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AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA

FROM A MEDIA-CENTRIC TO A SOCIETY-CENTRIC APPROACH. THE MONITOR: A BEST PRACTICE OF THE DUTCH PUBLIC BROADCASTER NPO

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Abstract: Audience participation in production of public service media programs appears to achieve objectives that are more often media-centric than society-centric. *The Monitor*, a journalism program of Dutch public broadcaster NPO chooses not to focus on participation in production but on participation in the information-gathering phase. We investigate whether and how participation in this stage involves society-centric participation. We carry out expert interviews with the journalists, questioning their intentions and how they evaluate audience input in terms of societal objectives. In the conclusion, we discuss how participation in pre-production can help journalists to step out of their bubble.

Keywords: audience participation, public service media, media-centric, trust, transparency, filter bubbles

1 Introduction

Scholars have identified a growing gap between politicians and media professionals on the one hand and the audience on the other.[1] One of the democratic tasks of public broadcasters is to close this gap by enabling audience members to participate in societal debates through radio, TV or online services.[2] However, even with audience participation in public service media (PSM) programs, societal goals such as increasing diversity of opinions or being critical of the status quo, are not always achieved. Audience participation in the production or distribution phase often remains media-centric.[3] The participation is implemented to keep audiences engaged with media, but does not encourage them to become active participants in society, although this is a key part of a public broadcaster's democratic task. User generated content is included to deal with challenges such as audience retention, but not to achieve actual audience empowerment.

This general observation[4] has led the Dutch public broadcaster, NPO,[5] to focus more on the involvement of the audience in the information-gathering phase, before production or distribution, in order to advance a bottom-up approach by starting from the concerns and life worlds of the audience.[6] Accordingly, the journalists of the investigative journalism program '*The Monitor'* start their research from audience input that they collect both online via *The Monitor* website and offline by organizing *The Monitor* meetings.

In this paper, we investigate to what extent audience participation in the information-gathering phase of *The Monitor* involves societally relevant audience participation. Our assumption is that participation in the research phase is less media- and more society-centric than participation in the production or distribution phase. In particular for *The Monitor*, we assess the intentions of the journalists with this audience participation in the input phase and how they evaluate the actual audience input in terms of societal goals.

In the first part of the paper, we elaborate on the challenges PSM experience with audience participation and the societal goals related to audience participation. Subsequently, we describe the specific context of *The Monitor* as a case study and reflect on the methods used. Findings are based on a study visit of three weeks at *The Monitor* in November 2017. We carried out 10 semi-structured expert interviews with the journalists,[7] mainly asking questions about the opportunities and challenges with audience participation in the input phase. During the stay, we also adopted Caldwell's industrial texts approach to carefully scrutinize the television episodes and website articles of the program.[8] We compare the aspirations of *The Monitor* in policy with the evaluation of the audience input in practice. In conclusion, we discuss whether and how audience participation in the pre-production stage can help journalists and public broadcasters to step out of their bubble and regain societal relevance.[9]

2 Audience Participation or Technological Interaction?

In the beginning of the new millennium, public broadcasters started offering their content online and engaged in interactive media strategies.[10] This so-called shift from public service *broadcasting* to public service *media* enhanced the opportunities for users to create and share content themselves.[11] More than ever, it was deemed possible for public broadcasters to establish a two-way relationship with their most important stakeholder: the audience. PSM researchers and policy makers have consistently encouraged audience participation in the production and distribution of PSM content.[12] Many PSM producers were obliged to add audience participation to their television and radio formats. This came with particular challenges.

First, a conflict of expertise with audience members in terms of producing media content, including writing and filming, has led producers and journalists to adhere to a broadcasting logic of restricting control of media production to a specific group of people with journalistic expertise and skills (as illustrated in figure 1).[13] Empirical findings of newsroom culture have demonstrated that journalists do consider digital opportunities for participation of media users relevant for both marketing and democratic purposes (although often prioritizing the latter, see below).[14] At the same time, they do not regard media content created by media users as being of an equal standard in comparison to the news content they produce.[15] This reasoning, interpreted by some as a self-preserving strategy of elite expertise against the do-it-yourself culture of the digital age,[16] becomes problematic especially when adopted by media professionals to have "a monopolistic claim on expertise in communicating 'truth' about the world".[17] On the other hand, independence of journalists and their final say on news content are still at the heart of the trustee model of journalism, ensuring quality content and a watchdog function in society.[18] Moreover, audience research shows that media users frequently prefer good quality content made by professionals and do not always have the desire to participate (see also below).[19]

Second, audience participation becomes complicated when there is a discrepancy between the levels of participation promised and the actual conditions created. A lack of transparency and expectation management about the actual use of their input can create frustration with media users. For example, when participation is seemingly invited in the production stage but is only allowed after distribution (e.g. there is a call to comment upon

or share content after the PSM program is disseminated). Or, when participation is asked in the distribution phase, but there are no sufficient resources to follow-up on these comments (referred to as 'no follow-up' in figure 1).[20]

Third, audience participation in production and distribution of PSM programs often remains media-centric; it is implemented to keep audiences engaged with media but does not encourage them to become active participants in society.[21] However, a public broadcaster's democratic task is meant to foster more active participation in society. This conflict can be explained by the fact that, due to a lack in vision, participation is frequently adopted in ways that are most convenient for PSM producers. Rather than to foster audience empowerment, they use it as a strategic means to face the challenges of the digital age (e.g., audience retention). For example, second screen apps are implemented to reinforce users' loyalty or to get a better grip on content preferences but not to achieve societal goals such as increasing diversity.[22] Enli demonstrated that BBC and Scandinavian public broadcasters SVT and NRK mainly implemented audience participation to gain institutional legitimacy.[23]

Of course, not all prior participatory projects of public broadcasters have been marketing attempts. Some had a clear vision and societal objectives in mind, such as ABC's (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) *New Beginnings* project aimed at cultural diversity.[24] Other participatory projects, in turn, were initially marketing-driven, but engaged in more societal goals over the course of the project, or wanted to achieve both.[25] For example, VRT's current affairs program *Vranckx* initially aimed to increase audience appeal by creating an online community, but media producers became concerned of more democratic PSM objectives such as decreasing polarization and including different perspectives throughout the project.[26] This also shows that more minimal forms of participation, such as interaction in an online community, can foster societal goals equally well as some more elaborate forms of audience participation in media production.[27]

Accordingly, the question becomes how to move from mere technological interaction or media-centric participation (participation that attracts audiences to other media platforms) to society-centric participation (participation that also encourages media users to go out and promote actual change in society), and the achievement of societal goals.[28] While audience participation in the production and distribution of PSM is rhetorically employed to legitimize the importance of PSM, the way it can contribute to societal goals, as shown in figure 1, needs further deliberation.[29] Moreover, it is also important not to fall in the trap of participation-centric reasoning as audience participation "must be questioned and tempered in relation to other more substantial goals and principles."[30]

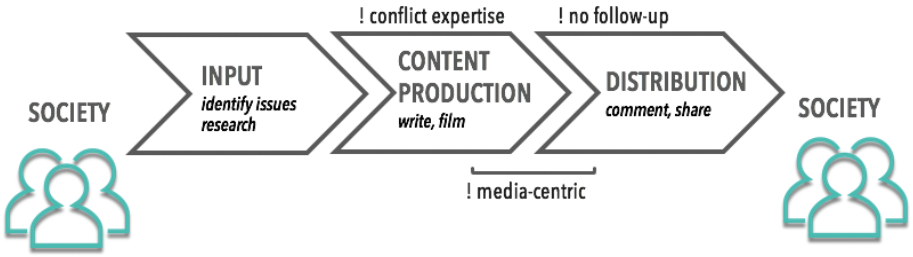

Figure 1. Challenges audience participation in content production and distribution (source: author).

3 From Media-Centric to Society-Centric Audience Participation

If we want to evaluate audience participation in terms of societal goals, it is important to know which societal goals could best be accomplished through audience participation. In PSM literature, diversity and being critical of media are mentioned as being the goals most attainable. Enhancing diversity is an important democratic objective for PSM, as it grants representation of the audience in the public sphere.[31] Audience participation potentially increases the

diversity of stories, arguments and opinions present in media content.[32] Furthermore, a greater diversity of voices is also better able to hold media professionals and politicians accountable and challenge them about the decisions they take.[33] Horz emphasizes this function of users-as-citizens as 'media watchdogs' who critically scrutinize journalistic ethics.[34] It must be noted, however, that it is still mostly a small part of the population – those who already have knowledge of the social and political worlds – who most frequently participate.[35]

Next to PSM literature, it is important to look at audience research to get a better grip on societally relevant participation. In the end, audience participation has a higher chance to be societally relevant when it is meaningful for the audience themselves. In collaboration with the BBC, Wardle and Williams conducted large-scale audience research on how the audience values audience participation in news.[36] The most often mentioned merit of audience participation was that it helps to produce stories which otherwise would have stayed under the radar and, as such, it helps media professionals and other media users to better relate with societal issues.[37]

Carpentier uncovered similar results in his study about two Belgian participatory programs 16Plus and Barometer.[38] Media users evaluated audience participation in these programs in terms of professional quality and social relevance. When audience input, in this case user generated content in the form of amateur films, were of too limited aesthetic and narrative quality, participation was disliked. However, when quality standards were met and audience input brought about authenticity and spontaneity, participation was considered an added value. Interestingly, some of the human-interest stories in Barometer were criticized "for falling into the human-interest trap of privileging the private and the personal without transcending it".[39] This shows that media users are well capable to think beyond entertainment objectives and reflect on societal relevance. More recent research on the Belgian participatory radio program Bel10 demonstrated related results.[40] In this study, media users especially appreciated participatory opportunities on the radio when they visibly contributed to the diversity, authenticity and critical quality of radio content. In other words, they valued audience input when it helped place critical topics on the policy agenda.

To sum up, audience participation is socially relevant and meaningful for media users when:

1. it contributes to the authenticity and diversity of media content
2. it helps media professionals and media users to better relate with societal issues
3. it brings up problems neglected by the policy agenda
4. it is critical of the media and media professionals

However, as we have mentioned, this does not mean that any audience participation automatically brings about these objectives. This depends on multiple factors, amongst others, the intentions of the public broadcaster and a solid participatory framework that is able to ensure good expectation management, quality and follow-up of audience input. Furthermore, research on audience participation in the production and distribution phase of PSM programs reveals that it still too often remains media-centric, failing to contribute to the above mentioned societal goals. That is why we want to investigate to what extent participation in the information-gathering phase might be less media- and more society-centric than participation in the production or distribution phase. We choose to study audience participation in the input phase in a specific program such as *The Monitor* and not more openly invited audience participation. Openly invited participation on the website of public broadcasters, such as input received by the ombudsmen, has already proven to entail many challenges in terms of society-centric participation, for example in terms of incivility, hate speech, racism and harassment towards female journalists.[41] Before studying the specific case of *The Monitor*, we look at similar participatory cases of other media outlets to discern some of the defining characteristics of *The Monitor*.

4 What Is So Distinctive About *The Monitor*?

From the creation of ***Wikinews*** in 2004 and onwards, high hopes have been assigned to participatory journalism as a means to include citizens in the online public sphere. If we look at initiatives public and private broadcasters took in

this regard, we mainly identify cases that invite audience participation in the production stage. For example, the ***ABC Open*** website of the Australian public broadcaster, the ***Les Observateurs*** initiative of the television network France 24 (see Figure 2), and ***CNN iReport*** encourage eyewitnesses or people at the heart of societal events to upload videos, photos and stories they created themselves.[42]

Figure 2. Screenshot website les Observateurs

Over the years, however, the success of these platforms has been surpassed by the hashtag-function on social media.[43] ***The Guardian*** adopted a different approach by spurring readers to help sift through piles of government documents, such as after the British Parliament scandal in 2009.[44] Key to the relative success of this project was that the editors gave audience members very specific instructions on what to do; after reading a page, readers had to answer some questions on a multiple-choice form. While interesting for departing from the more common type of participation in content creation (audience members were asked to help categorize data, not to write articles) it was no bottom-up project that started from the concerns of the audience. BBC's ***Have your Say,*** on the other hand, continually asks the audience, similar to *The Monitor,* which topics they deem relevant for investigative journalism. *Have your Say* has been criticized, however, for being primarily based on personal interests and opinions of the audience and less than *The Monitor* on their experiences and expertise. It is for this reason, we selected *The Monitor* as case to evaluate audience participation in the information-gathering phase of PSM programs.

Figure 3. Different phases audience participation (source: author)

4.1 The Monitor

The Monitor is broadcast on television on a weekly basis and has a strong online presence as well. The tagline on the **website** of *The Monitor*, 'our research starts with you', encourages users to upload information on local political wrongdoings. The journalists also reach out to diverse parts of the audience by organizing offline *The Monitor* meetings at different locations. As such, the topics under investigation in the program directly come from the audience.

However, while audience participation is key for the format, it is only invited in the information-gathering phase. Each television episode of *The Monitor* is the result of at least six weeks of research. During this process three articles a week are published on the website to ensure continuous communication to and feedback from the audience. The production and distribution of journalistic content, both the written articles on the website and the television episodes, are firmly in the hands of the journalists.

The Monitor is produced by KRO-NCRV, one of the eight broadcasting organisations of the Dutch decentralized PSM system NPO. These broadcasting companies share three television channels and have to make sure different ideological strands in society are presented.[45] The broadcasting company KRO-NCRV, responsible for *The Monitor*, is the result of the merger of the Catholic Radio Broadcasting and the Dutch Christian Radio Association in 2014. While KRO mostly targets a mainstream audience, NCRV adopts a more critical approach that aims to tackle the trend towards polarization in society.[46]

The Monitor sets out from a belief in the importance of involving audiences in the pre-production stage. This is rooted in NPO's philosophy to advance a bottom-up approach towards the audience starting from their concerns and life worlds, encapsulated by the quote of current head of KRO-NCRV Hans Laroes "not the will, but the world of the viewer".[47] To this end, NPO adheres to the idea of two-directional participation, i.e. not only enabling audience participation in media formats, but also fostering stronger participation of media producers, whether or not via online tools, in society.[48] An example of this approach is the 'explorer project' of KRO-NCRV. Journalists are sent to different places in society (hospitals, schools, prisons, etc.) to keep in touch with societal issues.[49] Furthermore, two-directional participation involves collaboration with the audience by sharing information with them in the earliest stage and keeping in check with their way of interpreting the news.[50] This implies transparency at the level of content creation. Journalists have to communicate on how they process and interpret information and audience input.[51] This focus on transparency is not so uncommon, and it is mentioned in policy papers of other public broadcasters as well.[52] However, the focus in the other public broadcasters still seems to be on transparency at the level of the PSM organization (such as financial transparency), and not on the level of production or journalism.[53]

5 Methods

To analyse how this audience participation in the input phase of *The Monitor* contributes to societal goals, and thus entails societally relevant participation, we conducted a study visit of three weeks at *The Monitor* in November 2017. During this period, the team of journalists was transitioning to a new website with a communication strategy that ensured better expectation management of audience input. From then on, newsletters per topic would inform participating audience members on the status of the research. The idea was also to use this transition period to go a step beyond crowd sourcing (how the journalists themselves called participation in the input phase). Following the example of *the Guardian* (see reference to *the Guardian* above), the journalists of *The Monitor* would ask audience members to help them screen government documents.

Being at the site of *The Monitor* was mainly an advantage to get a hold of the journalists, since they had very unpredictable day schedules. It is also for this reason that we were not able to conduct participant observation, but chose to carry out 10 semi-structured expert interviews with the journalists as the main methodology.[54] The real names of the journalists were included in the analysis. For the most part, we asked them questions about the opportunities and challenges with audience participation in the input phase, their thoughts on the evolution to even more audience participation and their strategies to remain as transparent as possible. Between the interviews we adopted the industrial texts approach of Caldwell to look at "television texts that circulate beyond and below the on-screen programs," such as the articles and videos on *The Monitor* website touched upon during the interviews with the journalists.[55] Subsequently, we transcribed and analysed the interviews, focusing on the four societal goals related to audience participation previously identified; authenticity and diversity, making complex issues relatable; bringing up problems neglected by

the policy agenda, and being critical of the media and status quo. Before evaluating *The Monitor* in terms of these four societal objectives though, we examine the intentions of the journalists with this audience participation in the input phase. We look at how they adopt it as a strategy to increase trust and transparency in the context of fake news and question why they have chosen to move away from audience participation in media production.

6 Strategy to Increase Trust and Transparency

People increasingly distrust mainstream media given that they no longer feel connected to news about politics and policies happening above their heads.[56] For the journalists of *The Monitor* audience participation in the information-gathering phase was mainly important to repair this declining trust of the public in mainstream news organizations. It helped them to keep in touch with the day-to-day realities of their audiences. According to Anne, journalists needed to reach out to diverse audience members and engage in dialogue with them in order to re-establish their presence in society: “I think we should go where the actual stories take place, rather than to expect audience members to bring those to us.”

This reflects the idea of two-directional participation strongly present in NPO policy documents (see above). Indeed, people can not only upload information on *The Monitor* website, but *The Monitor* journalists also organize meetings with diverse communities in society. Furthermore, this process of gathering input did not necessarily have to result in media output. Daan, for example, said about his next offline meeting in Zeeland, a remote area in the Netherlands, “I won’t take my camera with me. It is mainly an opportunity for me to better understand their issues.”

Secondly, an important implication of this audience participation in the information gathering phase was transparency at the level of content creation. During the entire process of collecting input from the audience, the journalists communicated on how they processed this information on *The Monitor* website. This was important in terms of expectation management, according to Stephanie, as people are being informed on which input will be mainly used and why. For example, during the investigation of how the police treats the identity of people on social media,[57] Daan received some questions on why this is such an important issue. As a response, he made a video clearly stating the arguments he had for focusing on the police, while also mentioning the procedure of the research (see Video 1).

Video 1. Daan explains the research behind the ‘police online’ episode.

In another case, Bastiaan received negative feedback on a television episode[58] via e-mail, after which he published this criticism in an **article**, together with a clarification of the choices he made. Some of *The Monitor* journalists even

admitted and published their mistakes on the website. According to Sietse, this was something "other journalists should do more often as well, as it is a good way to establish a relationship of openness and trust between media and the public."

Admittedly, some journalists disapproved of transparency when it was instrumentally used to publish an article faster. For example, Bastiaan and Marjolein criticized the publication of website articles that only brought one side of a story while being transparent about this. "It is not enough to say this is only one side and we will bring you the other later on," insisted Bastiaan, "you always have to try to look at it from both sides." Marjolein added that "sometimes it was a pragmatic choice to already create some buzz surrounding a topic and gather audience input." They supported the move towards transparency, however, not when it was just used to attain efficiency goals. Stephanie, in turn, valued the culture of transparency, but said that journalistic selection procedures did not have to be mentioned in each and every article, as this might become "too meta" and draws attention away from the actual story. All journalists did seem to appreciate the transparency measures on the new *The Monitor* website. From the point of switching to the new website and onward, people who uploaded information received an automatic update with a timeline and information on the progress of the research.

Interestingly, the journalists of *The Monitor* preferred audience participation in the information-gathering phase and the transparency this brought about over fact-checking as a strategy to rebuild trust in journalism. These reflections resonate in PSM literature. For example, Helberger and Reiter et al. are convinced that citizens will regain trust in media's watchdog role if they get a better understanding and/or become involved in the news gathering processes.[59]

Many media companies however still consider fact-checking as the best way to deal with fake news and declining trust in media. The journalists of *The Monitor* did not dismiss fact-checking as such, but did problematize the monopolistic belief of some journalists on expertise in communicating one objective truth about the world" (see above). Moreover, a lot of people distrust mainstream media exactly because the latter brings a version of the truth they no longer identify with. "People no longer take it that news media preach the truth from their ivory towers," according to Anne, "that is why it is better to acknowledge and reflect on our own selection bias. This not only makes us more relatable, but also spurs media users to be self-critical." Accordingly, rather than to merely check the facts, *The Monitor* journalists deemed it better to encourage reflection on different possible interpretations of the facts.

7 Moving Away from Audience Participation in Production

Audience participation is invited in the information-gathering phase of *The Monitor*, but not in media production. The production and distribution of the website articles and television episodes are entirely in the hands of the journalists. They preferred it this way for two reasons. First, they believed they had the best professional expertise and skills when it came to writing journalistic content, and secondly, they presumed to have fewer specific self-interests than media users. Daan and Bastiaan emphasized the importance of journalistic expertise and experience. "It is so complex sometimes our profession," claimed Daan. Bastiaan continued: "it is about bringing different types of information together, making it understandable without losing the nuance, balancing emotion with reason, etc." Stephanie agreed, saying "We are trained in bringing complex stories in an accessible way." As such, the journalists implicitly referred to the strong professional pragmatics at play in the stage of media production, that is the resources, strategies, routines, norms and skills that constantly need to be considered in order to achieve relevant, accurate and up-to-date quality content.[60] Anne, in turn, mentioned the problem of self-interest. "When media users write news stories, you always have to check their background and motivations." This again demonstrates the risks of too openly invited participation in production in terms of quality. Bastiaan concluded that media users can contribute a lot to a story in terms of experience and expertise, but not to the journalistic process itself.

This argumentation of the journalists, which can be interpreted as part of the self-preserving strategy of journalistic expertise in the digital age (see above), is mainly at play in the stage of production. It is especially in this phase that the journalists consider their expertise as vital to ensure their watchdog function in society. Accordingly, the journalists were much more enthusiastic about inviting audience participation in the information gathering phase (see also below). This however, did not mean that the input of the audience in the information-gathering phase, before production, was not critically scrutinized by the journalists. A good demonstration of this was *The Monitor* episode on Lyme disease.[61] One of the audience members sent in the idea to make a story about the lack of treatment of the disease in the Netherlands. After careful investigation of *The Monitor* it appeared that the requested treatment was unreliable with no proven effectiveness. As a result, the journalists brought a story that was the opposite of the initial wish of one of the audience members. They explained why they did this in an **online article** published shortly after the episode.

In summary, *The Monitor* journalists prioritized societal goals such as bringing the right story in all its complexity over the goal of audience participation itself. As such, *The Monitor* heralded the promise for achieving societal objectives less driven by media- and participation-centric reasoning than previous participatory projects (see above). This brings us to the next question of whether and when the audience participation in the information-gathering phase of *The Monitor* was societally relevant.

8 Towards Societally Relevant Audience Participation

The intentions of the journalists to foster transparency and trust with audience participation in the information-gathering phase do not say anything on how we can evaluate this participation in terms of societal objectives. As mentioned above, we can speak of societally relevant participation when:

1. it contributes to the authenticity and diversity of media content
2. it helps media professionals and media users to better relate with societal issues
3. it brings up problems neglected by the policy agenda
4. it is critical of the media and media professionals

8.1 Coming Closer to Authenticity

First, audience participation in the information-gathering phase had huge advantages for the authenticity of news stories according to *The Monitor* journalists. In the traditional journalistic approach, reporters had to call different citizen or customer associations if they wanted to hear the media user's point of view. Often, these associations chose a faithful representative that most clearly reflected the groups' interests. "This implied an extra filter," Marjolein told us "while the input we receive on *The Monitor* website directly comes from audience members and is more edgy." Evidently, this also enabled the journalists of *The Monitor* to find people beyond the usual suspects. "As a journalist you can call approximately thirty people a day, said Daan, but "if we launch a call on the website, information comes in from places we would never go looking." Sietse confirmed that very specific calls on the website motivate people under the radar to speak up, fostering not only the authenticity but also the diversity of news stories. Moreover, by organising the meetings offline *The Monitor* journalists also tried to reach people who spend less time on the Internet.

This brings us to the second criterion for societally relevant participation; i.e. does audience participation help media professionals and other media users to better relate with societal issues? The journalists were enthusiastic about the audience input as a "very good thermometer of society" but did not always find it easy to deal with emotional reactions of audience members. At first, many of the journalists such as Bastiaan were opposed to investigating stories that

arose from emotions of audience members. Gradually, however, they learned that emotions are a very important source of information. Bastiaan referred to the surprised reactions in their newsroom on the 2016 election of Donald Trump and how this reshaped their vision not to overlook emotions. They made an important distinction between opinions and experiences of people in this regard, focusing especially on experiences as they better help to understand the root of societal issues. Daan told us that they tried not to concentrate on the anger or on the discontent itself, but on the reasons causing these emotions. Stephanie and Yvonne pointed out that this was a deliberate strategy to avoid polarization. For example, when discussing the difficult topic of integration, they did not broadcast a series of opinions, but zoomed in on the experiences of different people living in a multicultural street in Rotterdam. Moreover, listening to people tell their personal stories enabled not only journalists but also other media users to better relate with complex societal issues. "We often receive reactions that people recognize themselves in these stories," said Stephanie.

8.2 Confront and Go Beyond Filter Bubbles

The third measure to evaluate audience participation; whether it brings up problems beyond the policy agenda, was already touched upon when discussing the authenticity principle above. When a voice was given to people under the radar, problems could be brought to light that go beyond current events, challenging the dominant agenda setting. One of the strengths of *The Monitor* was that while they did not intend to cover the hot topics of the policy agenda, the investigated issues sometimes were picked up by the evening broadcast, an important success factor for the journalists to measure the impact of *The Monitor.* "We create buzz around topics by investigating them in-depth," asserted Bastiaan.

Furthermore, audience participation in the information-gathering phase ensured that the journalists were critical of their own hypotheses. This aligned with being critical of media professionals, the last evaluation criterion of societally relevant participation. Stephanie acknowledged that in the traditional journalistic approach, it was quite easy to control how your story would turn out; "you have a hypothesis and you work towards it." When allowing audience feedback in the research phase, however, the journalists had to be open to constantly challenge their own assumptions (see Figure 4). "The tips of the audience confront us with our own filter bubble," said Sietse.

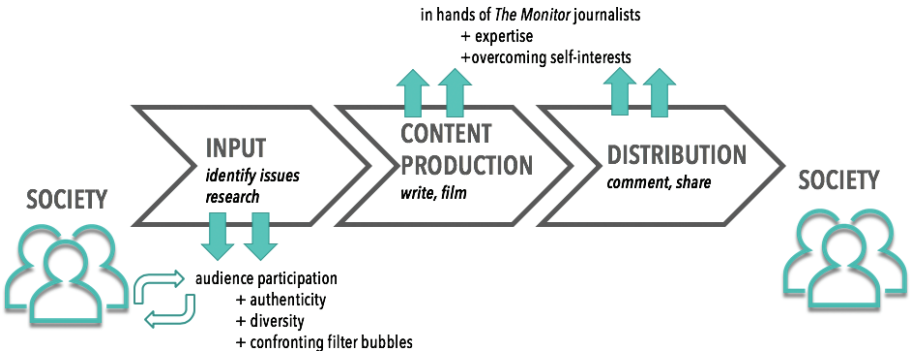

Figure 4. Audience participation in *The Monitor* (source: author)

While the audience input challenged some of the assumptions of the journalists about societal issues, it needed to be complemented with critical insights of the journalists as well in order to guarantee the critical quality of the final media output. Niels said that media users were not that critical or innovative when discussing current policy measures. Bastiaan said that they had to encourage media users to think outside of the box. "If an episode is very critical of current policies, it is because we framed it like that. We are very deliberate in who we cast and which part of the story we show. Every personal experience is to raise a critical societal problem." When giving these examples,

The Monitor journalists again emphasized the importance of their specific journalistic expertise to bring complex societal issues in a nuanced way and to prioritize societal goals over unlimited audience participation.

9 Conclusion

Audience participation in the information-gathering phase of *The Monitor* significantly contributed to societal goals of public service media (PSM) such as authenticity, diversity, and bringing up problems neglected by the policy agenda. It helped journalists to reconnect with the day-to-day realities of their audience members and to create their own news agenda. As such, there seemed to exist a strong shared vision at NPO between PSM policy, strategy and practice about the need to re-establish the presence of journalists in society - so-called two-directional participation - and to foster transparency at the level of content creation. *The Monitor* journalists considered the latter a more important strategy than fact-checking to rebuild trust in journalism. Collaboration with the audience in the earliest stage implied that journalists needed to be open to constantly challenge their own assumptions, admit their mistakes and go beyond their filter bubble.

Moreover, *The Monitor* journalists valued the personal experience and expertise of media users in the input stage the most. Audience participation in this phase allowed journalists to use their training and skills to differentiate opinions from experiences and further reflect upon emotions of media users. They considered participation in content production, on the other hand, as problematic, given that, in their opinion, professional journalistic expertise had to prevail when it came to actually filming or writing critical media output. In other words, participation in the input phase held the promise to circumvent the field of tension in terms of expertise between media users and media professionals, also referred to as professional pragmatics. Accordingly, the threshold for media users to participate could also be considered lower in the input stage, which especially benefits the society-centric objective of diversity.

Evidently, as the evaluation of audience participation in this article was merely based on the experience of the journalists, it needs to be validated further by audience research about how media users evaluate the audience participation in the input phase of *The Monitor.* For example, for a more complete assessment of participation in the input phase, it would be interesting to investigate how media users who sent in the idea to make a story about the lack of treatment of Lyme disease would react if they find out that *The Monitor* journalists decided to bring a story that was opposite to this idea. In addition, a content analysis evaluating the actual media output in terms of societal objectives would also enrich these findings. Finally, it would be interesting to complement our results with research on which impact this participation in pre-production has on media literacy of media users. The transparency and self-reflection of journalists this brings about might be able to trigger media users to better reflect on their own choices and filter bubbles as well.

Notes

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Biography

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