



## Article

# Metajournalistic Discourse on Participatory Journalism: Examining a Decade of Coverage in Trade Magazines

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**Abstract:** Audience participation is a contested issue in newsrooms and can challenge journalistic authority. By conducting a mixed-method analysis of a decade (2009–2018) of metajournalistic discourse ( $N = 135$ ) on participatory journalism in two leading trade magazines in the US and Germany (*Columbia Journalism Review* and *Journalist*), this study aims to contribute to the field's understanding of how and in which contexts audience participation is covered in public discourse and of reasons for positive and negative public evaluations of participatory journalism. The results show that while metajournalistic discourse covered participatory journalism in all stages of the news production process, notable differences in the coverage emerged depending on the specific context factors of participation dealt with. It is therefore depicted as a pervasive and multi-faceted phenomenon. 93 articles featured an evaluation: 53% depicted participatory journalism positively, 16% negatively and 31% left a mixed impression. Several themes emerged in the reasons for these evaluations, some of which are exact opposites, indicating that the presented evaluation depends on the specific circumstances of audience participation, namely the contexts of participatory journalism, the degree of involvement and character of audience participation and the resources available to the journalists.

**Keywords:** content analysis; journalism practice; journalistic authority; metajournalistic discourse; participatory journalism; qualitative textual analysis



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## 1. Introduction

Participatory practices in newsrooms belong to the most relevant journalistic innovations in Western countries (Meier et al. 2022). Although audience members participate in journalism in many different ways, journalists are sometimes still reluctant to include them in the news production process, with research focusing extensively on journalists' reasons for and against participation (e.g., Belair-Gagnon et al. 2019; Lawrence et al. 2018; Schmidt et al. 2022; Wolfgang et al. 2020). These reasons are particularly interesting in light of audience participation's impact on journalistic authority and its contribution to blurring journalism's boundaries (Carlson 2017).

This study seeks to extend this line of research by contributing insights into a hitherto more seldom addressed area in which reasons for and against various forms and types of participation in different contexts can be discussed: metajournalistic discourse. Metajournalistic discourse is a possibility for both journalistic and non-journalistic actors to publicly express evaluations of journalistic practices within the news production process and engage in the discussion of journalistic legitimacy (Carlson 2016). This paper examines discourse on how journalistic practices are shaped by audience participation in the news production process, while legitimacy is viewed in light of journalistic authority (see Carlson 2017).

Thus, this study sets out to describe metajournalistic discourse on participatory journalism through an analysis of a decade of coverage (2009–2018) in two leading trade magazines in the US and Germany (*Columbia Journalism Review* and *Journalist*). Specifically, the study is interested in disclosing and investigating (1) how and in which contexts the audience is publicly depicted as participating in the practices of the professional news

production process and (2) publicly expressed reasons for positive and negative evaluations of audience participation in these journalistic practices. By building on our previous work (Engelke 2019) and conducting a mixed-method study to analyze this specific metajournalistic discourse on participatory journalism, we aim to contribute a better and more holistic understanding of what audience-including journalistic practices are relevant in the discourse, of why allowing the audience to participate is such a contested issue as well as of why and under which circumstances this possible challenge to journalistic authority is encouraged or discouraged.

## 2. Participatory Journalism as a Contested Issue in Newsrooms

Participatory journalism is understood here as the participation of the audience in professional journalism's news production process (Abbott 2017; Borger 2016; Borger et al. 2013; Nip 2006; Singer et al. 2011; Westlund and Ekström 2018). Most basically, professional journalism's function is to convey factual information to the public, thus fulfilling a watchdog role, laying the foundation for the audience's participation in society and enabling and sustaining democracy (Borger 2016; Carlson 2017; Meier et al. 2022).

While the proposed understanding of participatory journalism thus corresponds to the definition developed for our previous systematic literature review of 378 studies on online participatory journalism (Engelke 2019), this study broadens the focus of our previous understanding in two ways: First, we are also interested in offline types of participation, as the audience can be involved in the news production process in both locations (e.g., Batsell 2015; Belair-Gagnon et al. 2019; Lawrence et al. 2018; Wenzel 2019). Second, our understanding here specifically comprises additional types of participation that are associated with certain forms of audience engagement in professional contexts, namely news games, storytelling and membership (e.g., Meier et al. 2018).<sup>1</sup> These were not explicitly taken into account in the previous literature review, although the term "engagement" was included in the search string used in the identification process (Engelke 2019).

A number of concepts deal with audience involvement in journalism (for an overview, see Loosen et al. 2022; Nip 2006) with often inconsistently and interchangeably used terminology (Abbott 2017; Hermida 2011; Meier et al. 2018; Nip 2006; Singer et al. 2011). Audience engagement is one of the newest and currently most popular concepts (Loosen et al. 2022; Nelson 2021; Nelson and Schmidt 2022). It has been defined as "audiences actively contributing to different stages of the news production process" (Belair-Gagnon et al. 2019, pp. 558–59; see also Broersma 2019; Ferrucci et al. 2020; Lawrence et al. 2018; Nelson 2021). While this indicates commonalities—and literature on audience engagement was drawn upon in Engelke (2019) and is drawn upon in this paper when appropriate and relevant—audience engagement cannot be equated with participatory journalism for the following two reasons: (1) participation entails not only active contributions, but also more passive involvement (see Netzer et al. 2014; Springer et al. 2015), albeit similarities exist between passive participation and a minimalist approach (Broersma 2019) to audience engagement, and (2) audience engagement encompasses both audience consumption and participation (Broersma 2019; Nelson 2021), and in this sense goes beyond audience participation in the news production process. This distinction is, for example, illustrated by the fact that only four of the five forms of audience engagement proposed by Meier, Kraus and Michaeler (Meier et al. 2018), namely communication, storytelling, editorial analytics and membership, can potentially involve the audience in the news production process and thus in these specific circumstances be considered types of participation.

In order to investigate metajournalistic discourse on participatory journalism, this study builds on a taxonomy of forms of audience participation in the news production process that we previously developed for and applied in the literature review of empirical research on online participatory journalism (Engelke 2019) and expands it in the two ways described above. Based on the five stages proposed in a conceptualization by Domingo et al. (2008) and later Hermida (2011), the taxonomy distinguishes three stages of the news production process in which the audience can participate: the formation, the dissemination

and the interpretation stage. As presented in Table 1 (see Engelke 2019 for details on the development of the original taxonomy), participation can take on twelve forms within these three stages, in which various types of participation can become relevant—ranging, for example, from the audience financing news via crowdfunding by making donations or micropayments (Aitamurto 2019) to the audience enhancing news pieces' prominence on news sites by reading, sharing or commenting on them (Hermida 2011) to the audience being involved in the discussion of news by reading and writing user comments (Springer et al. 2015). Both offline types of participation and types of participation associated with forms of audience engagement have been integrated into the expanded taxonomy without adding additional forms (see Column 3 in Table 1, which lists examples for types of participation). This is possible as the original taxonomy was developed based on the stages of the news production process as well as the forms of participation—and not the specific types—thus allowing it to be continuously expanded to include new developments in journalism. Regarding the offline context, participation types can include, for example, in-person events or letters to the editor in which the audience can give journalists feedback or discuss the news in the interpretation stage (Batsell 2015; Belair-Gagnon et al. 2019; Broersma 2019; Lawrence et al. 2018; Wenzel 2019) or sharing news offline by word of mouth in the dissemination stage and thus enhancing its prominence (Bobkowski et al. 2019). Regarding audience engagement, membership as a type of participation, for example, can come into play in all three stages (Meier et al. 2018). As another example, news games can involve the audience in the creation and development process of a news piece—akin to involving the audience in writing—in the formation stage and can also allow audience members to check their comprehension of a news piece in the interpretation stage (Meier et al. 2018; Plewe and Fürsich 2018).

**Table 1.** Expanded taxonomy of forms of audience participation in the news production process, based on and expanding the taxonomy by Engelke (2019).

Stages	Forms of Participation	Examples for Types of Participation (Some Examples Are Relevant for More Than One Form)
Formation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience finances news via crowdfunding</li> <li>• Audience influences content selection qualitatively</li> <li>• Audience influences content selection quantitatively</li> <li>• Audience content supplements professional reporting</li> <li>• Audience involved in writing, editing, and revision</li> <li>• Audience produces entire news pieces</li> </ul>	audience edits, audience metrics, audience news pieces, audience revisions, crowdsourcing, donations, membership, micropayments, news games, polls, storytelling, user-generated content
Dissemination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience enhances prominence of news on journalistic sites</li> <li>• Audience enhances prominence of news on external platforms</li> </ul>	clicking news, liking news, membership, rating news, reading news, recommending news, sharing news, user comments on news
Interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience checks comprehension via interaction</li> <li>• Audience gives journalists qualitative feedback</li> <li>• Audience gives journalists quantitative feedback</li> <li>• Audience involved in discussion of news</li> </ul>	audience metrics, blogs, chats, forums, in-person events, letters to the editor, membership, news games, polls, quizzes, user comments

**Note:** The distinction of the three stages is based on the five stages of the news production process proposed by Domingo et al. (2008) and Hermida (2011). This taxonomy is based on and expands the taxonomy previously developed for the context of online participation in Engelke (2019) to include types of participation taking place offline and associated with audience engagement. The first two columns of this table are therefore equivalent to Table 1 previously presented in Engelke (2019, p. 33).

As illustrated by the examples in Table 1, our approach to participation is broad in three ways (see Engelke (2019) for the scope of the original taxonomy) and thus allows us to capture it holistically: First, regarding the degree of involvement, we include both low-involvement, more passive types of participation (e.g., participating in news discussions by reading user comments) and high-involvement, more active types of participation (e.g., participating in news discussions by writing user comments) (see also Netzer et al. 2014;

Springer et al. 2015). Second, regarding the location of participation, we include types of participation both on news outlets' own platforms and on external platforms (see also Westlund and Ekström 2018) as well as both online and offline (see also Belair-Gagnon et al. 2019). Third and finally, regarding the degree of the participation type's establishment, we include both older, more established types, such as letters to the editor or user comments, and newer, more innovative types, such as news games (see also Meier et al. 2018).

### 2.1. Reasons for and against Participatory Journalism on the Part of Journalists

Different, even contradictory experiences with audience participation in journalistic practice over the years deliver an answer to the question as to why some newsrooms implement participatory practices in the news production process and others do not (see also Borger et al. 2013; Engelke 2019; Manosevitch and Tenenboim 2017; Westlund and Ekström 2018): reasons on the part of journalists for and against implementation can be roughly grouped into—partially overlapping—functional and civic-oriented reasons on the one hand and economic and strategic reasons on the other hand. Research shedding light on these reasons includes studies that examine metajournalistic discourse on (aspects of) participatory journalism or closely related issues (Anderson and Revers 2018; Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino 2020; Duffy and Knight 2019; Ferrucci et al. 2020; Haas and Steiner 2002; Meltzer 2015; Nelson and Schmidt 2022; Nelson et al. 2021; Reader 2012; Vos and Thomas 2023; Wolfgang 2021).

Previous research has also identified context factors that influence newsroom's attitudes towards allowing participation or not: the type of media organization, with start-ups or newer organizations being more open to participation in early stages of the professional news production process than legacy organizations (e.g., Hermida 2011; Lawrence et al. 2018), the location of participation, with online and offline participation being valued differently and offline forms being particularly appreciated (e.g., Belair-Gagnon et al. 2019; Wenzel 2019), and the level of reporting, with participation being valued particularly on the local and regional level (e.g., Canter 2013; Hermida 2011; Wolfgang et al. 2020).

#### 2.1.1. Reasons for Participation

From a functional and civic-oriented perspective, journalists perceive audience participation as being able to support journalism: selecting and disseminating information can be eased and enhanced by audience members contributing their ideas, tips, (expert) knowledge, new and diverse perspectives, time and effort (Anderson and Revers 2018; Belair-Gagnon et al. 2019; Canter 2013; Ferrucci et al. 2020; Hermida 2011; Loke 2012; Meier et al. 2018; Robinson 2007; Schmidt et al. 2022; Vos and Thomas 2023; Wenzel 2019; Wolfgang et al. 2020). In the interpretation stage, journalists see audience involvement in the discussion of journalistic content as a means of more inclusive societal participation in a public forum (Lawrence et al. 2018; Loke 2012; Singer 2011; Vos and Thomas 2023; Wolfgang et al. 2020; Wolfgang 2021) and appreciate when audience members correct mistakes and give valuable feedback, thereby helping to improve journalistic work (Ferrucci et al. 2020; Nelson et al. 2021; Singer 2011; Wolfgang et al. 2020). Participatory practices can also help create an overall sense of community and a relationship of trust (Batsell 2015; Belair-Gagnon et al. 2019; Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino 2020; Ferrucci et al. 2020; Hermida 2011; Lawrence et al. 2018; Nelson and Schmidt 2022; Robinson 2007; Schmidt et al. 2022; Vos and Thomas 2023; Wolfgang et al. 2020).

Turning to economic and strategic reasons, newsrooms have implemented audience participation because it can provide access to free content, help build a branded community and member loyalty and generate traffic and circulation (Batsell 2015; Canter 2013; Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino 2020; Ferrucci et al. 2020; Haas and Steiner 2002; Lawrence et al. 2018; Meier et al. 2018; Nelson and Schmidt 2022; Vos and Thomas 2023; Vujnovic et al. 2010). Furthermore, crowdfunding is regarded as a possible business model for journalistic endeavors (Ferrucci et al. 2020; Lawrence et al. 2018).



### 2.1.2. Reasons against Participation

Regarding functional and civic-oriented reasons against implementing audience participation, the discursive potential of audience participation can be thwarted by instances of so-called “dark participation” (Quandt 2018): Journalists find comments problematic due to, amongst other things, incivility and low quality more broadly or attacks on as well as harassment and insults of journalists, sources and other audience members more specifically (Anderson and Revers 2018; Batsell 2015; Canter 2013; Duffy and Knight 2019; Lawrence et al. 2018; Loke 2012; Meltzer 2015; Nelson et al. 2021; Reader 2012; Robinson 2007; Singer 2011; Wolfgang 2021; Wolfgang et al. 2020; Wright et al. 2020). These issues are particularly pronounced for female journalists (Chen et al. 2020; Singer 2011). They can, in general, even lead to journalists’ self-censorship to different extents (Chen et al. 2020; Wolfgang et al. 2020), which in turn can limit journalism’s function if certain information is not conveyed. Audience contributions in the formation stage are also regarded as potentially problematic regarding issues such as verifiability and accuracy (Duffy and Knight 2019; Singer 2011). Finally, catering to the audience for economic reasons can endanger journalism’s function due to possible self-censorship and distortion (Haas and Steiner 2002).

From the economic and strategic perspective, journalists state that including the audience can require many resources regarding both time and costs, especially when journalists themselves are actively involved (Batsell 2015; Lawrence et al. 2018; Meier et al. 2018; Nelson et al. 2021; Schmidt et al. 2022; Singer 2011; Wolfgang et al. 2020; Wolfgang 2021; Wright et al. 2020). Such concerns have particular weight in light of the fact that journalists often perceive large parts of the audience as not particularly interested in participating (Lawrence et al. 2018; Schmidt et al. 2022). Furthermore, journalists see participating audience members as competition (Wolfgang 2021).

### 2.2. Participatory Journalism and Journalistic Authority

Research has also focused on how participatory journalism can challenge journalistic authority, which is based on accepted professional practices (Carlson 2017; Robinson 2007; Vos and Thomas 2018) and understood as “a contingent relationship in which certain actors come to possess a right to create legitimate discursive knowledge about events in the world for others” (Carlson 2017, p. 13). The impact of participatory journalism on journalistic authority is thus closely related to questions of power over the news production process, with the roles of journalists as knowledge creators and audience members as knowledge receivers shifting and boundaries between the roles increasingly blurring (Carlson 2017; Domingo et al. 2008; Lewis 2012; Robinson 2007). Despite extensive research on this matter, there is no agreement on the exact nature of audience participation’s impact, with our literature review of empirical research on online participatory journalism showing that 51% of the pertinent studies see power being retained by journalists and 42% see power as shared between journalists and audience members (Engelke 2019). Furthermore, to what extent journalists share power with the audience may be connected to the reasons for and against allowing participation as well as to the specific context in which participation takes place, with studies focusing on North America, for example, seeing power as more shared and studies focusing on Europe seeing power as more retained (Engelke 2019). In light of the changes wrought by participation, Carlson (2017, p. 119) notes that the “basis of this authority relation will have to become more dynamic and responsive to an environment in which the boundaries between journalist and the audience are shifting”.

Journalistic authority is thus not static, but a relationship “arising through continual discursive production” (Carlson 2017, p. 15; see also Carlson 2016; Vos and Thomas 2018). One type of discourse in which professional practices are defined, questions of sharing or retaining power are dealt with and journalistic authority is legitimized is metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016).

### 3. Metajournalistic Discourse on Participatory Journalism

Metajournalistic discourse is understood as “public expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception” (Carlson 2016, p. 350). This study focuses on practices producing news texts, specifically on evaluations of how these practices include audience participation in the professional news production process.

Carlson (2016) differentiates three discursive components and three interpretive processes of metajournalistic discourse. We first turn to the three overlapping processes of “establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism’s legitimacy” (Carlson 2016, p. 350). In the process of definition making, Carlson (2016) posits that actors publicly establish who is (not) counted as a journalist and what is (not) counted as journalism. In this study, we deal with which forms and types of audience participation are publicly established and thus deemed as relevant practices for the news production process, thus focusing on the ‘what’ of journalism. According to Carlson (2016), the process of boundary setting involves actors distinguishing unacceptable and inappropriate from acceptable and appropriate elements of journalism, while the process of legitimization argues for or against journalism’s authority. Regarding these two processes, we focus on how audience participation is evaluated, i.e., with which reasons participatory practices are presented as acceptable or not in public discourse and on how these practices may impact journalistic authority.

Carlson (2016) explains the actors shaping the three interpretive processes in the first of the three discursive components, noting that metajournalistic discourse can be produced both by journalistic and non-journalistic actors. Sites/audiences are the second component, with Carlson (2016) proposing metajournalistic discourse to occur both in journalistic and non-journalistic sites with their targeted audiences. For topics as the third component, Carlson (2016) posits that metajournalistic discourse can be reactive and generative. In the analysis of metajournalistic discourse in trade magazines conducted here, we take a broad approach to actors and topics: we include all journalistic and non-journalistic actors who produce metajournalistic discourse on participatory journalism in trade magazines as well as both reactive and generative discourse. Regarding sites/audiences, the approach focuses on trade magazines as a specific and important journalistic site of metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016; Haas 2006). As publications that target professionals as opposed to a more general audience, reflect internal industry beliefs and explicitly assess journalistic performance (Ferrucci et al. 2020; Haas 2006), trade magazines are a particularly likely and also relevant site for in-depth and somewhat frank discourse on the issue at hand.

Previous studies examining metajournalistic discourse on (aspects of) participatory journalism or closely related issues (Anderson and Revers 2018; Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino 2020; Duffy and Knight 2019; Ferrucci et al. 2020; Haas and Steiner 2002; Meltzer 2015; Nelson and Schmidt 2022; Nelson et al. 2021; Reader 2012; Vos and Thomas 2023; Wolfgang 2021) often deal with specific forms or even specific types of participatory journalism. This study therefore aims to contribute a better understanding of metajournalistic discourse on participatory journalism by taking a holistic approach and examining relevant public expressions on all forms and types of audience participation in all three stages of the news production process. It thus poses two research questions:

RQ1: *How and in which contexts is participatory journalism dealt with in metajournalistic discourse in trade magazines?*

RQ2: *What reasons for positive and negative evaluations of participatory journalism are depicted in metajournalistic discourse in trade magazines?*

RQ1 thus focuses on definition making and boundary setting (Carlson 2016), specifically discourse surrounding all three stages of the news production process, all twelve forms and the various types of participatory journalism (see Table 1) and considers different contexts of audience participation, specifically media organizations, locations and levels. RQ2, in turn, focuses on boundary setting and legitimization (Carlson 2016) and is interested in the evaluations of participatory journalism in discourse, specifically in the

reasons publicly expressed for positive and negative evaluations and thus for and against including the audience in the news production process.

#### 4. Method

This study follows a mixed-method approach by combining a quantitative content analysis and a qualitative textual analysis. The quantitative analysis aimed to answer RQ1, while the qualitative analysis focused on RQ2. The study examines a decade of metajournalistic discourse on participatory journalism (2009–2018) and is cross-national in that it includes metajournalistic discourse from the US and Germany. This approach follows Carlson's (2016) suggestions for research on metajournalistic discourse and allows us to capture different national and temporal contexts. While participatory journalism is older than and was researched before 2009 (Engelke 2019; Loosen et al. 2022)—letters to the editor, for example, being a centuries-old phenomenon (Silva 2019)—publications on participatory journalism in the digital context as well as metajournalistic discourse about participatory journalism rapidly increased in the late 2000s and early 2010s (Engelke 2019; Vos and Thomas 2023), indicating that this is when audience participation took off in practice, as well. The US and Germany were included because they are two of the most researched countries in the field of online participatory journalism, indicating that an in-depth discourse takes place there, and are located in regions with differences regarding participation's impact on journalistic power structures (Engelke 2019). They also stem from different models or types of media systems (Brüggemann et al. 2014; Hallin and Mancini 2004), with the strongest differences lying in the fact that the US-including Western type is characterized by a comparatively low level both of public broadcasting and of ownership regulation, while the Germany-including Central type, by contrast, is characterized by comparatively strong public broadcasting and strict ownership regulation (Brüggemann et al. 2014). Including these two countries thus allows for a broader picture to be captured. Specifically, metajournalistic discourse is examined in the print publications of the two leading trade magazines *Columbia Journalism Review* (US) and *Journalist* (Germany).

In order to investigate metajournalistic discourse on participatory journalism in the two trade magazines, all issues from 2009 to 2018 were manually examined, with a full census of all relevant articles being drawn. The inclusion criteria were that the article (1) is at least half a page of written text in length, (2) deals with one or more forms of participatory journalism as defined above, and that (3) one or more forms of participatory journalism are at least semi-prominent in the article, i.e., dealt with in at least half of the article. The second criterion had to become apparent in the article's title and/or lead. If no lead was present, it had to become apparent in the first third of the article. In combination with the third inclusion criterion, this ensured that only articles covering participatory journalism as a main topic were analyzed. This procedure led to 135 relevant articles.

Drawing upon research on participatory journalism and metajournalistic discourse, the codebook was developed deductively and encompassed variables—some coded openly—for both the quantitative and qualitative analysis, with minor adjustments being made after a pretest. The coding was conducted by three coders, namely the author and two student assistants. We captured formal and content variables, specifically information on (1) the article, (2) its author(s) as actor(s) of metajournalistic discourse, including the type of author(s) (journalistic, non-journalistic, mixed or not discernable) and the number of authors, (3) the origin of discourse (reactive, generative or not discernable), (4) the form of presentation (fact-based, opinion-based or not discernable), (5) the stages as well as forms and types of participation discussed above, (6) the context variables of participation, namely media organization type (start-up, legacy, both or not mentioned), location (online, offline, both or not mentioned) and level of participation (local, regional, national, multiple or not mentioned) and (7) the evaluations of participation. For the quantitative content variables (Holsti = .91), agreement was highest for the variables regarding the stages and forms of participation (Holsti = .95) and lowest for the variables regarding the context of participation (Holsti = .78).

After coding was completed, the author performed the quantitative analysis on the 135 relevant articles and the qualitative textual analysis on those 93 articles featuring evaluations of participatory journalism. Combining qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000) with a thematic analysis approach (Peterson 2017), the two overarching categories of reasons for positive and reasons for negative evaluations were developed deductively in a first step and themes within these two overarching categories were developed and refined inductively—i.e., based on an iterative process of reading and rereading the evaluations in the 93 articles—in a second step. Since there were far more similarities between the US and Germany than differences (see below), themes were developed and refined across both countries.

## 5. Results

While the 135 articles in the sample were not distributed equally from 2009 to 2018—ranging from a low of 3 articles in 2016 to a peak of 20 articles in 2013—there was no long-term increase or decrease in coverage, illustrating that participatory journalism was of relatively steady interest to the trade magazines in the decade examined. 96 articles appeared in *Journalist* (71%) and 39 in *CJR* (29%), with the unequal distribution possibly due to the fact that, from 2009 to 2018, *Journalist* published 119 issues and *CJR* published 48 issues. Broken down, both trade magazines featured 0.8 articles per issue. Authorship was clearly dominated by journalistic actors (82%), followed by non-journalistic actors in the form of academics (8%) and by mixed actor groups (1%). We found no articles clearly authored by non-academic audience members. In 9% of articles, actors were not discernable. The majority of articles had a reactive origin (60%), while less (40%) were of a generative origin. Regarding specific origins, several topics emerged that were of particular relevance both in reactive and generative discourse: financial issues including crowdfunding and donations; discourse issues including hate speech, trolls and widespread backlash; and users contributing entire news pieces. Beyond that, coverage featured a wide range of origins, for example, various apps journalists can use to involve audience members, crowdsourcing endeavors, journalist-audience interaction in social media or the management of audience analytics. This variety shows how multi-faceted participatory journalism is. Finally, more articles were fact-based (84%) than opinion-based (16%).

In the following sections, differences between the US and Germany are pointed out when present. These two countries were included to capture a broader picture. Despite the differences in their region's power structures (Engelke 2019) and in their media systems (Brüggemann et al. 2014; Hallin and Mancini 2004), only few differences emerged—possibly due to both being Western countries (see Hanitzsch et al. 2019). Furthermore, the differences over time were not notable—other contextual and influencing factors emerged as more relevant.

### 5.1. Dealing with Participatory Journalism in Metajournalistic Discourse

RQ1 focused on how and in which contexts audience participation was dealt with in metajournalistic discourse in trade magazines: Most of the 135 articles dealt with one stage (59%), although a notable number also covered two stages (33%), while only few focused on the entire news production process (8%). Turning to the three stages, 77% of all articles dealt with participation in the formation stage, 14% focused on dissemination and 58% on interpretation. While *Journalist* and *CJR* gave similar amounts of coverage to the first two stages, there was a notable difference in the interpretation stage, with 62% of all articles in *Journalist* but only 49% of all articles in *CJR* covering this stage. All twelve forms of participation were covered, with the trade magazines showing a diverse focus. Audience involvement in the discussion of news (44%) was dominant, while the audience qualitatively influencing content selection (33%), supplementing professional reporting with their content (30%) and giving qualitative feedback (30%) were also prominently covered. Metajournalistic articles also (somewhat) frequently dealt with the audience financing news via crowdfunding (20%), producing entire news pieces (18%), quantitatively influencing content selection



(15%), enhancing the news' prominence on external platforms (13%) and being involved in the writing, editing and revision process (11%). Less frequently covered were the audience checking its comprehension via interaction (7%), giving quantitative feedback (6%) and enhancing the prominence of news on journalistic sites (3%). In the most pronounced forms covered, the following types were particularly prominent: User comments both on websites and in social media were dealt with most often regarding audience involvement in the discussion of news and giving qualitative feedback, while letters to the editor and in-person events such as town hall meetings and open houses were covered less frequently. Qualitative influence on content selection was covered prominently both via journalists finding new content due to user-generated content (UGC) in social media and via direct user tips or suggestions to the newsrooms. Regarding audience content supplementing professional reporting, articles most often focused on crowdsourcing efforts and UGC in the form of pictures and videos.

The contexts in which participatory journalism takes place were not always clearly mentioned in the articles. We first turn to media organizations, where legacy organizations dominated coverage (49%), though a notable number of articles dealt either solely with start-ups (17%) or with both organizational forms (24%), illustrating a broad focus on participation in all facets of professional journalism. 191 specific outlets were mentioned across the metajournalistic discourse in both trade magazines. The top 10 outlets—*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Zeit*, *ARD*, *Spiegel*, *The New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, *ZDF*, *Buzzfeed*, *Welt* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*—are all (American or German) national outlets. Two are start-ups, while the rest are legacy organizations. Turning to the location, most articles dealt with online participation (70%), but a notable number also dealt with participation in both locations (23%) or purely offline forms (5%), indicating that for journalists, audience participation is not a digital-only phenomenon but also an important part of their offline work. Turning to the level of participation covered, most articles focused solely on the national level (54%), followed by the local (14%) and regional level (4%). 19% dealt with multiple levels. Taking this into consideration, we see a notable shift: while the national level still dominated—73% of all articles dealt with it solely or in combination with other levels—20% of the articles dealt with the regional and 19% with the local level solely or in combination with other levels, illustrating a significant interest in these levels.

Finally, we were interested in differences that emerged regarding the stage of participation covered depending on the different contexts in which participation occurs. It should be noted that the following results focus on those articles that dealt solely with one organization form, location or level to more clearly draw distinctions and do not delve further into those cases in which multiple organization forms, locations or levels were present or no contexts were mentioned. Furthermore, we report percentages despite the (very) small sizes of the subsets of articles that dealt with the individual context factors for better comparability. Focusing on articles that dealt solely with start-up organizations ( $n = 23$ ) or legacy organizations ( $n = 66$ ), we see clear differences regarding the discussion of participation in the formation and interpretation stage: While 100% of start-up articles focused on formation, only 70% of legacy articles did so. Even more strikingly, only 22% of start-up articles focused on interpretation, while 68% of legacy organizations did so. Conversely, the strongest difference regarding location was in the dissemination stage, with 15% of the articles that dealt solely with online participation ( $n = 94$ ) but none of the articles that dealt solely with offline participation ( $n = 7$ ) focusing on this stage. Additionally, participation in the interpretation stage was dealt with more often online (55%) than offline (43%). Regarding the level at which participation takes place, we see differences in all three stages in those articles that deal solely with one level: While the formation stage was focused on in 95% of local articles ( $n = 19$ ) and 80% of regional articles ( $n = 5$ ), this was only the case in 71% of national articles ( $n = 73$ ). Only 5% of local but 12% of national and 20% of regional articles discussed the dissemination stage. Most strikingly, only 37% of local and 40% of regional but 60% of national articles covered the interpretation stage.

## 5.2. Evaluating Participatory Journalism in Metajournalistic Discourse

RQ2 focused on the evaluations of participatory journalism in the two trade magazines' metajournalistic discourse. 93 articles (69% of all articles) featured an evaluation. Of these, 53% depicted positive evaluations and 16% negative evaluations of audience participation, while 31% left a mixed impression. Several themes emerged in the reasons for both the positive and negative evaluations, some of which notably are exact opposites. Table 2 presents an overview of the themes and illustrates these opposites.

**Table 2.** Themes in the reasons for positive and negative evaluations of participatory journalism in metajournalistic discourse.

Themes in the Reasons for Positive Evaluations	Themes in the Reasons for Negative Evaluations
Facilitating journalistic research	Uncertainty regarding new sources
Community connection	Harassment of journalists
High-quality discussions	Audience's lack of interest in participation
Economic advantages	Low-quality discussions
Brand loyalty	Work overload for journalists
New forms of narration and depiction	Professionals being replaced by amateurs
	Questionable motives for participation
	Detrimentially catering to the audience

**Note:** The themes were identified by analyzing 93 metajournalistic articles featuring evaluations of participatory journalism in the trade magazines *Columbia Journalism Review* and *Journalist* (2009–2018).

### 5.2.1. Themes in the Reasons for Positive Evaluations

*Facilitating journalistic research:* Discourse evaluated participatory journalism—specifically in the formation stage—positively because it facilitates journalistic research. Some articles discussed how UGC accelerates the research process. Other articles stressed that the audience enables journalists to obtain information—i.e., story ideas, new trends, perspectives and sources—they would not have gained otherwise due to a lack of access or awareness. Articles also noted the positive impact of the crowd on large research endeavors, as demonstrated by a *CJR* article that described the *OffTheBus* news site covering the 2008 presidential campaign: it pointed out that “collectively, we could do what a single reporter or traditional news organization could not” (Michel 2009, p. 42), for example regarding research tasks assumed by the audience.

*Community connection:* Discourse also suggested that involving the audience enables journalists to enhance their community connection. Articles discussed how journalists and their audience become part of the same community in which both groups are invested and interact with each other, thus changing and improving journalism. As noted in a *Journalist* article covering the social media activity of the German regional newspaper *Rhein-Zeitung*, a community can grow around the newspaper's and journalists' Twitter accounts, even leading to an in-person meeting of followers and to readers regularly giving journalists critical notes (Siebert 2009). Regarding the audience as contributors of entire pieces, a *CJR* article explained that “[c]ontributors can also build a new audience and create a sense of community that keeps readers coming back” (Lanahan 2014, p. 29).

*Brand loyalty:* Articles described how (often transparent) forms of participation mainly in the formation and interpretation stage can enhance the audience's appreciation of and loyalty to the media brand offering these possibilities. Some articles dealt explicitly with offline participation, as demonstrated by a *CJR* article on what it dubbed ‘performed journalism’—live shows in which journalists perform news pieces to the audience, which can discuss the news afterwards—that described how live shows by the radio program *Radiolab* can positively impact both brand loyalty and the audience base (Sillesen 2015). Interestingly, this theme is closely related to the theme of *community connection*: for example, a *Journalist* article noted that the so-called reader-reporter concept developed at the regional newspaper *Saarbrücker Zeitung* not only strengthens brand loyalty but also shows the audience members that they and the newsroom are interacting as equals (Herbst 2016).

*High-quality discussions:* Articles emphasized that high-quality discussions can emerge due to participation in the interpretation stage. Discourse suggested these can be fruitful to the participants in that they allow the audience to enlighten each other, as reflected in a *Journalist* article on commenting that presented *Zeit Online*'s objective of making the expertise and wisdom of their community more visible in order to allow an even bigger part of the public to benefit from the contributions (Martens 2018). Articles also noted that the discussion benefits from the audience posing new and relevant questions. Furthermore, articles argued that high-quality discussions can improve not only the discussion, but even journalistic reporting, for example, by audience criticism leading journalists to increase their performance. Articles also reflected how good discussions can lead journalists in new directions. Discourse laid out various factors that contribute to the quality of discussions, namely journalistic involvement in the discussion, pre-moderation, setting the correct tone at the beginning, involving the audience as moderators, communicating specific guidelines, mandating registration and working with payment or membership models.

*New forms of narration and depiction:* Articles emphasized how participation contributes to the innovativeness of news. One new form discussed in a positive light were news games: a *CJR* article described the news game *Hair Net Hero* as "just one of an innovative new breed of news games that explain difficult issues by immersing players into the stories" (Oputu 2013, p. 12). Another form identified as innovative and new was storytelling: a *Journalist* article discussed news stories in which the audience members can decide how exactly they want to engage with a multimedia report, specifically from which perspective, focused on which aspects and at which speed (Krex 2012). The positive evaluation was further stressed by articles that discussed awards won by these new forms of journalism.

*Economic advantages:* Articles focused on the positive impact of participation in the formation stage. Specifically, they discussed how crowdfunding or membership models allow the audience to directly finance journalistic endeavors. Moreover, other articles delved into how audience participation can both save costs and increase revenue in the newsroom, as demonstrated by a *CJR* article that described the appeal of amateur contributions: "For very little money, a publication can have broader and more voluminous coverage than its paid staff can provide—and the desperately needed advertising revenue that comes with it" (Lanahan 2014, p. 29).

#### 5.2.2. Themes in the Reasons for Negative Evaluations

*Low-quality discussions:* This theme is the exact opposite of the positive theme *high-quality discussions*. Articles focused particularly on participation in the interpretation stage and discussed the low quality of comment sections due to off-topic, subjective, insulting and hate-filled contributions. The articles, moreover, delved into different factors contributing to the low quality, namely a lack of journalistic involvement, the wrong tone being set at the beginning as well as letting users post with pseudonyms or anonymously, thus showing factors that are the exact opposite of the positive counterpart theme. Articles even addressed this Janus-faced evaluation of participatory journalism regarding audience involvement in the discussion of news, as demonstrated by a *Journalist* article that covered the results of a study on journalism in a digital age which stated that while the dialogue with the audience can have added value for journalism, many editors-in-chief simultaneously see it as a burden (Weichert 2015).

*Questionable motives for participation:* Discourse saw the audience's involvement in the formation stage negatively due to questionable motives both on the part of those soliciting participation and those participating. Some articles delved into how media organizations may exploit audience members by not paying for their contributions and solicit donations to make further profit. Other articles noted that not only the solicitors' motives, but also those of audience members making donations or contributing content may be unclear: Lanahan (2014, p. 29) pointed out in a *CJR* article that "in the absence of editing, anything can happen, from flagrant conflicts of interest to fabrications, plagiarism, and outright libel".

*Uncertainty regarding new sources:* Articles in this theme focused on the formation stage and described how journalists have difficulties evaluating new sources—both in social media and on their own platforms. Some articles noted that journalists still lack the necessary expertise to examine the veracity of information presented in UGC. Other articles pointed out that journalists find it difficult to assess the importance of contributors and their contributions. This is demonstrated by a *CJR* article on the *Help a Reporter Out* online service that connects journalists with sources, which raised concerns about possible problems with the representativity of these sources regarding age, race and income (Paskin 2009). Here, we see a contrast with the aspect of new perspectives in the positive theme of *facilitating journalistic research*.

*Detrimentially catering to the audience:* This theme has two focal points. On the one hand, articles discussed how the audience quantitatively influences content selection via audience metrics that emerge due to participation in the dissemination stage—insights often gained with the help of social listening tools. The articles covered how this influence leads to journalists selecting more low-quality, sensational or homogeneous content because that is what drives audience numbers. On the other hand, articles dealt with how shitstorms in the interpretation stage can lead to journalists excluding certain topics in order to avoid further such audience reactions. For example, a column in the *Journalist* warned about how such self-censorship would endanger the freedom of the press (Konken 2012).

*Harassment of journalists:* This second aspect is related to a further theme that emerged in discourse specifically in relation to audience participation in the interpretation stage. Articles described how journalists are faced with hate speech, abuse, threats, public humiliation and violations of privacy by audience members. This can be an issue in particular for minorities as well as freelance, queer or female journalists, as demonstrated by a *CJR* article that discussed how female journalists deal with being a target (Petersen 2018). This theme thus emerged as a counterpart to the positive theme *community connection*.

*Work overload for journalists:* Articles discussed how journalists already have a high workload and are therefore overwhelmed by the additional work audience participation entails. This theme is therefore the opposite of the positive theme of *economic advantages*. Articles emphasized the effort it takes to deal with audience participation, especially in the interpretation stage, as demonstrated by a *CJR* article on millennials' use of news and expectations regarding interaction, which noted that "most reporters are already scrambling to meet the escalating demands of the Internet and the 24/7 news cycle, so they have little time to interact with readers" (Adler 2013, p. 34).

*Audience's lack of interest in participation:* Articles delved into the fact that even innovative, interactive and transparent journalistic endeavors struggle with low participation numbers. This is exemplified by a *Journalist* article's description of why the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* changed its strategy regarding online comments (Martens 2018): after removing comment functions from individual articles in favor of a weekly reader debate, the newspaper allowed comments to return under a limited number of articles because the reader debate was not used as actively as at the outset of the initial move. This theme thus also emerged as the opposite of the positive theme of *community connection*.

*Professionals being replaced by amateurs:* Articles covered journalists' fears of losing their jobs due to the participating audience. In this vein, a *Journalist* article noted that photo journalists covering firefighting and police operations see emergency respondents and other eyewitnesses sending pictures to newsrooms as competition (Lungmus 2017). The theme can therefore also be regarded as a counterpart to the positive theme of *economic advantages*.

## 6. Discussion, Limitations and Conclusions

Overall, our findings regarding RQ1 show that while participatory journalism was widely discussed both in its various forms and types and in different contexts, there are several aspects of audience participation that were covered more dominantly in meta-journalistic discourse than others. At the same time, notable differences in the coverage



of stages emerged depending on the specific context factors of participation featured in discourse. What are some possible explanations for these results?

The prevalence of the formation stage in metajournalistic discourse may seem surprising due to the fact that research has time and again revealed journalistic reluctance to allowing participation here (e.g., [Domingo et al. 2008](#); [Lawrence et al. 2018](#)). However, this reluctance may be the explanation for why it was dealt with so extensively here: Discourse sets boundaries to participation by presenting for what reasons and in which circumstances it is acceptable or not and thus in which contexts journalistic authority is legitimized and in which contexts authority can be shared with the audience and boundaries therefore blurred (see [Carlson 2016](#)). The contested nature of audience participation in the formation stage may simply evoke more debate regarding those boundaries. That audience involvement in the discussion of news was the single most prominent form of participation discussed—despite not being located in the dominant formation stage—can be explained due to the fact that user comments are one of the most widespread forms of participation ([Wright et al. 2020](#)). Interestingly, one of the most prominent types of participation covered regarding the second most prominent form of participation—namely the audience qualitatively influencing content selection—was passive participation in the form of journalists finding new content due to UGC in social media, albeit audience members actively giving tips or making suggestions to the newsrooms was also prominent. This result illustrates the importance of taking into account more passive types of participation.

The significant interest in the regional and local level in metajournalistic discourse mirrors previous research showing that journalists value participation at these two levels ([Canter 2013](#); [Hermida 2011](#); [Wolfgang et al. 2020](#)). Discourse thus illustrated the importance of [Wahl-Jorgensen's](#) (2019) call for research to focus on local and regional journalism. At the same time, the focus on the national level and on elite organizations with regard to the top 10 media outlets is not surprising, as it has been previously observed both in research and metajournalistic discourse (e.g., [Engelke 2019](#); [Meltzer 2015](#); [Wahl-Jorgensen 2019](#)).

We now turn to the differences in how the stages of participation were covered depending on the context factors in which the audience participates. Beginning with the organization in which participation was depicted as taking place, the results found here mirror previous research ([Hermida 2011](#); [Lawrence et al. 2018](#)) in indicating that start-ups are more open to sharing power with their audience members in the formation stage and surrendering their role as gatekeeper, although legacy media also seem fairly open. One reason for both the openness and the higher amount of discourse could be the important role crowdfunding plays for start-ups and the collaborative approach often associated with it ([Aitamurto 2019](#); [Lawrence et al. 2018](#)). The differences in the interpretation stage—with legacy organizations depicted as focusing on this stage more often than start-ups—are more striking and also harder to unpack. Authors in trade magazines may have focused more extensively on the third stage when covering legacy organizations because participation possibilities tend to be less prominent in legacy organizations than in start-ups ([Lawrence et al. 2018](#)), meaning that the legacy organizations' possibilities could more often be the focus of definition establishing and boundary setting (see [Carlson 2016](#)).

Regarding the location of participation, it is not surprising that metajournalistic discourse on the offline context did not deal with the dissemination stage, since sharing news offline by word of mouth, while a prominent audience practice ([Bobkowski et al. 2019](#)), may be less visible to journalists in their everyday work than online practices and thus not an issue deemed relevant for public evaluations. The interpretation stage may have been focused on more prominently online due to user comments, which are both one of the most widespread types of participation and particularly contested ([Nelson et al. 2021](#); [Wolfgang et al. 2020](#); [Wright et al. 2020](#)). They thus may evoke more prominent processes of definition establishing and boundary setting ([Carlson 2016](#)) than offline forms, which are particularly appreciated by journalists ([Belair-Gagnon et al. 2019](#); [Wenzel 2019](#)).

Concerning, finally, the level of participation, media at the regional and local level are crucial for the health of their communities and more economically constrained ([Wahl-](#)

Jorgensen 2019), which may lead them to involve the audience in the formation stage more than national media (Canter 2013; Wenzel 2019, see also Engelke 2019), thus explaining their more prominent coverage in metajournalistic discourse. The comparatively low focus on the interpretation stage at these levels may also reflect their particular economic challenges (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019), meaning that discussions on issues such as user comments may have been less prominent due to a lack of resources to actually become involved at a larger scale. The fact that articles that dealt with local media only seldom focused on the dissemination stage may reflect the fact that local news is predominantly shared offline (Bobkowski et al. 2019), thus leading—as discussed regarding the offline context—to dissemination being less visible to journalists and thus a less prominent topic for discussion.

Turning to RQ2, the themes uncovered here mirror and corroborate the reasons for and against participatory journalism presented above in the literature review: *Facilitating journalistic research, community connection and high-quality discussions* reflect functional and civic-oriented reasons, while *brand loyalty and economic advantages* reflect economic and strategic reasons for participation. *New forms of narration and depiction* emerged as a somewhat new theme, although it can also be connected to economic and strategic reasons, since awards may positively impact audience reach (Wellbrock and Wolfram 2021). In turn, *low-quality discussions, questionable motives for participation, uncertainty regarding new sources, detrimentally catering to the audience and harassment of journalists* reflect functional and civic-oriented reasons, while *work overload for journalists, audience's lack of interest in participation and professionals being replaced by amateurs* reflect economic and strategic reasons against participation. Taken together, they illustrate the multi-faceted, complex and contested nature of participatory journalism and furthermore demonstrate the importance of Westlund and Ekström's (2018, p. 8) call for a closer examination of "positive and dark participation across diverse platforms".

As described above (see also Table 2), several directly contradicting themes emerged: (1) *Facilitating journalistic research* is the opposite of *uncertainty regarding new sources*; (2) *community connection* can be contrasted with the *harassment of journalists* and the *audience's lack of interest in participation*; (3) *high-quality discussions* is diametrically opposed to *low-quality discussions*; and (4) *economic advantages* can be set against *work overload for journalists* and *professionals being replaced by amateurs*. Which positive or negative evaluation of participation was put forth in discourse seems to depend particularly on two prominent influencing factors that interplay with each other.

First, both the degree of involvement and the character of audience participation played a pivotal role. Active and high-involvement participation that is constructive or beneficial led to positive evaluations due to reasons of facilitating journalistic research, community connection, brand loyalty, high-quality discussions and economic advantages. In contrast, active and high-involvement participation that is destructive or malevolent and thus results in low-quality discussions, that threatens to replace professionals with amateurs, or that even simply leads to work overload for journalists was viewed negatively. At the same time, diametrically opposed, passive and low-involvement participation also led to negative evaluations due to low-quality discussions or the audience's lack of interest in participation.

Second, the resources available to newsrooms were also pivotal regarding evaluations of participation, although there is no clear-cut influence. Rather, the results indicated that newsrooms with small resources may particularly benefit from audience participation by capitalizing on the possibility to facilitate journalistic research and on economic advantages. At the same time, resource-strapped newsrooms may, for example, have a harder time implementing moderation strategies regarding the comment sections and thus ensuring high-quality discussions. They may also be particularly prone to work overload. Newsrooms with larger resources, in contrast, may be more able to create a setting that ensures high-quality discussions.

The identification of these factors may not be surprising, seeing as they mirror previous research on journalists' views, which also reveals the degree of involvement and character

of audience participation (e.g., [Lawrence et al. 2018](#); [Schmidt et al. 2022](#); [Wolfgang 2021](#)) as well as resources (e.g., [Lawrence et al. 2018](#); [Nelson et al. 2021](#); [Wolfgang et al. 2020](#)) as relevant influences. However, this study underlines the importance of these two prominent factors for the public discourse on participatory journalism, especially when it comes to their interplay: Together, they shape journalistic attitudes towards and thus may also impact which opportunities newsrooms provide for participation. For example, while an active comment section may be viewed as beneficial by a newsroom with dedicated social media editors because it helps shape the outlet's connection to the community and facilitates journalistic research, the same level of audience participation may be overwhelming to a smaller outlet with more limited resources and no participation-specific positions in that it leads to work overload. In both cases, participation has the potential to benefit journalism's ability to fulfill its function and achieve its strategic goals, but only one outlet can actually tap into this potential. In the other outlet, journalism's ability to fulfill its function may even be impeded if limited resources are stretched even thinner by audience participation.

While the results and insights regarding RQ1 and RQ2 are not generalizable—as discussed in more detail below—they allow us to draw some interesting conclusions that reflect previous research as discussed in the literature review above: Context is pivotal to how participatory journalism is presented in metajournalistic discourse. By drawing upon the functional and civic-oriented as well as the economic and strategic reasons described in the results section, audience participation is presented as either acceptable and appropriate or not—depending on the form, type and context of participation as well as on the degree of involvement and character of participation and the resources available to the newsroom. Metajournalistic discourse on participatory journalism in trade magazines thus serves to set specific boundaries (see [Carlson 2016](#)) and therefore to illustrate to its readers in which cases boundaries and power structures truly are shifting—and in which cases they are not. Through this discourse, metajournalistic actors to a certain extent seem to be indicating a move towards shared authority between journalists and the audience—as evidenced by the fact that positive evaluations of participatory journalism outweighed both mixed and negative evaluations—but at the same time, the negative themes in particular demarcate where journalistic authority remains in place, thus ultimately providing legitimization for it (see [Carlson 2016](#)).

The results therefore illustrate how participation contributes to the dynamicity of journalistic authority (see [Carlson 2016, 2017](#); [Vos and Thomas 2018](#)). Depending on the form and type of participation, the context in which it takes place and other influencing factors, journalists are depicted as being either more or less inclined to allow participation and thus to share their power, with sometimes directly diametrical reasons for their choice to encourage or discourage the audience. Metajournalistic discourse in trade magazines has thus proved to be a discourse in which audience participation's influence on authority is publicly evaluated and discussed and in which authority's contextual nature (see [Carlson 2017](#)) becomes particularly apparent.

What implications can be drawn about the relationship between journalists and their (participating) audience based on these results? The metajournalistic discourse analyzed here seems to reveal that while the relationship is viewed *differently*—either with positive evaluations of participatory journalism and authority being shared with the audience or with negative evaluations of participatory journalism and authority being retained by the journalists—it is viewed *in the same terms*. This is illustrated more broadly by the fact that both functional and economic reasoning is applied by both articles advocating for and articles arguing against participation as well as more specifically by the directly contradicting themes (see Table 2). In the investigated discourse, proponents and opponents of participatory journalism seem to be focusing on two sides of the same coin—which side they are looking at and which side thus determines their views on the journalist–audience relationship seems to depend on the described factors. Our study thus emphasizes that while in-depth investigations of specific forms, types and contexts of participation as well as of newsrooms with especially small or large resources certainly lead to interesting results

that contribute to our understanding of the journalist–audience relationship, we need studies that focus on all the influencing factors described here to fully understand how participatory journalism shapes this relationship. It stands to reason that this relationship will remain dynamic in the future (see [Carlson 2017](#)), meaning that further research on the reasons for both positive and negative evaluations of participatory journalism and the factors which shape the reasoning is needed in order to base the ongoing discussion of the journalist–audience relationship on a more comprehensive understanding of audience participation’s influence on it (see also [Engelke 2019](#)).

This study addresses some of the questions proposed by [Carlson \(2016\)](#) for research on metajournalistic discourse as well as some of the aspects identified as relevant for future research in [Engelke \(2019\)](#), specifically pertaining to cross-national studies, the consideration of various context factors and the focus not only on the national but also the local and regional levels. Nevertheless, the study must be viewed in light of several limitations.

First, our sample is limited in generalizability as it includes articles from the print publications of only two trade magazines from two nations. While the study provides an in-depth picture for these two trade magazines, the presented results and discussion can therefore not necessarily be transferred to all metajournalistic discourse on participatory journalism. In particular, the results pertaining to the differences that emerged regarding the stage of participation covered depending on the different contexts in which participation occurs have to be viewed with caution due to the small sizes of the subsets—quantitative studies with a larger sample could show whether these results hold firm. Moreover, while the results indicate that participation is a global phenomenon in which contexts and other influencing factors are more important than national differences (see also, e.g., [Netzer et al. 2014](#)), the non-generalizable nature of the study means that the national context in particular should be looked at more closely in future studies. Expanding studies on metajournalistic discourse on participatory journalism to include nations outside of the Western context would be especially interesting. Whether themes identified here are present in other countries and how dominant the individual themes are could be uncovered via quantitative analysis, while qualitative analysis as conducted in this study could show if there are further themes not present in these two Western trade magazines. Furthermore, examining metajournalistic discourse in the online publications of trade magazines or in purely online publications may also lead to different results.

Second, although we included all journalistic and non-journalistic actors producing metajournalistic discourse in *CJR* and *Journalist*, our study predominantly captures the journalists’ perspective—the perspective of non-journalists in the form of academics is much less present, while articles clearly authored by non-academic audience members were not found. Other studies that capture metajournalistic discourse on (aspects of) audience participation also mainly examine journalistic perspectives (e.g., [Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino 2020](#); [Duffy and Knight 2019](#)). [Reader \(2012\)](#), however, notably focused on both the journalistic and the audience perspective. To explore the audience’s perspective in metajournalistic discourse, sites other than trade magazines should be examined more in depth, such as letters to the editor, online comments or citizen journalistic endeavors (see also [Carlson 2016](#)). This is especially relevant in light of previous research showing differences in journalistic and audience perspectives on participatory journalism (e.g., [Engelke 2019](#); [Reader 2012](#)).

Finally, we capture how participation is featured in metajournalistic discourse, which most likely mirrors but does not necessarily coincide with (see, e.g., [Wolfgang 2021](#)) how American and German journalists view participation in general or how participation plays out in practice. The contexts and influential factors identified as relevant in this study should therefore also be further investigated not only in metajournalistic discourse, but also in surveys, in-depth interviews and observations that focus on journalists, audience members, newsrooms and the practices within them.

Despite these limitations, the investigation of the two trade magazines’ metajournalistic discourse contributes to research on participatory journalism in two ways: First, it



shows that participatory journalism is a pervasive and multi-faceted phenomenon that is widely discussed both in its various forms and types and in different contexts. Second, it demonstrates that while audience participation—under the best circumstances—was seen as being able to contribute towards journalism’s ability to fulfill its function as well as achieve economic and strategic goals, this was not always depicted as being the case. The results thus illustrate that there is no “one fits all” approach to participation, in turn indicating the importance of a continuing metajournalistic discourse—and its continued scholarly examination—to help scholars better understand participation’s ongoing impact on the journalist–audience relationship and to help practitioners better identify and reflect upon viable pathways for their own newsrooms, with both aspects depending in particular on the specific contexts of participatory journalism, the degree of involvement and character of audience participation and the resources available to the journalists.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> This expansion stems from the manual identification process of relevant articles, in which it became apparent that news games, storytelling and membership were treated as types of audience participation in metajournalistic discourse, leading to their inclusion in our understanding of participation and in the taxonomy.

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