

Session title: News audiences

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Abstract title:

(R)engaging with audiences: local news media's initiatives in French-speaking Europe

Biography

Laura Amigo is a PhD Candidate at the Academy of Journalism and Media (AJM) of the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. Her research focuses on the relationships between news media and audiences, editorial strategies and local journalism. She recently was a scientific collaborator for the LINC research project on the links between regional media and their audiences in French-speaking Europe. She teaches Communications at the University of Lille, France, and has previous professional experience in the communication field.

Nathalie Pignard-Cheynel is full Professor in Digital journalism, head of the Academy of Journalism and Media at the University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland). She led the LINC international research project on the links between regional media and their audiences, as well as a research on young audiences' engagement to (fake) news.

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In response to the current context of citizens' "crisis of faith in journalism" (Zuckerman, 2017) and of disruption of news media economic models, news organizations are exploring innovative ways to reconnect with audiences (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). They seek to adapt to their expectations of horizontal information and of a dialogue-based relationship, rather than a one-way lecture format (Deuze, 2007); a momentum amplified by the web participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). For local news media, proximity to the audience is an essential feature, since they position themselves as key players in the weaving of social ties in a given geographical space (Hess & Waller, 2017). However, little attention has been paid to study how these expectations and changes in the news ecosystem are affecting local news media -in comparison to national outlets- (Nielsen, 2015).

This paper discusses the results of an international research project investigating how local news organizations in French-speaking Europe (Belgium, France and Switzerland) try to rebuild a trusted relationship with their audiences. The first phase of the project consisted in the elaboration of a database of initiatives launched by radio, television, press or digital-only media concerned by the perimeter of our study and aiming to reinforce the links with their audiences. The research team carried out an inventory of initiatives no matter what their nature was (economic, editorial, communicational, etc.). This work was completed by a participatory form in order to gather as many initiatives as possible. From February 2019 to December 2020, we listed 550 media's initiatives.

The analysis consisted of manually coding each initiative based on a double inductive categorization referring to two research questions.

- What are the recurring formats of the media's initiatives towards audiences? We classified them in 26 formats according to their main characteristics (editorial conference, subscribers' club, crowdfunding campaign, etc.).
- What role is assigned to the audience and what is the extent of its involvement, particularly in the editorial process? We identified 5 different levels of audience involvement (observation, dialogue,

contribution, consultation and co-creation).

Our work builds up on previous research on participatory journalism, defined as the overall process of audience engagement with journalists in the construction of news (Paulussen et al., 2007; Thurman & Hermida, 2010; Singer et al., 2011). It aims to offer a complementary view to the studies on the resistance of journalists to release control over the editorial process (Hermida, 2011) as well as on organisational difficulties against this approach. Thanks to its longitudinal perspective, our research highlights the rise (before the Covid-19 pandemic) of initiatives that not only allow participation but also dialogue and transparency in the news building process. It also shows that initiatives launched during the pandemic foster solidarity between people and development of social links within the local community. More broadly, the results shed light on the rise, in French-speaking Europe, of engaged journalism, defined as practices integrating a regular and more horizontal link with audiences, even taking into account their expectations and needs, as well as committing in a reciprocal relationship with them.