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(Re-)Discovering the Audience. The relationship between journalism and audience in networked digital media

Current technological, organizational and institutional changes fundamentally alter the relationship between journalism and its audience - with consequences not only for journalistic practice, but also for theoretical and methodological issues of media research. After briefly recounting three perspectives on the audience, the paper outlines key aspects of the sociological theory of inclusion and explicates them in a novel and comprehensive heuristic model of audience inclusion in journalism. It introduces two constructs which apply both for journalism and the audience: (1) *inclusion performance* subsumes inclusion practices and their manifest results, and (2) *inclusion expectations* subsume attitudes, norms and perceptions with respect to audience inclusion in journalism. The degree of congruence between performances of journalists and audience members is interpreted as *inclusion level*; the degree of congruence between the expectations is interpreted as *inclusion distance*. This model can serve as a heuristic for empirical operationalization, helps to systematize existing and future research on digital networked media and journalism into a coherent sociological framework, and is also open for comparative research on participation in other social systems.

Keywords: journalism; audience; web 2.0; inclusion; audience participation

1. Introduction

Over the last 20 years, technological innovations both in hardware and software have lowered the barriers to make information accessible. They include improved means to transmit ever larger amounts of data (e.g. optical fibre; satellite connections), innovative devices for capturing, storing and retrieving digital information (e.g. digicams; smartphones), and services which provide interfaces to digital information (e.g. the World Wide Web; search engines). In sum, networked digital media, of which the

Internet is the most common manifestation, contribute to fundamental changes in communication by transforming the context in which information is selected, presented, aggregated, and distributed. They have become not simply an alternative channel or technology for news production and consumption (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski 2009), but have changed the conditions of (public) communication by changing the material basis, roles, and funding of journalism (Heinonen & Luostarinen 2008), as well as eroding the established sender-receiver-relationships including the monopoly of journalistic "gatekeepers" (Bruns 2005).

Both academia and broader social discourse have scrutinized and debated these developments under labels such as "participatory journalism" (Lasica 2003; see also Singer et al. 2011), "citizen journalism" (Lewis et al. 2010), "grassroots journalism" (Gillmor 2004) or "participatory news" (Deuze et. al. 2007). These concepts may vary in particular nuances, but usually agree on the observation that we are witnessing new combinations of professional, participatory and technical intermediation (Neuberger 2009). Institutional journalism online is complemented by new forms of participation via user-generated content and social filtering, and all this happens within a technological context where relatively new intermediaries such as Google or Facebook select and structure information via algorithms and software code. Thus, digital networked media continue and accelerate deep structural changes in the way public spheres are (re)produced (Marjoribanks 2000).

This paper discusses a particular aspect of these developments by focusing on the changing relationship between institutional journalism and its audience.[i] It starts by outlining three perspectives on that relationship (2.) and placing it within the broader framework of a sociological theory of inclusion (3.). We then specify this framework in a heuristic model of the relationship between journalism and audience, analytically

separating inclusion performance and inclusion expectations and discussing their

components (4.), and conclude with an outlook (5.).

2. Journalism and audience

The relationship between journalism and its audience has always been complicated,

even paradoxical in a way: On the one hand, journalism provides a public service for

which it needs an audience – media coverage of current events largely depends on

audiences. On the other hand, this audience only plays (or: used to play?) a subordinate

role in everyday newsroom routines: "In the midst of daily journalistic work 'audiences'

and 'public' have tended to be abstractions rather than an active presence in the

newsroom" (Heinonen 2011, p. 34). Journalists are often criticized for their "in-group

orientation" (Donsbach 2008, p. 68; see also Donsbach & Patterson 1996; Reinemann

2008), meaning that other journalists (colleagues, superiors) and the coverage of

opinion leading media are the most influential references when it comes to decide what

counts as news. This has led to the pointed conclusion that journalists are disregarding

the audience and suffer from self-orientation and self-reference (Weischenberg et. al.

2006, p. 194) – or as Mark Deuze (2008, p. 857) puts it:

> "journalism has somehow succeeded in taking its traditional public service role
> perception extremely seriously, while at the same time, and largely because of
> this, it has established a position for itself in contemporary society that seems
> almost completely out of touch with the lived reality of its constituencies."

Nevertheless, the audience always plays a role, of course, in journalistic practice

(Witschge 2012). For instance, about a quarter of the German journalists perceive the

audience to have an important impact on their job, which makes the audience by far the

most important external influence according to journalists views (Weischenberg et. al.

Like journalism itself, media research on the journalism/audience relationship has also been based on assumptions rooted in mass media systems, where the asymmetry between journalism and audience is a defining characteristic. With respect to the analytical status of the audience, two main conceptions can be distinguished: First, the *audience as recipients*-perspective which conceptualizes the audience as sum of receivers of media content. This perspective includes various paradigms, which differ in the extent to which they conceptualize the audience as homogeneous or heterogeneous, and in the extent to which they assume media reception as passive or active (see Carpentier 2011; also Bolin 2012 in this special issue). They range from early and simple cause-effect-models of media effects over general theories modelling the active selection of media content (e.g. in the uses-and-gratification approach; see Katz et. al. 1974) to studies looking at the various ways in which the seemingly passive audience of mass media products is actually engaging in complex activities of decoding meaning (Hall 1973/1980), participating in interpretative communities around soap operas or science-fiction movies (e.g. Ang 1985; Jenkins 1992), or "making sense of the news" (Bruhn Jensen 1986) when watching TV newscasts. Common to these approaches, however, is the positioning of the audience as opposed or even subordinate to media organizations: It receives the institutionally selected and distributed content without the technological means to send back on the same scale.

The second conception of audience started from a very different assumption. Instead of seeing the audience as the receiver of media products, the *audience as product*-perspective is asserting that it is the audience itself that is produced by the media industry (Smythe 1977; Ang 1991). Rooted in critical Marxist theory, this perspective stresses a different kind of audience activity or "audience labor", where

media consumption is reproducing the capitalist workforce and evoking consumption

desires (see Caraway 2011 for a recent critique). And even if one does not follow the

original Marxist assumptions, the audience-as-product-perspective emphasizes that

media systems always include and rely on regimes of audience measurement. Complex

constellations of actors, technologies and practices "manufacture the audience through a

set of measurement procedures that are shaped both by industry dynamics and the

technological and usage patterns of the media whose audience is manufactured"

(Bermejo 2009, p. 138; also Anderson 2011; Bourdon & Méadel 2011).

      Both perspectives acknowledge that information about the audience is flowing

back into the newsrooms, because journalism has to take information about its audience

into account in order to produce news that will be noticed. Thus, the relationship

between journalism and its audience is structured by reciprocal expectations about what

journalism should and will deliver, and what the audience should and will receive.

Images of audiences are regarded as an important factor shaping journalistic routines

and are (tacitly) embedded in the news making process (DeWerth-Pallmeyer 1997).

Theoretically, this constellation is part of the dynamic-transactional approach of media

effects developed by communication scholars Werner Früh and Klaus Schönbach (Früh

& Schönbach 1982, 2005; Schönbach & Früh 1984; see also Jeffres & Scheufele 2009).

It stresses the *transactional* character of the communication process and differentiates

between *inter-transactions* (between communicator and recipient) and *intra-*

transactions (intrapersonal information processing).

      With respect to the relationship of journalism and audience *inter-transactions*

are most important: They refer to the reflexive relationship of more or less

stable expectations and images both sides have of each other as well as to routines and

patterns for producing and receiving news. Empirically, this concept has been

operationalized, for instance, as *communication distance* between journalists and audiences (Weischenberg et. al. 1989; for pioneer studies in this field see also Atwood 1970; Martin et. al. 1972). It expresses the congruence or incongruence of the audience's communication expectations with the journalists' communication expectations, including expectations about the audience's expectations.

In journalism studies, most research has focused on journalists' perceptions and images of the audience and found, for example, that ideas about the audience differ among journalist from different media, even from different editorial departments or sections (Andersson 2009; Weischenberg et. al. 2012). A complementary perspective is looking at the image of professional journalism among the general population (Lieske 2008; Donsbach et al. 2009). But even though images and expectations about the audience guide journalistic routines, under conditions of mass media they are usually not based on direct interactions and experiences, but remain, as ever, "newsmen's fantasies" (Pool & Shulman 1959) instead. They are relying on indirect and filtered exposure, most often mediated either through market research and audience measurement or through those selected parts of the audience that choose to write letters to the editor or call in a broadcast station, expressing their preferences and giving feedback (Wahl-Jorgensen 2007; Coleman & Ross 2010, p. 45-71).

So for a long time, the relation between journalism and its audience, as well as a lot of research from journalism studies, remained grounded in the classical distinction between communicator and recipient, between the production and reception of news. Gradually, however, a third conception is emerging which sees *audience as empowered networks* – not a disperse mass of people engaging in the appropriation of media content or being appropriated by the media industry, but rather actively and collaboratively producing and disseminating information with the help of networked digital media.

Various scholars have suggested new theories and models to account for the consequences of this "convergence culture" (Jenkins 2006) on media and public spheres. Structural analyses have shown that "networked public spheres" (Benkler 2006, p. 11; see also boyd 2008; Papacharissi 2010) are characterized by a particular communicative architecture which affords the distribution, aggregation and retrieval of information on different scales and with varying degrees of collaboration. On the one end we find large-scale public spheres of mainstream media websites which serve a disperse mass audience. Additionally, digital media facilitate more or less stable "issue publics" which might emerge e.g. in topical and subcultural communities or around specific Twitter-Hashtags. On the other end we find the "personal publics" of Facebook accounts or blogs, where people share personally relevant information with the rather small audience of their social network (Schmidt 2011).

Networked public spheres rely on new modes of communication afforded by digital media. These have been called, for example, "mass-self communication" (Castells 2009, p. 58-70) or "produsage" (Bruns 2008; also Bruns 2012 in this special issue), all pointing at the blurring separation between a few "senders" and a large disperse audience of "receivers". Instead, "produsers" are contributing to networked public spheres by filtering, commenting, liking, retweeting, blogging, evaluating, and distributing information from various sources. These developments are often normatively discussed as examples for the empowering potential of digital networked media which will increase participation and level power disparities for "the people known as the audience" (Rosen 2006). For example, Benkler (2006, p. 220) argues that within networked public spheres "the social practices of information and discourse allow a very large number of actors to see themselves as potential contributors to public

discourse and as potential actors in political arenas, rather than mostly passive recipients of mediated information who occasionally can vote their preferences".

Empirical evidence on this "cyberoptimist position", however, shows that technological potential does not necessarily equal actual participation. Not all users *navigating* these networked public spheres do actually *contribute* actively to them, and not all of those who do also participate to the same extent (van Dijck 2009; Witschge 2012). Moreover, digital interactive media have been shown to provide "places of boundary work for the journalist-audience relationship" (Robinson 2010: 126), where institutional journalism defends and delineates its own practices more or less successfully. While this is, as Lewis (2012, in this special issue) suggests, a common reaction of many professions to technological change, within journalism the tension plays out in a particular way, since concepts such as deliberation or civic participation have always been important parts of journalistic ideals and self-images.

Thus, in order to accurately assess these alleged participatory potentials of networked digital media and to avoid utopian or cyberoptimistic fallacies, it seems necessary to first develop analytical models which help us understand the journalism/audience relationship and advance existing theories in light of the changing conditions of (public) communication. We suggest that sociological theory of inclusion can provide adequate concepts and start with outlining its general aspects.

3. Inclusion theory and journalism

Inclusion theory is rooted in systems theory and the concept of functional differentiation as developed by the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1995).[ii] The general idea behind Luhmann's theory is that "modern society organizes itself by delegating different functions to specialized societal systems in order to cope with societal problems"

(Görke & Scholl 2006, p. 647). Even though Luhmann's theory of social systems has been discussed controversial within journalism research (Löffelholz & Quandt 2005; Löffelholz 2008), its general outline is widely accepted.[iii] It has led to a definition of journalism as a social system that provides ongoing introspection of society and its different social systems such as politics and economy. Thus, journalism provides "information brokering for public communication" (Blöbaum 2007, p. 7), but becomes *public* communication only if its communicative offers are accepted by an audience.[iv] The relationship between journalism and its audience is therefore "circular and mutual", forming "a communicative unit called the public" (Görke & Scholl 2006, p. 651).

Like systems theory, inclusion theory is not restricted to journalism or public communication, but can be used in general to consider how social systems such as economy, politics, education, health care etc. include persons by taking them into account for their own systemic operations and logics (Burzan 2003; Burzan et al. 2008; Stichweh 1988, 2005). In all social systems one can identify system specific *performance roles* and complementary *audience roles* (Stichweh 1988; 2005). With respect to education, for example, a performance role is the teacher, while the student represents the audience role; with respect to politics one can distinguish between the politician and the voter. Thus, "audience" is a general term within the theory of inclusion and is used whenever a person benefits from or makes use of a performance of a social system, and in doing so becomes a part of that system's relevant environment. Both roles, the performance role as well as the audience role, are constitutive for a social system, its emergence and its operations.[v]

Specified for the system of journalism under mass media conditions, the *journalist* acts in the performance role and the *recipient* in the audience role – with the semantic coincidence that the same term is referring to the abstract general concept of

the role and the particular collective of recipients acting within that role. We can also specify the observations mentioned above: under the conditions of mass media the monopoly of journalism was based on the asymmetry between its performance role and an audience role that was restricted to the selective use of communicative offers. In that sense inclusion in journalism does not – at least not in the first instance – mean to participate, but *only* to accept communication offers (Scholl 2004).

This perspective also reveals the problems of inclusion in journalism, since the asymmetry between performance role and audience role can no longer be maintained in networked digital media for two reasons. The first is the *restriction of journalism's ability to include the audience*: Even though mainstream media are still very important, they are facing decreasing trust in their communicative activities and declining audiences and revenues, especially in print newspapers (for the U.S. see e. g. Downie & Schudson 2009; for Germany Kolo & Meyer-Lucht 2007; for Sweden Westlund & Färdigh 2011). [vi] The second reason is the *drive towards inclusion of the audience*, which is supported by new technological affordances (e.g. personal publishing tools and interactive features), the integration of these technologies into changing news consumption habits (Pew Research Center For The People & The Press 2010), but also by general expectations and practices forming in various social systems besides journalism, such as politics (e.g. "digital democracy", Hague & Loader 1999) or economy (e.g. "commons-based peer production", Benkler 2006).

To conclude, "the audience" is a highly important point of reference for journalism - and as a consequence also for theory building and empirical research within journalism studies. Inclusion theory introduced the differentiation between performance role and audience role, which needs to be reconsidered in lights of recent media developments. The most basic condition of inclusion in journalism - the

acceptance of journalistic communication offers - is still valid, but has to be

supplemented by other modes and aspects of inclusion which transcend the asymmetry

of mass-mediated communication and acknowledge the significance of an at least partly

symmetrical relationship. Over the last years, journalism research has produced various

empirical studies reconsidering the relationship between journalism and audience. The

remaining part of this paper is outlining an analytical framework to systematize these

findings within a broader theoretical context.

4. A heuristic model of inclusion

Combining assumptions of inclusion theory with established concepts such as *audience*

image, *communication distance*, and *journalists' role perceptions* we conceptualize

audience inclusion in journalism as reciprocal co-orientation and interaction in two

general dimensions (see figure 1): Aspects of *inclusion performance*, subsuming

practices and their manifest results, and aspects of *inclusion expectations*, subsuming

attitudes, norms and perceptions. Both dimensions have to be identified on the side of

journalism and the side of the audience, to account for (potential) instances of

communicative symmetry. To actually assess the degrees of symmetry or asymmetry,

we introduce the concepts of *inclusion level*, expressing the degree of (in-)congruence

between inclusion performance of journalism and audience, and *inclusion distance*,

expressing the degree of (in-)congruence between their respective inclusion

expectations.[vii]

Figure 1. Heuristic model of audience inclusion in journalism
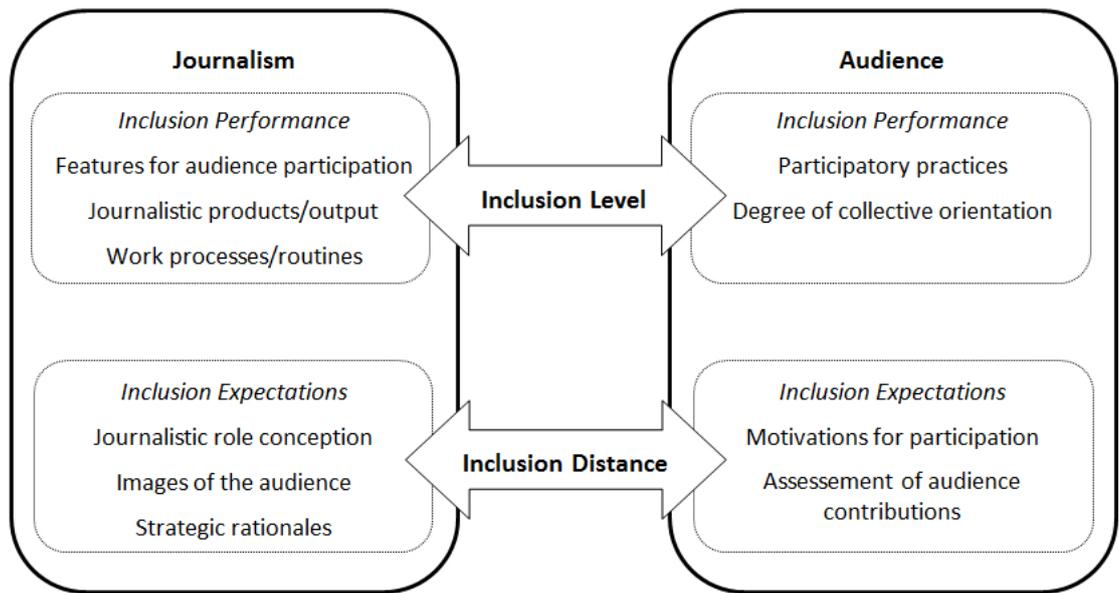
Inclusion performance in journalism can be assessed through various indicators

and aspects. Among these are, first of all, the actual *features of audience participation*

journalism provides (e.g. Thurman 2008; Domingo et al. 2008; Neuberger et. al. 2010;

Rebillard & Touboul 2010; Hermida 2011). These consist of the different venues and

channels to interact with journalists, ranging from, for example, letters to the editor and

dedicated phone hotlines to E-Mail, blogs, discussion boards or Twitter accounts.

Particular channels might be open to allow one-to-one feedback and interaction with

journalists, while others might be offered to facilitate interactions among the audience.

The particular features of audience participation rely on technological means, the shape

of which is usually outside of journalists' control but rather provided by IT

professionals who develop the software tools. The channels also differ with respect to

the depth of interaction and contribution they afford: Is it "only" feedback and

comments on already published information, is participation encouraged in order to

generate ideas or gather material for unfolding and upcoming stories, or does

participation even include (co-)producing content which is then distributed by the journalistic media?

The second aspect pertains to the *manifestation of audience participation in journalistic output or products* (e.g. Williams et. al. 2011; Kperogi 2011). This can be operationalized, for example, by looking at the share of user-generated content among all output of a news organization, or at the frequency with which audience participation is mentioned and encouraged. More sophisticated analyses concentrate on the place audience participation has within journalistic communication – is it used to complement and confirm stories or positioned in juxtaposition to journalistic practice? Is it explicitly acknowledged or only implicitly mentioned?

Inclusion performance on the side of journalism is finally assessable in terms of *professional work routines* within newsrooms, which (re-)produce forms and manifestations of participation (e.g. Domingo 2011). Options for audience participation will generate at least some amount of feedback and interaction, which needs to be reacted upon. This includes, for example, answering to, aggregating and forwarding feedback to the appropriate people in the news organization, but also taking comments and information into account when investigating stories. Thus, audience participation not only influences individual work routines, but also the institutional and organizational structure of journalism. New job positions (e.g. community manager or social media editor) emerge, and news organizations need to provide settings to coordinate the flow of information between different parts of the organization or from outsourced divisions into the organization (Erdal 2007; Paterson & Domingo 2008).

Turning to the *audience side of the model*, we can also identify *participatory practices* as part of *inclusion performance*. These include, for a start, the amount and intensity with which opportunities offered for participation are actually taken: just

because the technological features exist, people do not necessarily write an E-Mail to the editor or comment on an article. The actual performance of audience participation differs between groups and with respect to different media (Chung 2008). And with the emergence of social media, interacting with journalism is not confined to the features of audience participation institutional media provides. Rather it can happen through other venues as well, since personal publishing tools such as blogs and twitter, video platforms, wikis, social news aggregators and social network sites are all spaces where users can also interact with and comment upon journalistic information (Thorsen 2008; Messner & DiStaso 2008; Purcell et al. 2010).

Participatory practices also differ with respect to their addressees and their place within journalistic practice. While they might inform journalistic investigation or even specifically occur to be part of journalistic content, thus addressing journalism itself, most audience participation is "follow-up communication", which comments, evaluates, rates, or forwards professionally produced information. In this respect, participating users are addressing their own audiences – their extended social networks on Facebook, their followers on Twitter or other users within an online community.

These differences point to a second dimension of inclusion performance on the audience side. *The degree of community orientation* manifesting in the practices is in itself an important aspect of audience inclusion, since it is tied to the shift from a disperse audience of mass communication to the networked audience of online-based public spheres. Participatory practices include interactions with other users and references to their contributions, both affirmative and critical. Thus, inclusion in journalism can be on the individual level, when a user just reacts to a certain news item, but it can also happen on a collective level when users participate as and locate themselves within a group, network or community (Kopp & Schönhagen 2008).

Assessing inclusion performance has to take these different modes of collective inclusion into account, e.g. by analysing whether the audience organizes itself as an opposition to journalism (e.g. by criticizing practices or quality standards), acts as "interest group" in articulating desires and preferences (e.g. requesting to bring certain shows back on air), or should best be understood as "brand communities" forming around certain shows or personalities.

While inclusion performance expresses itself in (and can be empirically assessed by looking at) factual practices, audience inclusion as a whole is also framed by *inclusion expectations*, meaning the sum of cognitive patterns guiding the practices of journalism and the audience, respectively. Starting again with journalism, inclusion expectations consist first of *conceptions of one's own professional role* and the place audience participation takes within that profession (Thurman 2008; Singer 2010; Heinonen 2011). These self-conceptions result from professional socialization and previous experiences with audience participation that are molding journalists' (self-)perception. They also include expectation-expectations, that is expectations about the degree to which the audience (or groups within) expect to be able to participate in journalism. These aspects contribute to more or less specific *images of the audience* and the functions ascribed to it in relation to one's own profession (Jones & Himelboim 2010; Heinonen 2011; Anderson 2011; Weischenberg et. al. 2012): Is the audience to be informed, even enlightened by journalism? Should journalism encourage the audience to participate, in order to channel public opinion, even to advocate public interests towards more powerful political or economic actors? While self-conceptions and images of the audience remain often implicit, they might also be made explicit, for example in specific social media guidelines or commenting policies (Robinson 2010).

But inclusion expectations will also form as *strategic rationales* which guide the allocation of resources and structural decisions within media organizations (Vujnovic 2011). In this respect, within organizations audience participation might be seen, for example, as an instrument to improve the quality of journalism or to expand the distribution and reach of content via viral spreadability and the sharing features of social platforms. From an economic perspective, audience participation can be seen as imposing additional costs for community management and moderation, even including legal risks regarding libel or copyright issues that might surface. On the other hand, audience participation can be leveraged to reduce costs (e.g. relying on citizen reporters instead of professional correspondents) or to improve loyalty to a media brand.

Inclusion expectations among the audience, on the other hand, are also formed through a combination of situated motivations and previous experiences. *Motivation for participation* can be grounded in a variety of personal and social needs, for example expressing one's opinion, taking part in discourse and deliberation, asking for additional information and orientation, wanting to contribute expert knowledge, sharing personal experiences or affirming individual and social identity (Leung 2009; Ekdale et al. 2010). With respect to inclusion into journalism, an important distinction is if these motives are directed towards institutional journalism and its functions (e.g. to comment an article in order to participate in public discourse), directed towards other members of the journalistic audience (e.g. to flag another user's comment as inappropriate in order to improve quality of user discussions) or towards other people or audiences (e.g. forwarding an article in order to inform one's colleagues).

Previous experiences with participation performance influence the *assessment of audience contributions*. Since journalism can react in different ways to user feedback and other forms of user-generated content (including ignoring, exploiting or prohibiting

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it), users will form different opinions and expectations about the impact their activities have. As with inclusion performance, this aspect of inclusion expectations does also include a dimension of individual vs. collective action; participation might be assessed by the audience as mere individual comments or as part of the collective "wisdom of the crowd" (Surowiecki 2004; in similar veins also Sunstein 2006; Shirky 2009) which gets articulated in networked publics.

To sum up the analytical argument: Audience inclusion in journalism relies on inclusion performance and on inclusion expectations, which can be identified both on the journalism and the audience side. Inclusion performance consists of practices which use mediating technologies to stimulate, articulate and aggregate interaction between journalism and audience. This interaction can become manifest directly in journalistic output, but can also take place in communication spaces 'outside' journalistic media outlets by referencing its output. Within journalism, these practices have become part of professional routines and structures; within the audience, these practices form networked audiences which exhibit different degrees of collective orientation.

Inclusion performance is framed by inclusion expectations, which in turn are (re-)produced or changed through participatory practice. Within journalism, these expectations are an important part of professional self-images, which consist of conceptions of the journalistic role and the place of the audience within journalistic practices, but also of frames and criteria guiding strategic decisions of media organizations. Among the audience, expectations are mediated by motivations for participation and assessments of the impact these contributions might have on journalism, both as individual and collective practice.

Both dimensions of inclusion, performance and expectations, can be assessed separately for journalism and audience, respectively. When analysing specific situations

or constellations – for example in case studies of news organizations as well as on an aggregated level – we can also assess the congruence of these dimensions. Inclusion performance contributes to the general *inclusion level* which can be more or less uneven, when either journalism or audiences exhibit more or stronger forms of participation. Inclusion expectations, on the other hand, contribute to the *inclusion distance*, which will be small, if expectations about the amount and nature of participation are rather similar between journalism and audience, and will be larger the more these expectations differ.

The proposed perspective sheds light on the complex relationship between journalism and its audience. It can account both for increasing participatory activities as well as for tendencies or strategies of boundary work and demarcation, thus identifying areas of decreasing asymmetry or blurring boundaries. The concepts of inclusion level and inclusion distance, in particular, can help to understand and empirically map the different tensions journalism is facing due to the rise of digital networked media. It does not, however, abandon the very basic differentiation between professional roles and audience roles which is fundamental to journalism, its societal function and identity. While the exact relationship between those roles is mutable (and currently undergoing changes), the end of that constitutive differentiation would also mark the end of journalism as a social system. Whether this will happen and journalistic functions will be taken over by "functional equivalents" (Neuberger/Nuernbergk 2010: 321) is an empirical question, though.

5. Conclusion and outlook

Journalism has always been about the audience. As the social system which professionally selects and distributes information within public spheres, journalism is

not conceivable without the complementary system of the audience towards which the communicative offers are directed. Journalism studies have always acknowledged this relationship. But similar to their research object, they have been embedded in conditions of mass media, where audiences were either conceptualized as the sum of (more or less active) recipients of media content, or as the result of audience manufacturing in regimes of audience measurement.

Technological innovations of digital networked media have a profound impact on how this relationship is organized and socially structured, and they should also have an impact on the theories and models of media research. We are just beginning to understand the social implications of the rise of networked audiences and the resulting tensions – which are not only a challenge to journalism itself, but also to journalism research, since they call for a revision and possible re-formulation of established theories and models.

This paper has argued that sociological inclusion theory can provide a suitable contribution to assess these shifts, and it has proposed an analytical framework to separate as well as to integrate different aspects of audience inclusion in journalism. As has been demonstrated, this heuristic model can be useful to systematize existing research findings and to organize them in a more comprehensive theoretical framework. Additionally, it can serve to stimulate, instruct and structure further research. In October 2011, we have started a research project which is analysing audience inclusion in contemporary news journalism. Six case studies of different news media in Germany, acting within the convergence areas of TV-Online and Print-Online respectively, will not only provide information about inclusion levels and inclusion distances, but also allow comparisons between different media traditions and different kinds of news journalism.[viii] In principal, the analytical framework is also open to other forms of

comparative research which might focus, for example, on the analysis of news journalism compared to audience inclusion in fictional media content. It is also possible to use the model to investigate inclusion in other social systems such as politics or economy that are increasingly able to communicate with their audiences directly bypassing journalism. A historical perspective might compare the emergence and stabilization of audience inclusion in earlier stages of press and broadcast media (e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen 2007; Simmons 2009) with current developments in online communication. And an international perspective might compare media organizations and their audiences in different countries, or look at audience inclusion by global media companies and their audiences.

The shift away from the "'we write you read' dogma of modern journalism" (Deuze 2003, p. 220) is connected with high expectations – as an advancement for democracy, and as a chance for journalism to reconnect with declining audiences. Advancing our scientific understanding of this shift might eventually also contribute to our understanding of contemporary networked public spheres.

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[i] The paper has benefitted greatly from comments and suggestions by Nele Heise, Julius Reimer, Oscar Westlund, Tamara Witschge and two anonymous referees.

[ii] The concepts of "inclusion" and "exclusion" are not limited to systems theory, but serve as central dichotomy in various sociological theories and paradigms (Stichweh 2009).

[iii] We acknowledge that this is only one of various "heterogeneous, multidimensional and competing" (Löffelholz 2008) theoretical approaches to the question "what is journalism?". Whether journalism is modeled as social action, as social system, as popular culture or with the focus on journalism's normative role, will in addition make a difference on how the relationship between journalism/journalists and publics/audience is conceptualized. What all these different approaches have in common, however, is the need to account for the shifts brought about by digital interactive media.

[iv] While we concentrate on journalism in this paper, it should be noted that public communication is not restricted to journalism, but also includes for example public relations and advertising.

[v] This does not mean, however, that the particular relations between these roles are immutable. For example, by applying inclusion theory to West German history from 1960 to 1989, Gerhards (2001) shows how demands of citizens for participation in the social systems of medicine, education, law, politics, and economics have increased in what he calls "the rebellion of the citizens".

[vi] In fact, declining readership and revenue are phenomena predominantly observed in Europe, Australia and the United States. In its annual report on "the state of the news media" the Pew Research Center's project for excellence in journalism (2011) pointed out that "U.S. newspapers suffer more than others" anywhere else in the world. However, in India, Egypt and Lebanon print papers are thriving with respect to advertising revenues, and in Africa

paid newspaper circulation in 2009 rose by 4.8% (see the special report on international newspaper economics within the report: http://stateofthemedia.org/2011/mobile-survey/international-newspaper-economics/).

[vii] We recognize that these categories and dimensions rely on analytical distinctions: both within journalism and audience, actual communication always includes aspects of performance and expectations. Additionally, "journalism" and "audience" are broad roles which contain various actors, organizations and interests.

[viii] Additional information and findings are available at http://jpub20.hans-bredow-institut.de/.