

# Journalism Research

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# Citizen reporting: between participation and professional journalism

## Formats of citizen journalism in local television

by Gabriele Hooffacker

*Abstract:* Which conditions engender the success of participation in local television? What motivates citizen reporters and what do editorial departments expect from them? Which formats are suitable? Various research projects at Leipzig University of Applied Sciences (HTWK) have examined the way citizen reporters contribute to local television. The results can be used to derive factors that influence the success of participative formats in local television.

“The future of professional journalism may lie in the intelligent involvement of the audience.” Christoph Neuberger makes this prediction at the end of his overview of research into citizen journalism (Neuberger, *Bürgerjournalismus als Lösung? Empirische Ergebnisse zu den journalistischen Leistungen von Laienkommunikation*, 2012). Wiebke Möhring sees participative formats, especially in local journalism, as an opportunity to improve participation in public processes (Möhring, 2015). Mobile end devices and their connectivity have made the production of moving images, from filming to editing and distribution, much more accessible (Staschen, 2017). Involving citizens, with their smartphones and consumer cameras, in the program formats of local television stations is the next logical step.

In local and hyperlocal contexts, participative formats give television viewers an opportunity to collaborate on journalistic reports or to create them from scratch. Editorial departments benefit not only through ideas for topics and support in editing, but also in the form of greater loyalty from readers or viewers. However, many fear that journalistic quality may suffer (Christmann & Tadic, 2018).

At the heart of this investigation is the audience, who are shifting from a passive ‘lean back’ role to an active role - “switching flexibly between the roles of communicator and recipient” (Neuberger, *Konflikt, Konkurrenz, Kooperation*, 2014). Entire fields of research are today dedicated to the inclusion of journalism and the audience (for background: Loosen, 2016).

The central question is what motivates the citizen journalists. Are they even interested in participating in local television? Which sections of the population come into question? Are these

amateur communicators able to contribute regularly, despite the time needed for production? A series of projects at HTWK Leipzig has examined these questions and the options for this kind of participation over many years. Their work focuses on two key questions: Which conditions engender the success of participation in local television? And what might suitable formats for citizen participation in television look like?

The change in production conditions and the difficult economic situation of many television stations, especially small local ones, needs to be taken into account. A joint project by IiM Institut für innovative Medien gGmbH and the Forschungs- und Transferzentrum (FTZ) at HTWK Leipzig, funded by the Sächsische Landesanstalt für privaten Rundfunk und neue Medien (SLM), resulted in a website and app to make the workflow between citizen reporters and editorial departments easier (Bürgerreporter - Chancen für das Lokal-Fernsehen, 2015). It also developed a phase model for collaboration between a local television station and amateur communicators, and tested new formats for participation. The findings can be used to derive criteria and initial suggestions for how participative moving image formats can work at a local level.

### **Starting point and status of research**

Extensive research has already been conducted on the potential to participate in local press via the internet, weblogs and other formats (e.g. Engesser & Wimmer, 2009; Sehl, 2013; Neuberger, Langenohl, & Nürnbergk, 2014). Citizen radio and public channels exist in many German states, albeit with a very limited reach (Möhring, 2015; Förster, 2017).

The situation of smaller local broadcasters varies widely from state to state. On average across the country, around half of their income comes from advertising. However, the television providers differ widely in terms of their production processes and systems. Some broadcasters function with just two or three staff, while others employ up to 30 people. There are also significant differences in the schedule structure and number of repeats (Gomon, Hooffacker, Einwich, & Niebling-Gau, 2017).

The former East German states have always enjoyed a diverse landscape of local television channels. Saxony, in particular, has Germany's highest density of television channels (Stawowy, 2011). This wide variety of local broadcasters historically goes back to the 'antenna associations,' many of which have existed for generations. In the GDR, their role was to ensure television reception in the region (Liljeberg & Krambeer, 2012). Broadcasters often work with very few staff and under enormous economic pressure. However, this gives them a geographical proximity to their audience that large public broadcasters cannot afford.

In a practical experiment in 2015, the SLM and HTWK examined the extent to which the concept of participative citizen journalism can be applied to local television stations (Bürgerreporter - Chancen für das Lokal-Fernsehen, 2015). They used an online platform to help establish and support a community that would generate new contributions independently (Welz, Hooffacker, Kulisch, Datko,

& Thiergen, 2017). The studies explored here were conducted using this specially-programmed Reporter-Go app.

But what does 'citizen journalism' mean? Christoph Neuberger notes the confusion of terms. As defined by Joyce Y. M. Nip, strictly speaking the term refers to news production by citizens, independent of professional journalism (Neuberger, Bürgerjournalismus, 2012). However, the investigations in Leipzig were based on communication studies expert Steve Outing's broader definition of citizen journalism, in which he includes the entire spectrum of journalistically-relevant communication by amateurs, including in the context of professional journalistic media. Outing argues that the individual forms are almost impossible to separate (Burmeister, 2008).

In 2005, Outing defined the fields of activity of citizen reporters for local journalism in blogs and described them in an eleven-layer model (Outing, 2005). He places these eleven layers of citizen journalism in blogs in order of increasing professionalism on the part of the amateur communicators:

#### Layer 1: Comment functions

- Users can merely comment on texts

#### Layer 2: Add-on reporter

- Users can act as sources for certain texts

#### Layer 3: Open-source reporting

- Collaboration between the professional journalist and the reader
- Users are asked to provide their specialist knowledge or ask questions

#### Layer 4: The citizen bloghouse

- A blog hosting service invites users to participate

#### Layer 5: Set-up of blogs

- Users blog under the "brand" of the editorial department/distributor

#### Layer 6: Stand-alone citizen journalism site: Edited version

- Users write their own texts, which are edited by editors

#### Layer 7: Stand-alone citizen journalism site: Unedited version

- Texts are not edited before publication
- Inappropriate content can still be removed

Layer 8: Print edition of model 6 or 7

- Selected articles from a blog are integrated into the newspaper's print edition
- Texts are only edited for spelling and grammar

Layer 9: Hybrid or professional and citizen journalists

- Citizen reporters are given the full range of tasks of professional journalists
- However, they are not employed

Layer 10: Mix of professional content and content from citizen journalists

- No distinction between texts from citizen reporters and professional texts (from the point of view of the reader)

Layer 11: Wiki journalism

- The readers and journalists are the same people

The researchers in Leipzig needed to shape a theoretical framework for examining potential participation in local television by citizen reporters. Based on the work of Steve Outing and Jana Burmeister, they derived five layers of citizen reporter involvement in local television content, which were presented in detail at the pre-conference to the DGPK annual conference 2016 in Leipzig (Welz, Hooffacker, Kulisch, Datko, & Thiergen, 2017). Just as in Outing's work, the layers are in order of the citizen journalists' level of independence and professionalism:

### **Layer 1: Crowdsourcing in topic sourcing and research**

The editorial office asks the citizens to help them work on an existing topic. The content provided is then filtered, prepared and integrated into the relevant program. Although the result is tailored to the editorial requirements, it can be demotivating for the citizen journalists, as their contribution is barely visible.

### **Layer 2: Add-on reporting**

The citizen reporters supply additional information and materials on a specific topic or event. The broadcaster checks the material provided and may incorporate it into the piece. Again, it is the editorial office that specifies the topic. The low quality that can be expected from the material supplied is negligible.

### **Layer 3: Citizen journalism with editorial support**

The citizen reporters choose their topic themselves, in consultation with the editorial office, and supply material on it. The broadcaster then checks the material and builds a piece around it. This type of collaboration demands close cooperation between the reporter and the broadcaster, such as in the form of regular participation in editorial meetings. It also demands greater television journalism skills on the part of the citizen reporter.

### **Layer 4: Vloghouse - Broadcast slot for citizen journalism**

In the vlog (video blog) format, the citizen reporter has a fixed broadcast slot, which he himself fills independently with a broadcast-ready piece. This means that he has a lot of design freedom, but also requires significant skill. Viewers are able to recognize the vlog as a participative format.

### **Layer 5: Editorially independent citizen journalism**

The citizen reporter submits entire pieces on topics of his choice, practically ready for broadcast. The broadcaster may be able to specify or request a specific topic. This bears a certain level of risk for the broadcaster when it comes to quality and choice of topic; on the other hand, the high level of independence is very attractive to the citizen reporter. Mitteldeutsche Rundfunk has trialed this kind of citizen participation in a pilot project, in which citizen journalists had the chance to create pieces using equipment and other tools from the broadcaster (Eydnier und Schlappa, 2015).

A quantitative online survey conducted between February 9 and March 1, 2016 used these five layers as the basis for investigating what motivates citizen reporters to become involved. The survey was posted on the citizen reporter portal [myheimat.de](http://myheimat.de) and the Leipzig-based citizen reporter project Heldenstadt. 76 persons provided usable responses (Welz, Hooffacker, Kulisch, Datko, & Thiergen, 2017).

Analyzing the demographic data of the survey reveals an interesting age distribution: Hyperlocal blogs are dominated by the older generation, with 84% of those surveyed aged 50 years of older. More than half of those surveyed could imagine collaborating with a local television station.

When it comes to the topics, derived from the typical themes of local television channels in Saxony, the users listed culture as very interesting, and are also interested in events and history. Local politics and news are less important. The survey showed that local television broadcasters can expect less support in sport and business. The interests of the citizen reporters are thus totally different from the topics typically reported on by local journalists (Pöttker & Vehmeier, 2013).

So why do citizen journalists do what they do? Top of the list are sharing their own opinion, creativity, gathering experience and maintaining contact with others. The users listed the opportunity to pursue their own interests and topics as the main reason for their work, although feedback and the ability to reach the largest possible audience are also important. Financial incentives are seen as irrelevant. One aspect that should not be underestimated is the citizen reporters' desire to enhance both their journalistic and their technical skills.

According to the respondents' own assessment, self-promotion is less important. However, analyzing their open responses on their motivation indicates otherwise, with multiple respondents mentioning the opportunity to promote their own society, church congregation or other voluntary roles. One respondent gave a critical view: "No 'untrained' journalists, please! We need more professionals in print media, radio and television again" (Welz, Hooffacker, Kulisch, Datko, & Thiergen, 2017).

Interim conclusion: There is great interest in participation in local television among a predominantly older audience. Their motivation comes from a desire to deal with their own choice of topics and draw attention to their own work. This motivation to make a contribution to the social life of their community and ensure media coverage should be valued - even if it is not a primarily journalistic objective, but an objective that can be attributed to public relations in the very broadest sense.

### **Test case: University television**

In order to test the suitability of the results in practice, various practical projects were launched with master's students at HTWK Leipzig's Media faculty. This included both long-term cooperation with local television channels in Leipzig and Muldental and the use of *floid*, the university television channel at HTWK, as a test object.

The use of university television as a test case is justified as it demonstrates structural similarities: A hyperlocal audience uses the medium, which is tailored to the target group, to discuss shared topics and their own involvement. A comparable project on the incorporation of participative journalism by a professional editorial office was also conducted in North Rhine-Westphalia on TU Dortmund's teaching channel *nrwision* (Möhring, 2015).

Over several semesters, new TV formats were developed to incorporate viewer pieces into the schedule of the university channel *floid*. The analysis shows the conditions that need to be met if the participative format is to work. Some of the results described here were presented at the "Die neue Öffentlichkeit" [The new public] conference in Leipzig in fall 2017 (results below as in Christmann & Tadic, 2018).

The pieces for *floid* are organized and produced by students at HTWK Leipzig, and distributed via the website [www.floidtv.de](http://www.floidtv.de) and sometimes via the local channel Leipzig TV. The idea is that participative television formats will enable *floid* to cover more topics and offer a varied range of

pieces. In turn, this would enable the audience to publicize their own content, while giving the broadcaster the opportunity to consolidate the link to its viewers, better address content requested by the audience, and increase viewer involvement and the level of awareness. It is also hoped that it will be a way to attract new staff to the editorial office.

So how motivated is a student audience? Which topics would be of interest to them? In order to answer these questions, two *floid partizipativ* campaigns are briefly presented and analyzed below.

The online platform *www.buergerreporter.net* was used to transfer data between the citizen journalists and the editorial office. Having emerged from a preceding project together with the SLM (Bürgerreporter – Chancen für das Lokal-Fernsehen, 2015), the responsive platform for uploading videos is accessible to registered users via smartphone. It is also used for cooperation with local television broadcasters.

**Bachfest Leipzig:** Dating back to 1908, this music festival attracts an international audience to Leipzig with a mix of events, including many that are free. *floid* has traditionally been tasked with organizing the live broadcast of the open air concerts on Leipzig's market square. In June 2017, four *floid* editors acting as citizen reporters interviewed visitors and filmed them using smartphones. At the end, the interviewees were asked: "Would you sing or hum a Bach melody for us?" Of the around 60 visitors asked, 30 were willing to give an interview, and many of them sang. This resulted in 25 videos, a compilation of which was posted on the *floid* website (*floid-Redaktion*, 2017).

In terms of the five-layer model, the student reporters were used as in Layer 3: They delivered individual clips that were then combined in the editorial office to form a guest piece. The interviewees were thus in a classic situation similar to that of a survey; their average age was around 45 years. The high level of involvement corroborates the result of the preceding study, which found that older participants are more interested in such participative TV formats related to local issues.

**25 Years of HTWK Leipzig:** On June 14, 2017, HTWK Leipzig celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a program of lectures, presentations and music. Students, staff, supporters, sponsors and friends of the university were asked by the *floid* team to send birthday wishes to the HTWK in the form of videos. The participants each drew a card and were then filmed on smartphones. The results were then uploaded for the *floid* editorial office via the *www.buergerreporter.net* platform. In terms of the layer model, this process is a mixture of Layer 2 (add-on reporting) and Layer 3 (the participants film themselves and upload the results via the platform). In addition, everyone, including those who had no interest in participating, was presented with a questionnaire to find out their motivation.

The *floid* editors talked to around 50 students during the event. 14 of them took part in the campaign, resulting in seven videos. This corresponds to participation by 28 percent of all people to whom the campaign was presented in detail. 30 questionnaires were used and completed (Christmann & Tadic, 2018). The average age of the participants was 24 years. The most commonly stated reason for participation was "creativity" (59 per cent), followed by "an interesting topic" and



“community,” each with 53 per cent. The competition element, i.e. the opportunity to win something by taking part, had only a low impact at 28 per cent.

So what prevented those surveyed from taking part in a participative campaign? Analysis of the questionnaires shows that the fact that the videos are posted publicly is a significant barrier for the participants. The most common response given (by 16 of 30 of those surveyed) was that they did not want to be seen in front of the camera. Other reasons included a lack of time and interest.

### **Factors in the acceptance of participative formats**

The studies, practical projects and analysis of the questionnaires essentially result in three success factors for a participative format. They are crucial to the success of such a format, in the sense that the format is accepted and used by the participants (Christmann & Tadic, 2018).

1. The participant must be interested in publicizing the topic. If the participant is to take on the role of citizen reporter, it is essential that he is intrinsically motivated to contribute to this topic.
2. The technical barrier needs to be as low as possible in order to prevent the participants from losing interest in participating. Having to spend a lot of time on technical processes such as registration, activation etc. is seen as an impediment.
3. The participant must have control over publication. He himself must be able to decide if and when content should no longer be accessible, for example when it is no longer up to date and thus less relevant.

Regarding university television, Veronika Christmann and Komnen Tadic come to the conclusion that, “if used properly, participative formats give an editorial office the opportunity to present their view of things and draw attention to topics that usually receive little attention. The interaction between the user and the editorial office plays a big role in this (...). The solution lies in cleverly combining a professional editorial office with motivated users that become participating citizen reporters” (Christmann & Tadic, 2018).

### **Test case: Local television**

Another project, however, highlights the differences between the expectations of the citizen reporters and those of the broadcaster’s editorial office. This project investigated the collaboration between volunteer citizens and a professional local television editorial office in the fields of sport and culture. For a broadcaster that has to fill a lot of air time with very few staff, involving amateur communicators like this demands a great deal of support and supervision (Welz, Hooffacker, Kulisch, Datko, & Thiergen, 2017).

Small local television channels usually work at the limits of their resources (Gomon, Hooffacker, Einwich, & Niebling-Gau, 2017). With the need for a high level of support and supervision, pieces by citizen reporters are difficult to incorporate into the schedule. Two further teaching and research projects by Uwe Kulisch and Gabriele Hooffacker in the winter semester of 2017/18 and the summer semester of 2018 conducted this kind of collaboration between volunteer citizen reporters in the field of sport and culture and a professional television editorial office, Leipzig Fernsehen, as an example. Master's students then analyzed the results in qualitative surveys of those involved (Erthel & Zschammer, 2018).

As well as the citizen reporters themselves, the editorial offices of Leipzig Fernsehen, of a local online portal and of floid, including two mobile "citizen" reporters from floid, were also involved. With the new format "flog" (floid vlog) having become established at that channel, the teaching and research project asked about the background to that success.

A huge effort was put into supporting and supervising the cooperation with Leipzig Fernsehen within the project. Multiple pieces were produced, filmed initially by the supporting students themselves, later independently under instruction from members of the society. Only a single piece was broadcast - filmed and edited by the master's student. It was the only one considered suitable for broadcast by the television editorial office. Further pieces produced by the societies themselves were not broadcast. Guided interviews were conducted to find out the causes of this.

The analysis of the survey highlights the different expectations of the cooperation held by the various actors. Felix Ammann, Managing Editor at Leipzig Fernsehen, ultimately applies the same requirements to pieces from citizen reporters as to those from trainees and interns. In his view, the main problem with participative pieces is maintaining the standards of television journalism. For example, he says, the sound quality might be too poor or the storytelling insufficient for broadcast. It is also difficult when citizen reporting regularly focuses on similar topics, such as soccer games. On the other hand, he sees the "direct link to the viewer" as an advantage. Lea Quandt, Chief Editor at floid, makes similar arguments, also listing acquisition and training of amateur reporters as an additional difficulty (Erthel & Zschammer, 2018).

When it comes to the societies involved, Björn Mencfeld, volunteer coach and press officer at SV Lindenau 1848, views cooperation with a classic local television channel as having only limited attractiveness in terms of the target group. He argues that there are other local and specialist portals that the club can use to reach its (young) audience in a more targeted way. Mencfeld would like to see citizen reporters report on his club regularly, as the active club members are unable to achieve regular, fast reporting. The technical problems could be resolved with a little assistance, he argues. Jens Straube from the club Mühlenstraße 14 disagrees, seeing the technical barriers as significant. In addition, a lack of time prevents the already fully-stretched club staff from further productions, he says (Erthel & Zschammer, 2018).

A survey by Media Technology students Theresa Möckel and Kyra Prohaska was also analyzed. They had launched the participative format "flog" at the university television channel floid as a test format

for the use of mobile end devices instead of classic camera equipment. Both had previously held management roles at floid and have relevant technical and journalistic skills.

In the interview, they highlight the simplicity and speed of mobile production and the opportunity to take the viewers “behind the scenes.” With mobile technology, they say, “citizen reporters” have fewer reservations and production is simply enjoyable. They argue that a good “fan base” is very important for success, with social media an important element in this kind of participative format. The “flog” was picked up and continued by other students who valued both the lightweight equipment and especially the fact that there is no need to adhere strictly to formats of television journalism such as news or reporter piece. All in all, they say, the participative format has a greater emphasis on opinion and is more subjective and personal (Erthel & Zschammer, 2018).

The two master’s students conducted a further interview with Robert Dobschütz, who works for a local online newspaper (Leipziger Internet-Zeitung, LIZ). The LIZ is also occasionally published in print and already incorporates content from citizen reporters into its online segment. The online paper is open to participative video content, too, and is planning an expanded platform for this kind of content. Robert Dobschütz expects citizen reporters not to produce finished journalistic content, but to complement traditional journalism in terms of both topics and presentation.

### **Results for participative formats in local television**

The requirements of local television editorial offices and the possibilities of citizen reporters do not always match up. Television editorial offices want pieces that are produced as quickly and professionally as possible, i.e. participation in the sense of **Layer 5** above: “editorially independent citizen journalism.” This means that citizen reporters would submit complete pieces on topics of their choice and adhere to agreed topics and deadlines, just like professional journalists.

However, the usually unpaid citizen journalists from sports clubs or local cultural societies cannot achieve this kind of up-to-the-minute professional journalism – even if they wanted to. They see their possibilities as closer to those in **Layer 3**: “citizen journalism with editorial support.” This means that they would propose their topic in coordination with the editorial office and deliver material on it. The broadcaster or other external citizen journalist with professional skills would then have to check, edit and complete the piece.

The most promising format appears to be that of **Layer 4**: “vloghouse – broadcast slot for citizen journalism.” It has a fixed broadcast slot and is easily recognizable to viewers as a participative format. Citizen reporters enjoy a lot of freedom in terms of design, but are also required to work with a high degree of independence.

## Outlook

The results from the teaching and research projects at HTWK Leipzig tend to corroborate the assumptions of Christoph Neuberger and Wiebke Möhring on the importance of participative formats for the future of professional journalism in practice quoted at the start of this paper. The danger of pieces produced by citizen journalists predominantly transmitting content that supports their own public relations objectives can be prevented by tapping into the citizen reporters' own critical awareness. However, the needs of the local broadcasters and those of the citizen reporters involved in the participative formats will never be a perfect match.

Like those of university television channels, editorial offices in local television have few resources to spend on supporting citizen reporters. They place the same expectations on participative as on traditional journalistic formats and sometimes have reservations about mobile journalism. In contrast, local and hyperlocal platforms pursue different goals, seeing themselves and participative formats in particular as complementing traditional journalism.

The next step will therefore be to investigate the workflow between citizen reporters with mobile end devices and the incorporation of participative formats in online-affine hyperlocal editorial offices. Potential cooperation partners in this are less traditional local television channels and more hyperlocal blogs or alternative platforms of local or cultural journalism, inspired by student-run university television. This will be used as the basis for developing processes and models for incorporating participative formats, which can then be applied to practice at local television channels. However, the main focus will be to develop topics and formats that complement, rather than replace, traditional journalism.

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# Journalismus



Claudia Mast (Hrsg.)

## **ABC des Journalismus. Ein Handbuch**

*Praktischer Journalismus, 1*

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Weitere Informationen zu diesem Buch finden Sie unter:  
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CLAUDIA MAST, Prof. Dr., leitet das Fachgebiet für Kommunikationswissenschaft und Journalistik der Universität Hohenheim (Stuttgart). Die Kommunikationswissenschaftlerin wurde 2015 zur ›Professorin des Jahres‹ gewählt. Schwerpunkte ihrer Lehr- und Forschungstätigkeit sind Innovationen im Journalismus und in der Unternehmenskommunikation, redaktionelle Strategien der Publikumsansprache, strategische Kommunikations- und Themenplanung sowie Wirtschaftsjournalismus und Unternehmensberichterstattung. Die Universitätsprofessorin war viele Jahre in leitender Position bei der Siemens AG tätig und hat zahlreiche Fachbücher über Journalismus, Kommunikationsmanagement und Wirtschaftsberichterstattung veröffentlicht. Sie ist in verschiedenen Gremien tätig, u. a. im Verwaltungsrat der Deutschen Welle (Bonn).



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