The Reluctant Audience:
Online Participation in the Swedish Journalistic Context

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Abstract
With new media technology everyone online can easily participate in creating news content. This is usually considered positive from a societal, democratic point of view, even if audience interaction is not necessarily seen as a positive feature by editors and journalists. As a response to the somewhat scarce research in this field, this article analyses a Swedish mail questionnaire survey on audience behaviour and attitudes in these matters. The analysis shows that there is only relatively little interest, from a general audience point of view, in participating in creating content on news sites. Likewise, the minority who are actually commenting on news articles, or otherwise participating in the journalistic process through blog-writing, seem to consider these activities as part of a creative leisure-time, rather than as partaking in democratic activities. The article further argues that the use of interactive facilities and content creation in the journalistic context tend to be yet another tool for persons already possessing substantial competence about society and political life and who are already busy in the online world.

Introduction

Media and democracy are intimately associated with modern Western societies, where the participation of citizens in the public sphere is a crucial element. In recent times, technological developments within the media have contributed to an increased flow of information that in different ways is considered to strengthen citizens' partaking possibilities. Importantly, during the first years of the new millennium, a new generation of web applications has developed. Web 2.0 is an umbrella term for new interactive web services and possibilities characterised by the freedom to share media content and to participate in its production (Limonard 2007; Madden and Fox 2006; OECD 2007). Along with Web 2.0, the audience is increasingly able to participate in content production as well as to publish content. User generated content means media content created by the users themselves, independent of the established media companies. This kind of content is found in most online areas, most commonly perhaps, in the entertainment field where video uploading is one example.

This new relationship challenges the traditional view of journalism as being the main force in investigating and criticizing the established power, in ways which might lead to changed journalistic working processes, but also to a more systematic change regarding the content provided in traditional journalistic products. Editors and journalists are now competing in content production with the users, who are able to instantly interact with the traditional content provider. Examples are blogs, chat forums and personal web sites, but also interactive facilities such as comment and e-mail links on news sites (Gillmor 2004, 236ff; Gunter 2003, 167ff). Yet, despite a great deal of theoretical assumptions about the impact of the new digital possibilities in the field of journalism, there is still relatively little research into how audiences perceive and make use of the interactive facilities that the new technology offers. When analysing present developments within journalism and news production, an investigation into an audience perspective on user participation thus makes a relevant contribution. This paper, then, starts with outlining what research so far has concluded about interactive online facilities and user participation within the news production field, to go on to present results from a quantitative Swedish study on audience behaviour and attitudes in terms of contributing to news sites and blogs. The study focuses on the audience's general and everyday interactivity in terms of online mainstream news media.

When trying to understand media development and new trends Sweden is an interesting case study for several reasons. Sweden is among the top-ten in the world when it comes to Internet access and use (www.nua.com) and has well qualified Internet users (c.f. Bergström 2005). Many users have been online for several years now, and Internet use is part of daily practises. As the net has grown and the amount of time spent online has increased, the use of news online has expanded. But compared to other top-ten countries like the USA, where the top-ten online news providers consists of a mix of traditional broadcasting and newspaper companies and search engine companies, according to Nielsen Online (www.cyberjournalist.net), development in Sweden differs somewhat. Most of the largest news sites are those of well-known newspaper companies. There have been attempts by new contestants to enter the online news market, but most of the newcomers have closed down. It has been, and still is, hard for players other than traditional newspaper brands to gather larger audiences (Bergström 2005). Online news brands, thus, are very much the same ones as printed offline brands.

Newspapers in Sweden, further, have a high circulation rate and by tradition a very strong position among the public. The share of frequent readers is one of the highest in the world (c.f. Hallin and Mancini 2004). This provides a good opportunity to examine what happens when new technology meets strong traditional media and how interactive facilities in a well-established news context are perceived. The research questions to be answered in the following paper are:

1. How does the audience value and appreciate participatory facilities on news sites?
2. How are visitors to news sites actually using the opportunity to comment on articles?
3. How does the public use blogs in terms of maintaining their own blogs?

These three questions are analysed from a social demographic and life orientation perspective, as well as from the point of view of Internet use and skills.

Users as Content Providers
With online access the opportunities to participate in different societal contexts have increased greatly and have shown up in a variety of ways. Citizens can for example easily get in touch with politicians, follow political matters and decisions and even vote online. New media technology, as explained in the introduction, likewise allows media audience members to take a greater part in content-generating and publishing processes online. In this context, the term user generated content is taken to mean content made by the audience, for the audience, published online. This type of media content includes different kinds of text, sound, visual and mixed content, such as for instance digital video, blogs, podcast and public sites edited by the users themselves, so-called wikis. Users can create and publish content, share files but also recommend or rank existing content. These 'new' content providers are sometimes called ProAm – Professional Amateurs (Limonard 2007). These 'professional amateurs' are active in producing content in many areas of the media, although when it comes to news journalism their contributions have been particularly noteworthy in situations of crises, where citizen's contributing and taking part in producing media content has been shown to be extremely relevant. Ordinary people become eyewitnesses and independent sources (Neuberger et al. 2007). The terror attacks in the USA on September 11th 2001 in many respects became a starting point for the so-called public journalist (Gillmor 2004, ixff).

The increasing potential for audiences to contribute to the media content process can seem to support the idea that the boundaries between media producer and media consumer are blurring. The traditional journalist is no longer only a gate-keeper, but also a conversation moderator. And the former audience is helping to create this conversation, joining the journalistic process by interacting on news sites (Gillmor 2004, xiv; Limonard 2007). Even though interactivity with news providers is not a new phenomenon, new technology means something different than the old ways of writing letters to editors or sending questions to the television doctor. Editorial staff are more easily available and can be reached immediately. The former barriers of time and space are considerably lower with new technology. News journalism, which traditionally has been considered as one-way, has,

theoretically, become multi-way (Chung 2007; Hujanen and Pietikäinen 2004; Morris and Ogan 1996).

There are some general methods of participating that can be applied in different ways within online participatory journalism. One way is to share content with other users in collaboration tools or server programs where anyone can attend. Examples are Wikipedia, where users contribute in building and maintaining an online encyclopaedia, and Linux, which is an open source operating system free of use. Then there are free sites based on users' contributions, such as YouTube, where anyone can upload videos. The sites mentioned do not have an editorial function in a journalistic sense, but the same techniques could be used on different kinds of news sites to set up reader wikis, videos and other content. Although the present study focuses on audience interaction with mainstream news sites, it is worthwhile stressing here that such techniques of course are relevant to a range of alternative media, too (c.f. Salter 2003, 127ff).

Another way of participating in online journalism is to attend different chat rooms or newsgroups, where there are opportunities to 'meet' people or share interests with others. Editorial staff can set up such forums on matters of recent interest or specific topics. Likewise, the audience can participate in chats with known individuals such as celebrities or sports stars, for example before or after a contest or competition. Unlike chat rooms in other contexts, however, it is common that part of this type of chat is edited and published on the news site, and also in the printed paper. Chats on traditional news sites, however, must be considered as interactivity with great limitations, since the editor decides with whom, when and how long this dialogue is going on.

It is likewise possible to turn the audience into participants and content-creators by setting up so-called polls, where the site visitors are asked about their opinion in different matters. The results from the polls might be turned into news articles. A few years ago, this seemed to be one of the most common interactive facilities offered on news sites. Users can of course also generate content by sending pictures for publishing, and many news sites request their visitors to contribute if they eyewitness something extraordinary (Gillmor 2004, 27ff; Huijanen and Pietikäinen 2004; Matheson 2007).

When speaking about user generated content there has also been a great deal of discussion about the activity of blogging, with blogs sometimes thought of as a new form of journalism (Kline and Burstein 2005). Aside from the journalistic field, there are for example political blogs, marketing blogs and blogs in the field of education and knowledge. The most popular area, however, seems to be the blog as a personal journal (Blood 2002; Kline and Burstein 2005). The main reason for maintaining a blog can thus be considered to be self-expression. Blogging is to a

large extent motivated by social motives, concerning for instance updating friends on one's activities, expressing opinions, 'thinking by writing' and also releasing emotional tension (Nardi et al. 2004, 225). In research reports, bloggers witness that their main interest is to write about their personal sphere rather than debate or produce journalistic content (Kullin 2008; Nardi et al. 2004). In Sweden, well-known people such as journalists and celebrities, along with private fashion bloggers keep many of the most popular blogs (see www.bloggtoppen.se). Often, journalists keep their blog on their employer's site, and sometimes popular non-journalist bloggers are asked to maintain their blog on a news company's site.

User generated content raises issues regarding the degree of control over media content and also regarding to what extent the medium allows users to modify or form content. Within the traditional journalistic field, the editor had a great amount of power over content produced. He or she still has, but the staff has expanded outside the news desk, and an important question is to what extend the users are let in (Chung 2007; Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997). Online, you can of course be your own editor and keep the entire control over publishing on your own site. But to get access to arenas that draw larger audiences, you are dependent on an editor letting your content through the selection process. There are different degrees of interactivity according to what level of control the publisher allows. One fruitful distinction can be made between human interaction and medium interaction (McMillan 2002). The former refers to user-to-user interaction, for example achieved in message boards. This type of interactivity is synchrony, meaning that all participants are online at the same time. In this mode it is hard to control the content produced. The latter concerns user-to-medium interaction like moving or commenting via hyper links. This type of interactivity is asynchrony, meaning that participation is independent of others being online. This mode of interactivity is easier for the publisher to control (Massey and Levy 1999; McMillan 2002; Stromer-Galley 2000).

Yet, despite the various ways that 'ordinary' people today are able to contribute to media content in general and to the process of news production in particular, existing research indicates that many news sites owned by traditional news companies do not make extensive use of interactive facilities. A study of 24 news organizations in four European countries shows that the adoption by online news services of interactivity inviting or including the audience has been limited (Quinn and Trench 2002). Similarly, a study of the British newspaper the *Guardian's* blog concluded that it does not let the user talk but preserves the journalistic role of the gatekeeper (Matheson 2004). Another conclusion from this area of research is that user participation mostly means feedback from users to producers, not really participation in the sense of creating content. Many media producers are unwilling to let go of control to the users (Gillmor 2004, 112ff; Lasica 2002; Matheson 2004). This way of handling audience participation is yet another example of

medium or asynchrony interaction. McMillan (2007, 285) argues that 'if website developers want to develop responsive dialogue with website visitors, more mechanisms for two-way communication need to be added to the website and they must actively respond to messages from visitors'.

Due to this situation there has been some criticism of news organizations in that they only slowly adopt interactive publishing techniques – that they, in this respect, are rather conservative. Such editorial reluctance can however be explained in different ways. One of the most important reasons for sparsely occurring interactive facilities is for instance likely to concern legalities. In Sweden, the editor-in-chief usually has the legal responsibility for what is published and ensuring that content sticks to current rules and regulations concerning freedom of the press. This responsibility also includes what the public might publish on your site. Published content with legal consequences is costly in both economic and confidence terms (c.f. Peterson et al. 2007).

Another reason for the unwillingness towards a participating public has to do with practical, organizational issues. Most publishers find it necessary to edit user generated content for the reasons mentioned above, but also to keep an eye on newsworthiness and language on their site. The working load, above all in terms of reading over the user contributions, is thought to increase with extensive use of interactive facilities and increased quality control means raised costs (Chung 2007; Thurman 2008; see also the contribution by Paulussen and Ugille in this issue). If using interactivity, the journalist also has to manage the facilities and spaces for the audience to write and interact (Cardoso 2007, 215f). Likewise, there are issues connected with the professional role. Public participation might for instance undermine editorial control. Some editors point out that the core of journalism is to provide the audience with a professional product. A German study of blogging and journalism concluded that the journalist-produced content is experienced as neutral, more information-oriented and more in-depth, while the content provided by audience members is considered more subjective and entertainment-oriented (Neuberger et al. 2007). Much of this has to do with credibility. Someone has to verify and guarantee that a certain piece of information is correct, and the user might not be considered to have the skills necessary for doing that (Cardoso 2007, 212ff).

While existing research points to a slow uptake of interactive facilities from within the news organisations themselves, there is yet little evidence showing to what extent the general news audience actually is interested in interacting and participating on the news sites. Research results so far however indicate that little has changed regarding audience activities when consuming news. In a study of interactive use of journalism in Finland, Hujanen and Pietikäinen (2004, 391) conclude that 'new communication technologies have not changed the usage of

journalism radically among young Finns at the turn of the millennium.' Limonard (2007, 24) concludes, when comparing different findings about segmentations within communities, that a minority of users provide an extremely large amount of the user generated content. In this respect the audience can be considered as receivers rather than as active participants. As has been suggested by Roscoe (1999), it seems that there is a prevalent notion of considering ourselves as audience members as receivers in the first place, going online looking for packaged content ready to consume. Studies of bloggers, on the other hand, show that their desire for interactivity is limited, and interaction in the blogosphere might be overestimated (Kullin 2008; Nardi et al. 2004). Research has, thus far, given us a hint about what the audience is doing in the field of interaction and participation in the online journalistic context. As outlined in this section, much of the focus in conducted studies has been from the editors' and journalists' point of view. Audience studies within the field of interactivity have mainly been conducted within the field of social use of ICT media, and less with a focus on the audiences' attitudes towards, or use of interactive facilities within the traditional journalistic field. Much is yet to discover, not least the audience's view of participating facilities. Are they at all desirable on news sites?

Methodological Discussion and Data Collection
The following analysis is based on quantitative data collected within the framework of the Newspaper Research Programme (NRP), www.dagspresskollegiet.jmg.gu.se/inenglish.html). The NRP (in Swedish: Dagspresskollegiet) was founded in 1979 by a research grant from the Swedish Newspaper Publishers Association and located in The Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at The University of Gothenburg. The purpose of the NRP is to carry out long-term research on the development of the newspaper market in Sweden, with a focus on newspaper exposure, reading and attitudes, as well as on the interplay between daily press and other media.

The results presented here are collected in the so-called Gota survey, commissioned by one of the large newspaper groups in Sweden in the fall of 2006. Six random samples of 500 people aged 15 to 65 years old, altogether 3000 persons, were drawn in six different municipalities in the southern part of Sweden. It was conducted as a mail survey with an 11-page questionnaire consisting of 41 questions, most of them closed. The Gota survey is influenced by the Swedish national SOM-survey[1], in that many questions are fully compatible and comparisons with a national average can be made. In contrast to the SOM-survey however, the Gota survey provides more information about attitudes towards new news media technology. It also adds value to the results of the national SOM-survey in bringing data on specific media titles, which deepens the insight into changes in the media landscape and how new media is adopted and used.

The SOM-survey was conducted within the framework of a national mail survey between the years 1986 and 2006. Each year 6000 persons aged 15-85 living in Sweden received the survey. The frequency of responses is on average 65 percent, divided almost in the same way as the Swedish population on age, gender, social class, education etc.

The Gota survey has an average response rate of 55 percent. The comparatively low share of respondents affects the representation of the youngest and the oldest in the study to some extent, but altogether the respondents constitute a good mirror of the sample (table 1). This gives us a statistically significant material and possibilities to se patterns in a large population as well as in smaller groups.

Table 1: Response rates due to gender and age compared to the national average in the total group of 15-65 years old (per cent)

	National average	**Gota survey**
Men	51	48
Women	49	52
15-29 years	28	24
30-49 years	41	41
50-65 years	31	35

Source: The Gota Survey 2006 and Statistics Sweden 2006 (www.scb.se).

The Gota survey focuses mainly on new media technologies. Habits as well as attitudes towards the Internet and cell phones are measured along with household and individual media technology access. Respondents are asked about what facilities they consider important on journalistic web sites, how often they have commented on journalistic content on the Internet and how they read and write blogs. Along with this, there are questions on general media and news habits and on confidence in different news media. The survey also contains demographic data as well as different interest and lifestyle data, which gives good possibilities to analyze correlations and compare different groups. There is, of course, a problem with measuring new technological phenomenon and facilities only once. Some developments are very trend-sensitive. The compatibility with the national SOM-survey however gives an opportunity to compare and evaluate the results from the Gota survey. We also know from earlier research (c.f. Becker and Schönbach 1989; Bergström 2005) that dramatic changes in media habits only occur rarely.

The Gota survey should give us an accurate picture of the participating Swedish audience at the beginning of the new millennium. However, one should be aware of some general limitations using quantitative research techniques. The survey conducted can give statistically significant answers to people's habits regarding content-creation on the Internet. But it cannot give more in-depth information about how and why audiences engage with online content. That is a challenge for a study with a qualitative methodological approach, within a different research frame.

The Attraction of Commenting on News Articles

The first research question in this report deals with the audience's attitudes and preferences towards participating in content-creating on news sites. The analysis focuses on what facilities users appreciate the most and how commenting and chatting come out compared to other kinds of news site qualities. Attitudes and interest do not automatically lead to use, but we know that media use in general often depends on interest in certain topics or facilities and could be a condition for use.

The respondents in the Gota survey were asked to point out qualities they considered being of general importance on news sites with a journalistic profile providing everyday news. Only those using news on the Web once a week or more have answered the question, which means 51 percent of the total sample. The answering rate differs only slightly (between 93-96 percent) when comparing the alternatives and most online news users have answered the question.

Most important is that the site is continuously updated (fig. 1). It should also be easy to navigate and simple and clear when it comes to layout. And, not to forget, use should be free of cost. It is the glancing, the checking and speedy updating facilities that matter most. The results resemble those of an interview study of Swedish online news users, where online news users pointed out the ability of quick updating as the single most important function for online news (Bergström 2005).

Figure 1: Important facilities on news sites on the Web (percent)
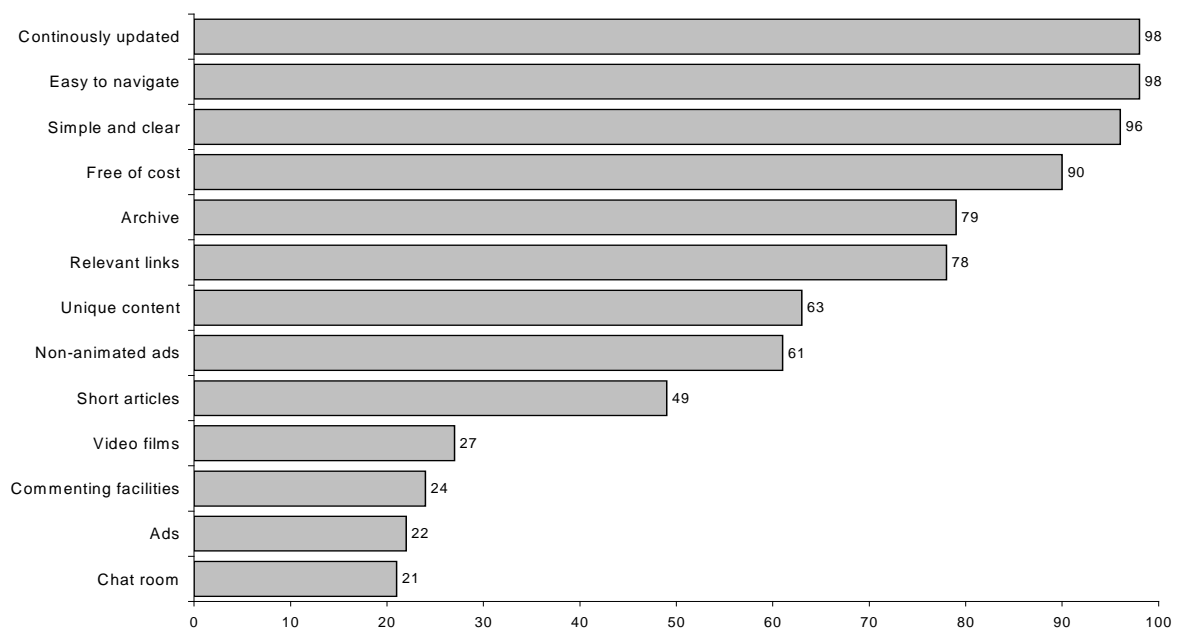
Source: The Gota survey 2006. The figure shows shares that considered each facility as very or fairly important. The scale also included not very important and not at all important.

Least important are chat rooms, ads and commenting opportunities. About one fourth of the news users find these qualities important. Also less important are archives, links and unique content. The results, then, are in line with what has been shown in earlier research on a reluctant participating audience. Most of us consider ourselves as spectators and do not wish to participate in the journalistic production process to any large extent. We go online to gather information or news, which should be packaged in an easily accessible way. As long as the content is the latest news, there is no desire that it should contain other qualities such as content unique to the online edition or chatting facilities.

It is a well-known fact that Internet use and interest for online facilities differ when comparing different groups in society (c.f. Ibid). First of all, we can state that Internet use is far more widespread among younger, well-educated people. We also know that those persons who were early online – innovators and early adopters (Rogers 1995) – are generally more interested in new facilities. Interest in new technology and curiosity about new innovations seem to be driving forces in adopting new areas of use on the Internet. This orientation towards 'the new' is often more important than other interests, such as for example news orientation or politics. Table 2 (next page), shows how different groups consider the importance of commenting opportunities on news sites.

There are no great differences when comparing groups and their valuation of the comment function on news sites. What seems to be of most importance, however, is level of education. The comment function on news sites is more frequently asked for among people with lower or middle levels of education. Education is the single most important variable explaining the desire to comment (beta 0,16). Interestingly, these results appear to contradict what was concluded above, as these people are not innovators or early adopters. One explanation would be that groups that are traditionally underrepresented in the media, and persons who are traditionally less interested in making their voice heard in the media, see possibilities in this new publication forum. It simply does not mean that much to those who have been raising their voices since long before the Internet. It is also worth pointing out that to have an opinion about what is more or less important is not the same as actually taking the opportunity of using for example comment functions when given.

What is perhaps most striking when looking at table 1 are the patterns due to online news practices. The more frequent a news user, the less of a wish for commenting possibilities. But since the news practice on the Internet more or less equals quick checking and a short glance at the headlines, it might be the case that frequent news users simply do not consider news sites as places you are interacting or commenting on. It is not possible to tell on basis of the conducted study, but this explanation seems

Table 2: Perceived importance of comment facilities on news sites in different groups (eta and per cent)

|	Eta	Very important	Fairly important	Not so important	Not important at all	n=
All		**6**	**18**	**49**	**27**	*771*
Sex:	0,02					
Women		7	17	50	26	*350*
Men		5	18	48	28	*418*
Age:	0,11					
15-29 years		6	23	49	22	*240*
30-49 years		5	14	49	31	*355*
50-65 years		6	20	47	27	*168*
Level of education:	0,14					
Lowly educated		8	14	49	29	*51*
Middle educated		7	22	48	24	*487*
Highly educated		4	12	49	35	*227*
Using news online:	0,06					
6 days a week or more		6	19	46	28	*403*
1-5 days a week		4	17	53	26	*335*
More		15	21	36	27	*33*
Interest in society:	0,03					
Interested		6	18	49	26	*648*
Not interested		5	17	46	32	*117*
Interest in news:	0,06					
Interested		6	18	49	28	*731*
Not interested		11	29	34	26	*35*
Interest in new technology:	0,05					
Interested		5	20	49	26	*510*
Not interested		7	14	46	32	*250*
Interest in politics:	0,06					
Interested		6	20	47	26	*390*
Not interested		5	16	49	30	*371*

Source: The Gota Survey 2006. Eta shows strength of correlation between an independent variable on nominal scale and a dependent variable on interval scale. Eta varies between 0 and 1, and the further from 0, the stronger the correlation.

reasonable from what is known about time spent on news sites and the quick 'checking' function online news appear to have for users (Bergström 2005). This does not mean that commenting in general is unimportant for Internet users. There might well be other sites more suitable for this kind of activity.

Actual Commenting on News Articles

Many journalistic web sites actually do provide a comment function where users can react to single articles. The second research question regards what people are actually doing in this sense, to what extent they are commenting on news articles on the Web. Compared to other areas of use on the Internet, commenting on news articles is quite unusual. Most people are for example frequent e-mail and news users on the Web, more than half of the population devote time to these activities once or more a week. Going to the Internet bank is also quite common on a weekly basis; almost four out of ten visit their bank website every week. Comparably, five percent post comments on news articles at least once a week. On a weekly basis, commenting is comparable with writing blogs and purchasing goods and services. These three areas of use are at the bottom of people's Internet use (fig. 2).

Figure 2: Areas of use on the Internet 2006 (percent)
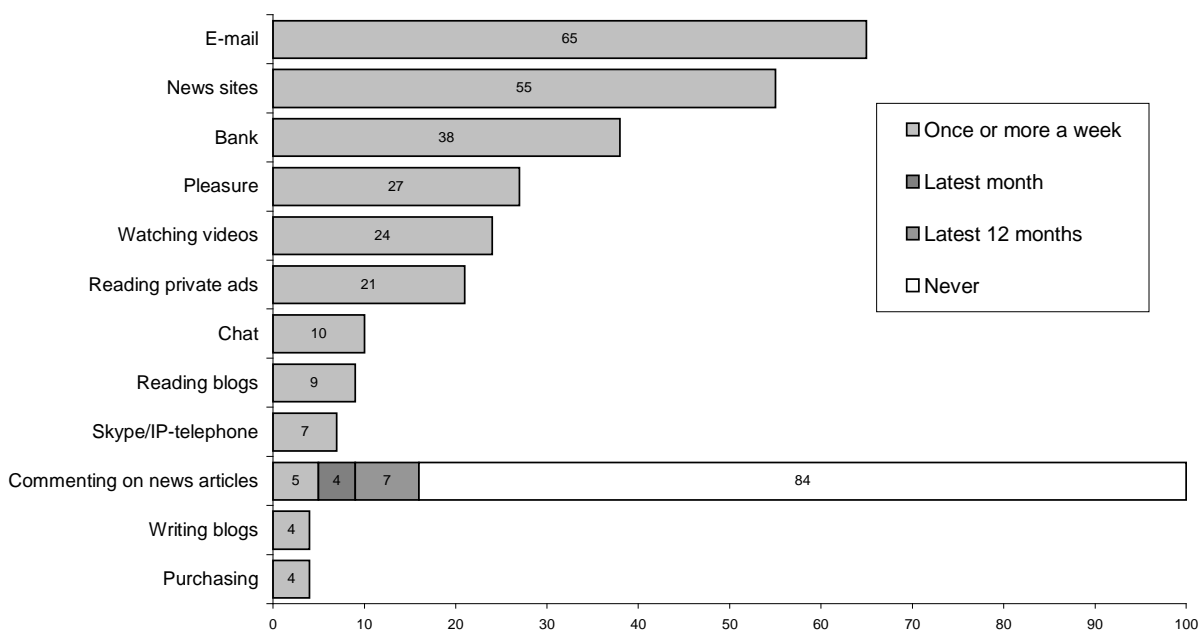
Source: The Gota-survey 2006. The figure shows shares of those who answered once or more a week. For commenting news articles also latest month, latest 12 months and never are shown.

It is possible that the timeframe of 'once a week' given here is not the most appropriate frequency to analyse commenting on news sites. Not all news sites invite readers to post comments on articles and even if the audience is invited to comment, it is quite a new phenomenon which, to most people, has not become

part of daily practice. As shown above, 16 percent have commented on news articles once or more within the last 12 months, and 84 percent of the Swedish adult population has never taken the opportunity to do so. The correlation between those finding commenting an important facility on news sites and those actually commenting is negative ($r= -0,197^2$). This means that a positive valuation of the opportunity does not automatically mean that action is taken when possibility is given. What respondents claim they want and what they do differ here, as well as in many other online areas.

This is of course partly a methodological issue too. When asked about what is important, people tend to mention most issues or problems. But when actually taking action, many aspects affect what happens: time available, interest, opportunity on a certain day, working load etc. The way the question is posed does not say anything about the volume of the comments either. Even if people do not regularly post comments , it is still possible that they may do so in concentrated bursts at different times.

As with the value of comment facilities, the actual commenting differs when comparing groups in society (table 3, next page). It is striking that there are no gender effects, despite the fact that findings from studies about general Internet use show that men spend more time online than women. News audience studies also show that men are more frequent online news users (Media Barometer 2007). The logical conclusion from what we know about male and female internet habits would have been a larger share of male commentators.

There are other differences in commenting behaviour however. Commenting is far more common among younger people than among older generations. About one third of the 15 to 29 years old have taken the opportunity, and ten percent comment on news articles once a week or more. This is twice as many as among the 30 to 50 year old group. We can also find more frequent commentators among those interested in new technology. In contrast to the perceived importance of commenting facilities, it therefore seems that actual commenting on news articles correspond with the more general habits of Internet use. We know that young people, those highly educated and those interested in new technology are also more frequent Internet users and spend more time online than others. This is strengthened by the fact that frequent online news users are most likely to post comments (see table 3, next page). Again, it becomes clear that what you think and what you do might differ. When asked about what they value on a news site, heavy news users consider commenting facilities important to a smaller extent than other groups do. But it seems that when this group is on the site, they tend to post comments to a larger extent than any other group.

Table 3: Commenting on news sites in different groups (eta and per cent)

	Eta	Once or more a week	Last month	Latest 12 months	Never	*n=*
All		**5**	**4**	**7**	**84**	***160***
<u>Sex:</u>	0,05					
Women		5	3	7	85	*832*
Men		6	5	8	81	764
<u>Age:</u>	0,24					
15-29 years		10	8	14	68	*386*
30-49 years		5	3	7	85	649
50-65 years		2	2	3	93	*550*
<u>Level of education:</u>	0,12					
Lowly educated		3	2	4	91	*230*
Middle		6	5	8	81	*953*
Highly educated		4	3	6	87	407
<u>Using news online:</u>	0,20					
6 days a week or more		11	7	14	68	*428*
1-5 days a week		5	6	7	82	*368*
More seldom/never		4	2	3	91	*205*
<u>Interest in society:</u>	0,03					
Interested		5	4	8	83	*128*
Not interested		5	3	5	87	*283*
<u>Interest in news:</u>	0,02					
Interested		5	4	8	83	*148*
Not interested		6	8	6	80	*87*
<u>Interest in new technology</u>	0,09					
Interested		7	8	5	80	*919*
Not interested		4	6	3	87	*624*
<u>Interest in politics:</u>	0,08					
Interested		7	5	8	80	*759*
Not interested		4	4	7	85	*784*

Source: The Gota Survey 2006. Eta shows strength of correlation between an independent variable on nominal scale and a dependent variable on interval scale. Eta varies between 0 and 1, and the further from 0, the stronger the correlation.

Writing Blogs

As discussed previously, one way of publishing ones' own content on the Internet is to write a blog. The last research question in this study is about this topic and the analysis focuses on who is actually writing blogs and with what frequency. Even though blogs are not a new online phenomenon, they became known to a larger Swedish audience around 2004/2005. In the winter of 2007/2008 there has been a rather intensive debate in Sweden both about blogs in the journalistic context and about the impact of blogging on areas such as politics, fashion and other markets. A few famous bloggers quit blogging since they thought the whole idea with public discussions had gone wrong. They argued that the level of debate in the blogosphere had become too low and that too many bloggers were lacking in judgement. Some newspapers that recently hired famous bloggers fired them since editors felt they could not control the blog content, which was considered damaging to the brand's reputation. This might very well have affected the overall attitudes towards blogging, and also the actual writing. Unfortunately, the survey was conducted before the debate peaked, and does not provide answers to the impact of that debate on actual blog writing.

In the fall of 2006, we could note that nine percent of the sample had visited a blog once or more every week, and that four percent had written blogs with the same frequency (fig. 2 above). When analysing online interactivity in terms of user generated content, it is the latter – persons who are actually active writing blogs – that are of most interest. As with other media use, the reading, watching or listening parts are obviously active but not necessarily interactive. If we expand this analysis to those who have written blogs at least once a month, the figure increases from four to six percent (fig. 3, next page). A first, and important, conclusion is that blog-writing only attracts a few. It might, due to the intense discussion about blogging, seem like 'everyone' is a blogger, but the public debate can tend to exaggerate what is actually happening. It might also be the heavy media coverage on blogging, and that certain bloggers attract a lot of attention, that causes the misperception that almost everyone has a blog. If blogging is indeed a new form of journalism, this finding suggests that, as such, it attracts a rather small minority in terms of its consumption, and an even smaller group of people in terms of its production.

Secondly, as already noted earlier, it is above all age and level of education that affect blog-writing. The younger and the more highly educated are more likely to keep a blog. Looking at table 3, there is also a rather strong correlation between blog-writing and frequency of Internet use. Once more, participation in this sense seems to be determined by the fact that the participator is an 'online' person. This seems to be far more important than for example an interest in society or politics. The innovators and early adopters also adopt new facilities, and the innovation itself seems to be of great interest and importance. The mentioned blog debate is

Figure 3: Blog-writing in different groups of the Swedish population (per cent and eta)
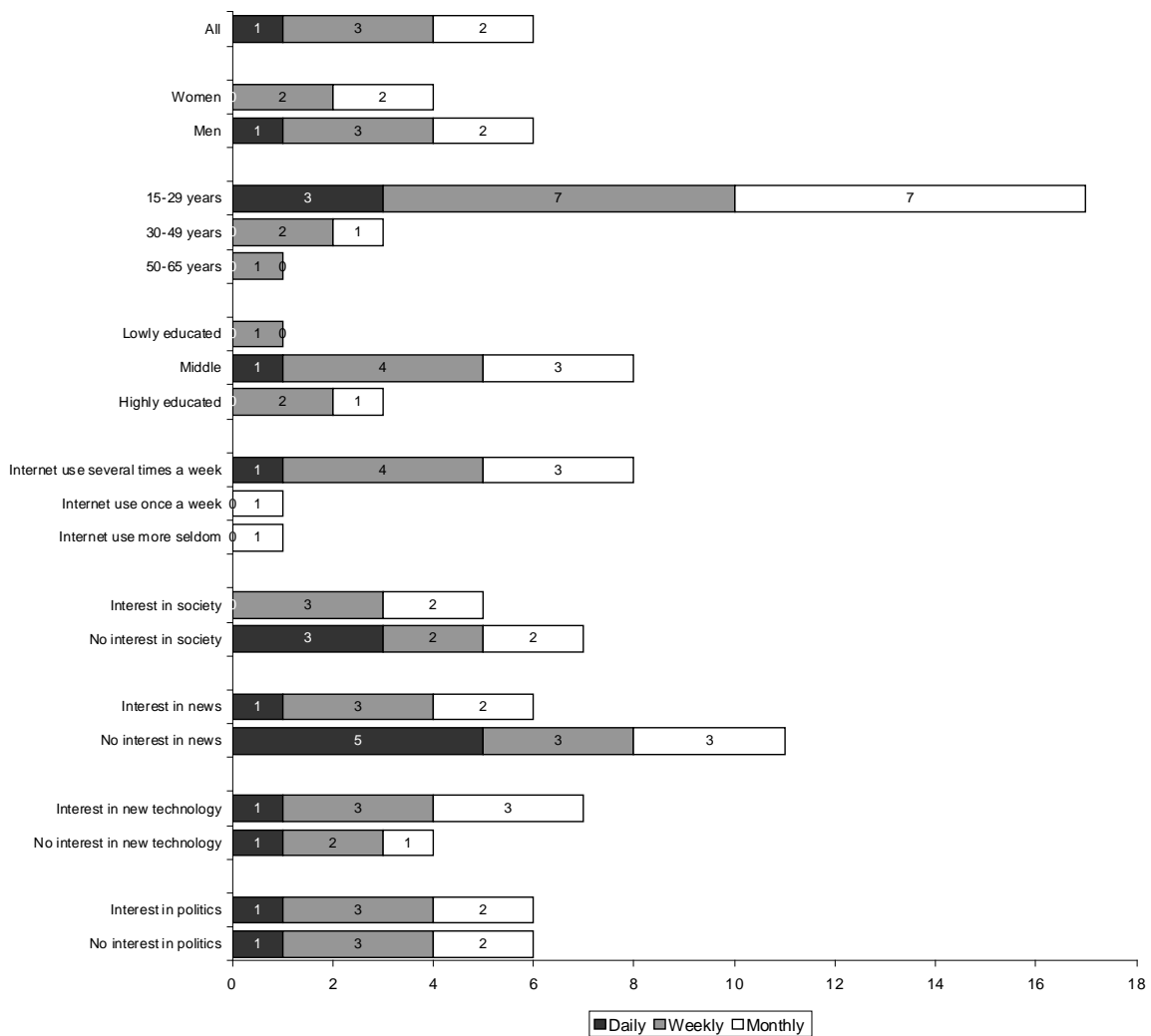
Source: The Gota Survey. Eta shows strength of correlation between an independent variable on nominal scale and a dependent variable on interval scale. Eta varies between 0 and 1, and the further from 0, the stronger the correlation.

about what a small group is doing, and, interpreting the results in the Swedish context, this group is not mainly blogging for reasons such as political participation, but for reasons more connected to self-expression, entertainment and a fascination with the new. This might, of course, be different in other societies with other media structures and habits, and it may also change in the Swedish context over time.

Conclusions

Media companies with a presence on the Internet in most cases offer their audience limited participating possibilities due to regulations, responsibilities and the professional role of the journalist. Despite a great deal of discussion about the democratic *possibilities* of online journalism, when it comes to news sites owned by traditional news companies, the main interactive functions offered to the audience

is to give feedback on articles and get in touch with editorial staff. Despite such limitations, the Internet is considered to offer other ways for ordinary people to participating in a journalistic process, for example by creating their own news in a blog. In an attempt at shedding light on how audiences may use and value opportunities to participate in online journalism, the research presented in this article has been conducted from an audience point of view, looking at the attitudes and activities of a general news audience in the Swedish context.

The research findings point to little general interest in the kind of participation demanding more activity and creativity from the users when it comes to news sites. Commenting facilities are not the audience number-one desire on news sites. As a matter of fact, it is one of the three lowest ranking options among Swedish online news users. Surprisingly, since the study shows that most of the participating is performed by groups with high educational levels, it is those with low educational levels who mostly consider commenting an important part of the news site. People, who traditionally have not raised their voice in media, seem to appreciate the opportunity given by new media technology – but when the opportunity is given, it is not taken by these groups.

It is not the possibility to comment on journalistic articles that draw people online, nor the blog-writing. Everyday errands and efficiency along with personal communication is preferred to participatory qualities in the sense of creating journalistic content. Those who appreciated the ability to create content the most do not first and foremost perform the actual commenting on news sites. It is the young ones and frequent online news users who write comments on news sites. Two matters seem to be of great importance when doing so: the curiosity about new facilities and the actual 'being there'. This has little to do with interest in politics or society – it can be suggested that it is not necessarily the possibility to express opinion or thoughts that draws, rather that the innovators have found something new to deal with. The same explanation can be used in the case of blog-writing, as the study shows that this is performed by a minority of young innovators, whose interest seem to be more of an entertainment rather than of a societal or political character.

The study moreover points to a distinction between an educated elite and a majority of less educated people. Results show that a small group of younger, well-educated, frequent Internet users are more willing to participate in creating content of their own. And for the majority, interest is above all in giving feedback on content created by someone else. Conclusions are drawn from a representative sample, but the active groups are small and results should be interpreted with caution. However, the trends that show up in this study very much correlate with what we know from earlier research on the influence of political and societal interest on media use. Persons with high educational levels tend to find and use

media content that increases their informational resources and their potential to participate in public communication, whereas persons with low educational levels on the other hand tend to use media primarily for amusement and their degree of participation in the journalistic context and in the expression of political and societal opinions is lower. Interpreting the findings from the perspective of the present study, participatory functions within the journalistic online context seem to reinforce these differences, not least because the strong correlation between educational level and Internet skills. The higher the level of education, the more likely it is that you are a skilled Internet user (Bergström 2005).

Many of the findings presented, then, are expected from what we know about Internet use in different groups of society. What is striking however, are the general results for a country like Sweden. The Internet and broadband penetration is high, the online audience is skilled – but the figures for online participation in blogging and in contribution to news sites, in terms of user generated content on news sites and blogs, are rather low. The blurring boundaries between producer and user, and the multi-way journalism outlined in the beginning of the article, seems, one could argue, to be theoretical constructions pointing to the possibilities given through new media techniques. In practice, the strict traditional roles kept by publishers and audiences appear to continue to exist to a high degree.

One explanation is most likely the strong position of the printed newspaper in the Swedish context. The printed newspapers have turned out to be strong in online publishing too, and the audience is used to turn to a journalistic source for selected information, in-depth explanations and editorial argumentation, without contributing themselves. The opinion of the audience has not, historically, been asked for to any great extent. It could take many years yet for the audience in such a media landscape to discover the qualities of participating in content provision in the journalistic context.

Notes
[1] The SOM Institute at the University of Gothenburg, founded in 1986, conducts interdisciplinary research and organizes seminars on the topics of Society, Opinion and Media. The Institute is jointly managed by the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, the Department of Political Science and the School of Public Administration at the University of Gothenburg (see www.som.gu.se).
[2] Correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (2-tailed).

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