

„It’s just not my thing“ – Why audience members don’t use participatory features of (online) news media. Insights from four German case studies

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Most print and TV news media also run websites providing a diverse range of features (e.g. discussion boards, feedback forms) and/or social media profiles that complement traditional feedback channels (e.g. letters, phone calls). Previous research suggests that only a minority of committed users regularly engages with these participatory features (cf. Larson 2012). But little is known about the reasons and causes for this reluctance and (potential) participation barriers from the user perspective. This paper reports findings from four case studies on audience participation at German news media and their online services, each of which included, among other empirical approaches, an online survey of their website users: a *daily TV news cast* (NC; n=4.686), a *weekly political TV talk show* (PT; n=354), a *daily newspaper* (DN; n=525), and a *weekly print magazine* (WM; n=257).

In general, we found notable differences regarding the percentage of non-users: While almost half of the respondents at the two TV formats never used any of the participatory features (NC: 49.3%; PT: 43.4%) their portion was considerably lower at the print formats (DN: 27%; WM: 12.5%). This might be due to the amount and types of participatory features offered by the media outlets (e.g. the PT does not run any social media profiles), as well as the (visible) integration of user-generated content into the journalistic products, e.g. as both print media run pages with letters to the editor, their readers might be more familiar with this type of engagement.

We measured reasons for not using participatory features with a set of 14 items (5-point Likert scale: 1=“disagree completely” to 5=“fully agree”; displayed are mean values) plus an open answer field. In all four online surveys two items gained the highest agreement. The first one, “I don’t want to register” (NC: 3.48; PT: 3.47; DN: 3.40; WM = 3.58), points to a certain unwillingness to specify personal data or to register at social networking services such as *Facebook*, as well as to worries about data security. This is also supported by previous research identifying registration as main inhibitor of user engagement on online news sites (e.g. Engesser 2010, Springer/Pfaffinger 2012, Weber 2013) and, more generally, raising awareness for online data security. Secondly, non-users indicated that active engagement with participatory features is too time consuming and/or takes too much effort (NC: 3.09; PT: 2.87; DN: 3.23; WM: 3.28). While the results only differ in nuances between the four surveys, we also found differences within the case studies related to socio-demographic variables such as age and educational status of the respondents, e.g. elderly non-users at the Daily Newspaper indicated significantly more often that participatory features are too complicated or that they had technical problems.

Complementary findings from open answers and non-standardized interviews provide additional insights, e.g. many non-users of the Newscast and the Daily Newspaper feel content with being (passive) viewers or readers of the journalistic products they trust, without feeling motivated or even obliged to add something. Specific to the Political Talk Show, users report being frustrated because they think that their (critical) feedback is not taken seriously by the journalists or does not have any effect. Overall, our findings suggest that the perceived and actual “costs” of participating (personal data/data security, time, and effort) do outplay possible individual gratifications obtained from active involvement. Contrary to the rhetoric of the “participatory web”, many users seem to agree with one respondent who stated with regard to participation in news journalism: “It’s just not my thing”.