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EXPERIENCES OF INTERACTION AND PARTICIPATION IN MEDIA COMMUNICATION IN A DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Digital technologies, it is claimed, provide enhanced opportunities for interactivity and participatory engagement in media communication for ordinary audience members. Whether arising simply from the enhanced functionality offered to media consumers, or through utilising the various channels available to audiences to talk back to media providers, it would appear that audiences are empowered in new ways, previously unavailable in the analogue era. This paper examines what use ordinary audience members make of such opportunities. Drawing on a comparative study of layperson participation in broadcast media in three European countries (Norway, Portugal and Ireland), this paper presents findings from the study of participative media experiences in Ireland. The project arises from the COST A20 Action (Impact of the Internet on Mass Media), and its working group Digital Radio Cultures in Europe (DRACE).

I. Introduction: Access and Participation

In this paper issues of democratic access and participation are presented as an overarching theme for the empirical investigation of the impact of digital technologies on broadcast media, with particular reference to the democratic potential of new and emerging forms of radio in a digital environment. Based on research conducted within the *Digital Radio Cultures in Europe* research group (DRACE, www.drace.org), part of the COST A-20 Action on the Impact of the Internet on Mass Media, the paper presents findings from a 3 country study of audience accounts and responses to opportunities for participation in public media. Drawing on McQuail's definition (1992), access is defined as the degree of openness of media channels to a diverse, wide range of voices and the ability of those with limited powers to gain entry to the media space owned by public and private media. Digital technologies in the more general sense, have added substantially to the opportunities for listener access to radio as a broadcast medium. Broadcast radio now routinely incorporates opportunities for comment, feedback and direct participation via conventional technical means as well as new digital technologies of email, SMS, and the web. Building on the relative ease of accessibility, changing practices in radio production have made interactivity a central feature of programme style, providing listeners with opportunities to contribute or gain enhanced access before, during and after actual broadcast programming.

The enhanced opportunities for interaction, however, do not necessarily mean that listeners in fact *participate* in any substantial way or that enhanced access as a whole has contributed to media diversity. Participation, as discussed above, encompasses a wide spectrum of activities which in terms of radio range from consumption itself as a form of participation, to engaging with the content in some way either directly with the media operator or more contextually by incorporating radio-originated content into daily life. A series of empirical questions follow which seek to establish the kind and extent of participation in digital radio and include exploring the actual needs for interactivity among

the listening public, qualitative and quantitative assessment of interactive experiences and assessing the added-value created by interactivity in digital radio.

The discussion of the modalities of access and participation in the digital landscape are set within a normative framework and seek in an 'instructive way' (Nyre, 2006) to contribute to professional practice and public policy. Processes of communication have become more sophisticated and efficient through the process of digitalization but they have not necessarily become more democratic nor has the quality of communication improved through the availability or the use of such technologies. In many instances, the pace of technological development and the rapid uptake by constituent groups of new tools of communication precedes any obvious application or communicative practice. For this reason, a concern within the subgroup has been to debate the nature of good communication values and to interrogate possible forms of participation that enhance the quality of communication in everyday life.

Emerging models of digital radio may, or perhaps should, in fact alter models of access and participation as currently represented and provide methods of communication and interaction that cut across the boundaries in which radio currently operates. As it is, digital technology has quickly changed the nature of access to live radio from being a once-off media event to an extended, multi-platform and transnational experience. Listening to radio is no longer constrained by being available at a broadcaster's time and location of choosing; the radio event is now available locally or globally, in real time or on demand, on the platform and device chosen by listeners. An emerging feature of the digital transformation of radio has been a dissemination of the tools of production into the hands of ordinary members of the public enabling them to make and distribute their own programmes. The speed of the development of 'podcasting' from its underground origins in 2004 to mainstream broadcast and commercial applications is but one illustration of how a new approach to access and participation can change media practices.

New models of communicative practice, however, are required to meet the challenges facing increasingly diverse European societies. Digital radio, because of its accessibility and affordability, is well placed to act as an experimental ground of good communication practice. Practices of social integration, for instance, where 'integration' is understood as a two-way process negotiated between immigrants and the immigration receiving society, is something that digital radio should be able to contribute to. Likewise, the expansion of spectrum brought about by digital radio removes scarcity as an argument in the rationing of a public resource and provides opportunities for innovative programming and scheduling by multiplex operators. However, market-driven regulatory policies have to date displayed little interest in supporting or encouraging new approaches to digital audio services, and in practice digital service provision has been predominantly consumer-oriented. Enhanced access, or participation, is not guaranteed by the availability of new channels; indeed, a worst case scenario is that digital radio may actually lead to more narrow and tightly controlled access than before.

II. Literature Review: Technological Democracy

Technological democracy is one of a number of key discourses within the broadcast lexicon, positing the view that technologies of communication facilitate enhanced participation, access, control, and equality in communication (Young 2003, 214). For long, a feature of the public service mandate, in addition to community and access models of broadcasting, as well of applications of distribution technologies like low-power FM or cable tv, the appeal to the ability and the responsibility of ordinary citizens to participate in the

media and 'have their say' has been an important touchstone of the positive role of the media in everyday life.

Hujanen (1997) has noted how the discourse of technological democracy was successfully invoked both in processes of regulatory reform and deregulation which occurred throughout Europe during the 1970s and 80s as well as in broader debates on the democratisation of communication. With specific reference to radio, deregulation of the traditional monopolies enjoyed by national public service broadcasters was assisted by the appeal to the more 'democratic' service offered by private companies as against the 'authoritarian' model of the monopoly state or public broadcaster. Voicing a critique of the institutionalised professionalism of broadcasting, democratic utopians at the same time argued that greater participation and access to the public resource of broadcasting was crucial to the development of a democratic community of equal individuals. As Hujanen writes: The new technology would create a 'polis' and "facilitate the direct participation of people in the political debate and decision making, without the control and patronizing of the bureaucratic state and the corporations linked with it" (Hujanen 1997, 48).

Utopian claims have similarly become central to the notion of an inclusive 'information society'. Information and communication technologies or ICTs like the mobile phone, digital camera, and digitalisation of all aspects of media production processes have been welcomed as a 'technology of freedom' (van Dijk and Hacker 2000, 220) which empowers citizens and provides greater opportunities for layperson participation in the media. Information Society policy both in North America and Europe builds on the twin themes of the need to build a knowledge economy and to facilitate greater social inclusion and integration by facilitating widespread public access to the Internet at individual, institutional and community level.

Participatory media have been the subject of much research in recent years and include studies of talk radio (Crittenden 1971; Hofsteter, et al. 1994; O'Sullivan 2000), audience participation on television (Livingstone and Lunt 1994) and public participation in on-line discussion forums (Schultz 2000). On-line media in particular have been credited with a revitalisation of democratic processes. Citizen e-participation has been noted as a key element in democratic elections in Korea (Woo-Young 2005) and in American Presidential elections since 1992 (Bucy and Gregson 2001). In the case of South Korea, alternative media, citizen journalism and widescale use of online discussion forums have thrived on the basis of ubiquitous broadband Internet access, and have served to bypass a conservative media and to subvert a hierarchical social order (Woo-Young 2005).

However, in contrast to the mainly utopian claims made for technological democracy, civic engagement, in general, is widely represented to be in decline despite the interactive features of digital media and ICTs, and the proliferation of opportunities for media participation. Putnam's widely cited account of the decline of social and civic capital, portrays increasing disconnectedness from civil society and from democratic structures (Putnam 2000). Internet use and time spent online is at the same time linked to a withdrawal from social life and community involvement. Cynicism, political apathy and the decline of social trust fed by a corporate media system no longer acting in the public interest (McChesney 2000), rather than technologically-enhanced participative democracy, is arguably the more accurate representation of contemporary society.

Distinctions have been made in the nature of civic engagement between institutionalized or formal acts of participation, such as voting, and non-traditional acts of participation, such as participation in alternative public forums (McLeod. et al, 1999). So-called 'lifestyle participation' in environmental movements and the like is represented as a new pro-civic attitude to which new media and the Internet are ideally suited.

Media consumption, in this context, is not a passive activity and even with little active participation provides the gateway to not just information but opportunities to be informed

and involved. Use of media, in particular attentiveness to local issues in news media, and using the media to gather information is cited in the literature as playing a key role in stimulating active citizenship and promoting civic engagement in a variety of different public spheres (McLeod, et al. 1999). The shift from 'civic' and 'public' journalism to 'citizen journalism' and the rise of the 'blogosphere' are indicative of different forms of engagement outside traditional media structures and whatever their merits as media processes have become new indicators of the complex field of civic engagement.

New media, in particular, are argued to have changed the participatory landscape (Bucy and Gregson 2001), and the venues offered by web-hosted discussion forums, user-generated content sites, talk radio, call-in television all represent applications of new media use based on the active engagement of users. While certain kinds of engagement such as net activism are overtly forms of political participation, the more widely diffused and mundane use of media in an interactive way, such as participating in online discussion of public issues without obvious political intent, the simple giving of feedback or soliciting of information, all contribute to a psychological feeling of being involved (Bucy and Gregson 2001). For critics, this may be more a symbolic than an actual form of participation which serves to legitimate the current political arrangement. But, as Bucy and Gregson argue (2001), the privileging of direct political involvement over mediated participation and more passive forms of engagement ignores symbolic and material rewards and the potential for empowerment at a more local and individual level. Media participation in this sense encompasses a broad spectrum of activities ranging from the relatively passive, 'monitorial' role of keeping informed via the media to more activist positions, each of which has positive benefits for the democratic process and to which new media have been found to be well suited.

III. The Research Study: Opportunities for Participation

In order to explore further the opportunities for participation provided by digital technology, a qualitative research study of experiences of participation and interaction in 3 European countries, Norway, Portugal and Ireland, was developed by the DRACE research group. To date, little research has been done on the actual experiences of ordinary people in media participation and has tended to focus on theorising participation or on contexts for interaction within media settings. The principal aims of the project are to explore and compare the experiences of media interaction as articulated by audience members; to evaluate public platforms for access, participation and interaction, particularly radio in its emerging digital form; and to examine opinions about layperson media participation among members of the general public.

The research explores the different kinds of opportunities for participation and interaction provided by digital technology (the internet, email, SMS and mobile phones) and the kinds of experiences that result from such interaction. The project locates participation within media consumption more generally as well as in terms of access to digital technology. Of particular interest are the accounts by participants, reflecting on the experience before, during and after acts of media participation.

Data collection for the project involved a short survey and interviews in each country with a purposive sample of 32 participants with quotas for age, gender and education (see Table 1). There were 8 informants in each of the following age groups: 15-24, 25-34, 35-54 and 55+. Semi-structured interviews were held with participants and with medium level moderator involvement to explore past experiences of media participation, accounts of any such experiences and responses to selected examples of broadcast and new media, illustrating audience participation and interaction. The interviews lasted approximately one hour, and were tape-recorded, transcribed and coded.

Table 1: Sample Structure

Age groups	Male Basic education	Male Higher education	Female Basic education	Female Higher education
15-24	2	2	2	2
25-34	2	2	2	2
35-54	2	2	2	2
55+	2	2	2	2

A questionnaire used at the beginning of each interview gathered background information regarding access to media and ICTs, media consumption habits, and general socio-demographic information. Information was tabulated and used for subsequent analysis.

The first section of the interview explored informants' experiences with interactivity and assessed what kinds of experiences of media participation informants had up to that point. Working on the assumption that in most instances, members of the public have had even trivial experiences of interaction with the media, whether voting in a 'Pop Idol' contest or being interviewed for a vox-pop on the street, respondents were presented with a range of examples of such interaction ('Being an interviewee', 'writing a letter to the editor', 'sent an SMS to a radio show', 'completed a TV or online poll'). Informants were then asked to describe in more detail one or two examples of such interactive experience. The purpose of this part of the interview was to get a full picture of the event and to learn more about the informant's motivation for participating, the sense of satisfaction and reward subsequently and responses by others to the media event. In addition, in the interview informants were asked about situations where they might want to have got involved or felt motivated to contribute but did not in fact follow through. The study was interested in looking at 'close to interactivity' experiences, and explored reasons for not participating just as much as why someone in fact intervened in a public way.

Another area of interest in the research was on attitudes to media participation. A series of questions were asked about prominent local examples of opportunities for interaction in order to get a sense of the informant's preferences and opinions about such engagement. Two media extracts were chosen for a more detailed evaluation and discussion and are drawn from local examples of radio, television and the web. Informants were asked to respond to what they hear/see and asked if they could envisage themselves participating in such a programme.

A third topic of interest pursued in interviews with respondents dealt with more general opinions on the value of media participation and interactivity. In exploring questions of civic obligation to be involved, informants were asked if they ever felt they should have participated more in public debates or whether audiences more generally should become more actively engaged via the media. Finally, respondents were asked to suggest ways in which the media could facilitate greater interaction or great more accessible conditions for active participation of audiences.

The study provides findings of different types. Individual country-specific studies report on relevant issues of interaction with media. It provides a comparative study of media participation experiences in 3 European countries and documents accounts, opinions and attitudes of ordinary people towards participation in everyday settings across different age, gender and social groupings. It also theorises on barriers to as well as ideal conditions for

interactivity with reference to innovative applications of technology and on grounds of effective democratic access and participation. Findings drawn from the Irish section of the study are presented in the full version of the paper.

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