

The citizen as media critic in periods of media change

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Abstract

Media criticism often evolve – and grow in strength – during times of media change with new forms of journalism, new media formats, new media markets, new ways of addressing media markets and new media technologies. Different stakeholders may pursue their interests by formulating a media critique that protect their positions and promotes status quo. It is not difficult to find critics who in the name of the citizens formulate criticism against journalism and the media. It is more difficult to find and study representative examples of criticism expressed by the citizens themselves.

The technological development on the Internet has paved the way for a number of new communicative tools that enable users to interact with each other and publish content in a way that changes the conditions for citizens to act as media critics radically. This is an aspect of the Internet's democratic and participatory potential – and a key point in the rhetoric surrounding the concept "web 2.0". In this paper we analyse and compare media critical debates during two periods of media change in Sweden: A) the debate caused by the launch of the tabloid Expressen in the 1950's, and B) the critique against the new, commercially driven participatory news- and debate forum called Newsmill, launched in 2008. These historical and contemporary cases are used to enlighten a theoretical discussion about participatory online media's potential for improving the conditions for citizens to act as media critics in a fruitful way.

Both Expressen and Newsmill represent examples of journalistic innovations that affect surrounding media considerably. The result of the comparison point to a new dilemma related to the role of citizens as media critics in the digital age. The fact that the citizens themselves are now increasingly involved in the production of content, also puts them in a new role as defenders of the site that publish their content, against critics from traditional mass media.

Keywords: Media criticism; tabloid journalism; participatory journalism; Web 2.0; Expressen; Newsmill; Media Accountability

Introduction

Over the past two hundred years, mass media has increasingly become a natural part of societal and civic life and a defining feature of our culture. Freedom of expression in general but the liberty of the press/media in particular is widely understood as the foundation for a functioning democracy. Citizens have a right to receive information and to inform others. This was not always the case. The history of media progress has not only given rise to triumphant historiography, but also generated a rich history of media-criticism (Krogh & Holt, 2009). In a longer perspective, social and cultural historians identify certain periods of media change where media criticism has peaked. Media debates occurred when the oral tradition was challenged by the written word, when the printing press was invented, when reading became more

common and when broadcast media and the Internet were introduced (Briggs & Burke 2005). On various occasions and in shifting forms, criticism of media content, organisation, ownership and way of operating has led to debates about the consequences of the growing importance of media to society and culture. This criticism is an empirical gold mine for scholars interested in the role of media in society and culture. But the field is vast and the nature and quality of the criticism varies to an extent that makes any attempt at charting it or defining it in a general way problematic. In this study, we focus on the role of citizens as media critics, and we analyse how this role is changing when new media forms enter the media market. The recent wave of social media (Participatory journalism, social media like Facebook and Twitter and content sharing sites like YouTube etc.) has set a worldwide debate in motion, and also provided new forums for citizens to discuss media critically and provided platforms for publication of critical views on the media. How does this affect the role(s) of citizens in the media critical discourse?

In much discourse about media-criticism, there is a normative tendency to regard it as an activity that is supposed to be edifying for the media institutions. Ideally, criticism of the media should help the media improve the quality of their work, stipulating that media-criticism should use journalistic standards as a basis for critical assessment. Marzolf states that critics should not only have "thorough knowledge" about the history of journalism, but also have an understanding of the daily routine of journalists, and the ideals of the "best practitioners in the field". (Marzolf 1991: 209; see also Orlik 2001). Wyatt writes that press criticism is the "critical yet noncynical act of judging the merits of the news media" (Wyatt 2007: 6) and then goes on to define press criticism, with reference to Carey (1974), as "the ongoing process of exchange of debate among members of the press and between the press and its audience over the role and performance of the press in a democratic society" (p 7). Fengler, (2001) is exclusively focused on the internal media-discourse; "media journalism", what one might call "mediatised media-criticism" (Kroon, 2003), i.e. media criticism performed by, in and for the media.

Obviously, if one is interested in media-critics of a different disposition, like for example the Frankfurt-school, Critical theory or other individual critics like John C. Merrill, Jean Baudrillard, Noam Chomsky or early critics like Søren Kierkegaard, we have to modify this definition. Other forms of criticism might also contain valuable perspectives on the media and its role in society; perspectives that do not necessarily have to do with things that media-professionals can improve, but rather deals with conflicts, structural inequities, ideological implications and negative moral consequences of media, as a part of modern culture and society. In this view, criticism is regarded as something that plays a "vital role in the formation of culture" (Cawelti, 1985). Adorno & Horkheimers lamentations on the massification of culture, were based on the ideological assumption that bourgeois media were rotten to the core from the beginning, and not primarily intended to help improve it. When Bourdieu, in *On Television* (1998), complained about

the negative effects of the power of journalism, he was attacking journalistic standards *per se*, without any consideration for how to make journalism better. An early critic, Søren Kierkegaard, saw the press as the most obvious manifestation of the negative consequences of the emerging modern society (Kierkegaard, 2001). His criticism was existential, cultural and religious. (Holt, 2009a). Joli Jensen (1990) is one of the few researchers who analyses media-criticism from a cultural perspective: media-criticism is a discourse that can tell us something about our culture; it makes "assumptions about our common life" (Jensen, 1990, p. 18). John Durham Peters also treats the "intellectual history" of ideas about public communication – as a resource for "cultural criticism" (Peters, 2005, p. 27). The aim, in this view, is not to evaluate journalism, but to understand media's role for existence in modern society.

Media-criticism can therefore be divided into at least three categories, based on the aim and purpose: A) Assessment of critical perspectives on the media intended to edify and enlighten the media itself. B) Cultural criticism, trying to understand medias' role in society and culture. C) Criticism issued by stakeholders (for instance politicians, professionals, academics, financial interests and the public) in the societal information process. We are not arguing for one above the other, only distinguishing between different kinds of approaches towards media criticism. Scholarly work on the history of media criticism has hitherto mainly been concerned with the period of the establishment, growth and consolidation of mass media (Jensen 1990; Marzolf 1991; Christians 2000; Fengler, 2001; Orlik 2001; Wyatt 2007). The development of media criticism since the introduction of the Internet has not yet been studied systematically. In a time when traditional journalism is challenged by new forms of journalism (i.e. citizen journalism, participatory journalism, blogging etc.) it is increasingly important to view media criticism as something wider than evaluation of the performance of institutionalised professional journalists. When "the people formerly known as the audience" also must be counted as creators of content, or, as Axel Bruns argues, as "producers", they also become stakeholders in a new way in the critical discussions about these new participatory media forms (Rosen 2006, Bruns 2008). Media accountability is more and more also becoming citizen accountability.

One of the major themes in scholarly discussions about the implications of the digital age is the question about new levels of democratic participation obtainable through new levels of interactivity (Schultz, 2000; Jenkins, 2006; Boler, 2008; Bruns, 2008; Dahlgren, 2009; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Gripsrud, 2009). Therefore, the question about the citizen's role as media critic in today's digital environment is central as a part of a larger discussion about new online media's potential to revitalize democracy. One of the areas where the new technology changes the conditions for media criticism has to do with media accountability. In the previous era of mass communication, media criticism was one of the methods used to obtain a higher degree of media accountability. Media critics often demand that media organisations should react to

criticism, be accountable and responsible. Criticism is a part of the interactivity that is included in a working definition of media accountability as “the interactive process” by which media organizations may be expected to render an “account of their activities to their constituents” (Krogh 2008: 27). Plaisance (2000) envisions accountability as “a fluid dynamic of interaction”, where the fluidity consists of the media’s “degree of responsiveness to the values of media users” (p 258). What some researchers consider a failing of various accountability methods, Plaisance perceives to be “a healthy tension created by journalistic autonomy in relation to various community groups” (p. 263). The way that media criticism is handled by different media accountability mechanisms varies between media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Media accountability has been studied in relation to media responsibility (Hodges 1986 and 2004), to press freedom (Dennis et al 1989 and McQuail 2003) and to concrete ways of criticizing media (Pritchard 2000; Bardoel & d’Haenens 2004; Brants & Bardoel 2008). Today, when more and more media content is produced and published by autonomous actors, not belonging to powerful media organizations, the question of accountability takes on new challenges: new media provides new channels for criticism and complicates the question about who is to be held accountable.

One of the pioneers when it comes to studying different ways of channelling media criticism was the French researcher, Claude-Jean Bertrand. Bertrand began with studies of press councils in the 1970s and then went on to examine local journalism reviews in the USA, which at the time were published in eight of the country’s ten largest cities. He thereafter turned his attention to ombudsmen and, finally, to codes of media ethics. Gradually, he developed the concept of Media Accountability Systems, MAS, which he defined as “any non-state means of making media responsible towards the public” (Bertrand 2000: 107).

Wyatt, aiming to form a normative theory, builds on earlier work on different aspects of media criticism by American scholars (i.e. Brown 1974; Carey 1974; Lemert 1989; Marzolf 1991; Inglis 1995 and Danto 1995) in combination with a Habermasian discourse theory of democracy and ends up with a theory of media criticism as “a discursive procedure that involves critics as well as the public and the press” that relies “on the press to provide a forum for the presentation of the critical publics’ discursively formed opinions” (Wyatt 2007: 171). One example of this kind of process, where some editors and some critics tried to establish an interactive dialogue with the public inspired by a media critical perspective, was the movement for so called public journalism in the US in the 1990’s (Glasser 1999). Today, many new forms for exchange already exist on the Internet, especially in the form of participatory newspapers like *Ohmynews* and *Newsvine*. However, the citizens are no longer solely engaged in this as concerned consumers or representatives of the audience, because those who choose to participate in this exchange by writing criticism, also take on the role of content producer and publisher, a role previously allotted only to media institutions or workers – those to be held accountable. (Deuze 2007; Bruns 2008). Citizens who participate

in media critical discourse in these new participatory forums find themselves occupying more than one seat. Furthermore, those who participate by writing articles in participatory newspapers are far from exclusively concerned ordinary citizens. Holt & Karlsson (2010) found that a large percentage of the contributors at Swedish participatory newspapers were in fact representatives for different companies and organizations. In the following, for the sake of comparison, we will analyze two periods of media change in the Swedish mediascape that have given rise to critical public discussions about the media: Firstly, an example of a debate from a period of mass media dominance, caused by the increased tabloidization of the Swedish press connected to the establishment of the tabloid *Expressen* in the 1940's and -50's. Secondly, an example of a debate from the digital age caused by the success of a participatory journalism site called *Newsmill*, started in 2008. Comparisons will then be made between the two examples in order to illustrate the complexity of this new situation.

On behalf of the people – media criticism in the age of mass media.

In 1944, the first issue of *Expressen* was published. In contrast to the traditional subscribed morning broadsheet newspapers, this was a tabloid with black headlines sold in single copies on the streets during the day. It was not as closely related to the political parties as the established press, some of its reporting dealt with areas hitherto not widely covered (for instance the sexuality of teenagers) and its circulation rose quickly; *Expressen* grew to become the second biggest paper in Sweden in not more than nine years (Krogh, 2006; Holt, 2008).

Expressen was met with fierce criticism from many parts of society for sensationalism and for abolishing sound editorial standards in pursuit of profit. Politicians, bishops and judges joined forces with editors, doctors and women associations in their critique. They often referred to potentially harmful effects from this journalism for the public and urged the public opinion to take action. But what can we say about the public; how did the citizens react to this new newspaper? The answer is sought through a wide search of sources that illuminate the reactions against the newspaper and the debate over the paper. The sources include interviews with the very few key players still alive (both editors and critics), a wider net of autobiographies and biographies, archives (including correspondence) for both editors and critics, archives for press organisations (newspapers, publishers' association and editors' club), archives for organisations dealing with press complaints (the Press council and its governing body), archives for newspaper clippings, and parliamentary documents and debate transcriptions. A rich source was the columns of *Expressen* itself plus all the newspapers that critically discussed *Expressen*. The magazines within the newspaper industry (the journalists' trade union journal and the newspaper owners' journal) contained some information; the

magazines for other sectors (politics, medicine, economics, manufacturing industry, religion, gender, law, commerce, consumers, trade unions, radio and contemporary affairs) less so.

The picture that emerges from these sources, and from the academic treatment of this period in the Swedish media historiography, has more to do with antagonisms between different interests in the society than with expressions of concern or approval from individuals or groups of citizens. There were no polls undertaken on this subject at the time, nor were in-depth scientific interviews performed.

Some groups had difficulties with a growing transparency in society and with new relations between the media and the authorities. This was in the works before *Expressen* arrived but the paper that soon became a symbol of changing times reinforced the sentiments. The presentation here is based on Krogh (2006). Some influential doctors found reporters knocking on doors that in their opinion should remain locked; information on health issues should be controlled by medical experts and not reported on by sensation-mongers from a sleazy tabloid. Some judges and lawyers worried about effects of crime reporting and feared that charismatic criminals would be idolized. Some bishops, priests, schoolteachers, education bureaucrats and social workers criticized the coverage of young peoples attitudes towards authorities and established social rules. A senior judge, president of the Court of Appeal for southern Sweden, condemned tabloids for not respecting people's personal lives and for creating irresponsible opinions among the public. Some letters of protests against alleged sensationalism in *Expressen* and other tabloids were sent from different women organisations to the Publishers' Association and to the Press Council. They often claimed to speak for a broad opinion, for instance mothers who care for their children, but since the letters seldom were specific they were mainly noted and filed by the board.

In the political area, two MPs motioned in the Parliament in 1947 for a ban on printing photographs of criminals in the press. Criminals could be portrayed as intelligent persons and a criminal career could be tempting for young people they argued, referring to recent coverage in the tabloids and notably in *Expressen*. The motion was turned down by Parliament with reference to the Constitution. In the debate, however, the leading constitutional politician for the governing social democratic party, Harald Hallén, accused parts of the media to exploit the public's desire for relaxation and excitement after the war. Censorship would be unconstitutional as a remedy, but he found the quest for action sound and one that "is shared by very many people". Instead of censorship he urged youth organisations from all political parties to boycott the sensational newspapers "that poison our youth". In another parliamentary debate one year later, Hallén asserted that "the common man" out in the country criticized parts of the press for chasing innocent people.

The major debate was, however, to found within the realm of journalism itself. The leading critic of *Expressen* was Ivar Anderson, an influential conservative MP. He held a PhD in history, was editor-in-chief

for the conservative morning paper *Svenska Dagbladet*, and chairman of Publicistklubben (The Publicists' Club). He had criticized sensational journalism years before *Expressen* arrived and his attacks became more intense as the tabloid grew in circulation. He feared that the influence of the established press would vanish if the hunt for readers became more important than printing "reliable" news and views. If the press accepts the moral crisis in the public and feeds its lust for sensations, the press loses its own moral authority and legitimacy. The press should enlighten and lead the public, not bow to "the applause of the thoughtless mass". The debates between *Expressen* and other newspapers were held in public, in the columns of the opinion pages. Most of them dealt with *Expressen's* alleged betrayal of sacred journalistic rules; looking for sensations to raise circulation instead of selecting news of importance to the society. But there were also debates about the value of reaching a bigger audience and what could be learned from *Expressen's* success.

How much of a media debate in general, and about *Expressen* in particular, that went on in other places is difficult to describe. Footprints can be found in some protocols, letters and autobiographies, but the extent is impossible to measure. What debates that took place over breakfast and dinner tables we don't know. What we know is that the criticism of *Expressen* had a strong peak in the newspapers in 1950 and another, weaker, in 1953. We know that the critique worried the owners of *Expressen*, who in 1950 ordered an internal content analysis to find out if *Expressen* was 'worse' than the other tabloids (it was considered not). We know that the Publishers' Association arranged a pr-campaign in 1952 with open newspaper offices all over Sweden during a goodwill-week. We know that Ivar Anderson gained new hope when he noticed a renewed strength in the critique in 1953. The hopes were, however, not realistic. The strong criticism of *Expressen* trailed off and the paper could celebrate its tenth anniversary on November 16th 1954 without complications. It had grown to become the second largest newspaper in Sweden with a circulation of 245 000 copies (four years later it became No 1). This growth implied a complicated problem for the critics; it meant that the negative ingredients were growing stronger and therefore needed stronger criticism, but it also meant that a growing number of Swedes enjoyed the paper enough to pay for it day after day.¹

The criticism found is concentrated to three dimensions: taste, harm and control. Taste in this sense would include origins in moral and philosophical outlook. Harm includes damage done to individuals as well as to political processes. Control is closely linked to power (and struggle for power). Concerning the role of citizens in the critique of *Expressen*, it is striking that in spite of the relative lack of visibility in the sources, alleged opinions of "the common man" were used by other interests in connection with all three dimensions in different patterns and time cycles. This is not so much criticism by the people as criticism on behalf of the people, over the heads of the people. Critics worried about the public's taste and wanted to educate it

¹ The circulation curve shows a steady increase of 15-30 percent every year – except 1950-1951 when it was down to 4 percent, so maybe the debate about the journalism of the paper made some impression on the readers after all.

not to read tabloids. Others argued that the tabloids would harm the young and lead them into criminality and even worse conditions. Some feared that losing parts of their own control, for instance concerning editorial values, politics and medical information, would be negative, if not catastrophic. What the citizens really thought, we don't know. The circulation of *Expressen* grew fast and later research has shown tabloid readers to be aware of distinctions of media formats; there is no reason to suspect that this was not true in the 1940's also.

By the people? Media criticism in the digital age

The development of media criticism since the introduction of the Internet has not yet been studied systematically. However, one of the major themes in scholarly discussions about the implications of the digital age is the question about new levels of democratic participation obtainable through new levels of interactivity. (Schultz, 2000; Jenkins, 2006; Boler, 2008; Bruns, 2008; Dahlgren, 2009; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Gripsrud, 2009). Among scholars, there have been different ways of looking at the Internet and its potential for stimulating and enabling a higher degree of participation in important democratic communication processes like media criticism. This discussion inevitably turns into a media-critical discussion in itself, and shows similarities to discussions about traditional mass media. Most scholars agree that the reality of the Internet and the many different forms of interaction that are now available through this medium, have created a new situation in which the role of traditional media is being radically redefined and challenged. Exactly how, is still a matter for negotiation.

In the culture of participation that is emerging, it is often pointed out that audiences no longer tolerate to be reduced into passive receivers - they want to interact, customize, and be taken seriously, they want to be able to influence, and they have the means to pool their resources in collective efforts (Jenkins, 2006). The implications of this for interactive and participatory media criticism are possibly revolutionary. Big media is now being challenged by citizens who have the means to create and "co-create" media content as well as disseminate it to larger audiences; issues are debated in new contexts where the audience have a greater possibility of both participating and dissenting publicly, but in front of audiences of a different fabric than the audience of traditional mass media (Boler 2008, Van Dijck & Nieborg 2009). As well as opening up new arenas for political participation and therefore also for media criticism, the Internet also provides the means to form "counter-public spheres" (Downey & Fenton 2003). Public discourses are created, shared and stored in new ways. Traditional journalism is getting competition from "participatory journalism" - where the audience is invited to interact with the journalistic products, submit content and have a say in the interpretation of news events (Domingo et. al. 2009). If the critical thoughts and discussions about

media that took place in the private sphere, among friends and family, about media in the 1950's are forever lost for researchers – the situation is somewhat different in today's digital age. The rise of "participatory media" and "participatory culture" online has been heralded as a communicative revolution in terms of making it possible for ordinary people to make their thoughts and opinions public and thus also to some extent available for analysis by researchers. (Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2009). This is one aspect of the increased mediatisation of citizenship that is visible in today's digital environment. The question here is therefore: Does this new situation create better conditions for citizens to act as media critics?

The launch of *Newsmill* 2008

Launched as a commercial enterprise in 2008 and owned by major Swedish media companies, *Newsmill*, is an example of an online public space, intended for debating and publishing news. The idea behind the site, is to be the "first social media" to focus on "news and debate", and it wants to be "the first major site that combines editorial content with user generated content and that sets the agenda for the debate." The motto reads: "Our readers know more than we do!" and the aim is to introduce a new, transparent, democratic and interactive way of working with news by "opening up the editorial board and inviting the readers to participate in an immediate way". Thus, their homepage tells us, they consider "every reader a co-worker" (*Newsmill*).

Newsmill has repeatedly been criticised by journalists in traditional newspapers, most notably the tabloid *Aftonbladet* (Social democratic) and the largest morning paper *Dagens Nyheter* (Liberal). In *Aftonbladet*, the journalist, blogger and media critic Dan Josefsson raised doubts about the motives behind, and suggested that *Newsmill* was big media's way of getting back at the competing blogosphere by incorporating bloggers under their own commercial roof – thus taming the wilderness of the blog-world and controlling the debate. Josefsson stated that *Newsmill* was falsely advertised as a part of a new democratic movement and as a shining example of participatory online culture – instead, Josefsson claimed, *Newsmill* was better described as a "PR-agency" for major media companies and a way for big media to subdue the blogosphere. The editors of *Newsmill* exercise a considerable influence on the agenda by actively suggesting topics and requesting articles about certain issues (related to issues that are the agenda in mainstream media). Instead of being a venue for citizens to participate and shape the debate, it becomes a secondary medium for comments about what is being said in the traditional media. Josefsson perceived of this as a possible threat to the true democratic potential of independent blogging, since projects like *Newsmill* – with connections in traditional media and therefore also more publicity – brings the logic of big media with it (Josefsson, 2008).

Ali Esbati, also from *Aftonbladet*, attacked the tone, taste and political orientation of the discussion in both articles and commentary – *Newsmill* had turned into a “playground for loudmouthed reactionaries” where nationalists and ultra-conservatives were unleashed without getting opposition. Browsing *Newsmill* was like “ending up at the pub after a Sverigedemokraterna (The Sweden Democrats) party-congress”. This did not help create better public discourse, but rather threatens the level of debate, which in turn undermines the role of public discourse in the democratic process (Esbati, 2009).

Dagens Nyheter’s cultural editor, Ola Larsmo, also picked up the ideological leaning of the debate at *Newsmill*, identified by Esbati as mainly right wing. However, Larsmo’s main criticism was directed against the commercialization of the Blogosphere, the idea of “sponsored seminars” and the fact that *Newsmill* cunningly managed to place itself in the media spotlight by asking famous or semi-famous people to write about scandals (Larsmo, 2008). Mats Bergstrand, (former über-gatekeeper of the single most important traditional debate forum in Sweden: “DN-debatt”, also in *Dagens Nyheter*) suggested that the “barefoot-journalism” of *Newsmill* was a threat to representative democracy. By having ordinary citizens work for free and deliver journalistic products of poor quality, sites like *Newsmill* threaten the future of professional journalism required for trustworthy dissemination of vital information in democratic society. People without journalistic training lack the competence and resources necessary to do a good critical job. This could lead to such a low quality of public discourse that it is questionable whether media’s role as fourth estate will continue to function. (Bergstrand, 2008).

These perspectives share a common concern for the quality and function of media as vehicle for public discourse, and they all point at different challenges to public discourse posed by the introduction of *Newsmill* as a new successful competitor to traditional media. We continue to use the dimensions taste, harm and control: Taste) the aesthetical criticism is clearly underlying the arguments that concerns the quality of public discourse. It is not only the quality of the information that is available without professional journalism that is lacking, but also the way in which it is delivered – the crafting of arguments, the selection of what is relevant and what is not, etc. (Bergstrand, 2008; Larsmo 2008). Harm) The damage that can be caused by *Newsmill* is both related to persons and the democratic political process. The, at times, harsh tone of the debate can result in insulting language directed at individuals or groups. (Esbati, 2009). Furthermore, public discourse runs the risk of losing in quality when it is performed by amateurs who work for free and competes with professionals. (Bergstrand, 2008). The strength of the positive democratic aspects of independent blogging is diminished when a commercial forum enters the field and brings traditional journalistic agenda setting into the field. (Josefsson, 2008). Control) *Newsmill* as an enterprise is interpreted more as a way for Big media to branch out into the rich soil of the blogosphere, but in the process it threatens the original qualities of that field (Josefsson, 2008; Esbati, 2009). In terms of power,

this can be described as an attempt to colonize an arena that by many is regarded as a threat to the dominance of mass media.

Although these perspectives come from people who are representatives, and hold positions in, traditional media. All four articles were linked by *Newsmill* and have become the subject of debate and commentary at *Newsmill* itself. Josefsson received 15 comments, Esbati 131, Larsmo only one and Bergstrand 30. What is striking about the debate about the articles among *Newsmill*-users is that the articles and comments are mainly written in defence of *Newsmill*, against the critics. There are exceptions, of course, one debater, for example, explains that he boycotts *Newsmill* by not linking to articles at *Newsmill* from his own blog, precisely because of the reasons explained in Josefsson's article (Josefsson 2008). In most cases, however, the comments tend to counter the argument that forums like *Newsmill* pose a threat to the quality of public discourse, and instead emphasise the fact that "ordinary people" are given a forum in which to publish their views. One response to Esbati's article comments that the emergence of new forums like *Newsmill* "must be really hard" for "professional journalists" because now "ordinary people" get to voice opinions in public that are considered to be "wrong opinions" by politically correct journalists. This raises the question about the self-reflexivity of these commercial online forums. If most users of such a forum display a tendency to express loyalty to the site when it receives criticism, it is logical to assume that they are loyal, because they are parts in the conflict – they are themselves contributors to, and "co-workers" of the medium under discussion, and they are also dependent on the medium for publicity for their contributions. So, what we see in this debate is an interesting difference compared to the situation described above, where a new tabloid received criticism from older newspapers, in the name of ordinary people, regarding taste, harm and control. In the debate about *Newsmill*, the new medium receives criticism from proponents of older media, but is defended by the "ordinary people" who have now become active participants in the discussion. Although the users of *Newsmill* and other participatory newspapers, as a community, are not to be seen as representative of "ordinary people" (See Holt & Karlsson, 2010), they must still be counted as voices from ordinary citizens that are to some extent participating in the debate. As a venue for reactions to/against content in other media – *Newsmill* and other similar sites (for example *Second-opinion*, which specializes in reactions against content in ordinary newspapers) can be seen as gigantic, endless letters-to-the editor sections. As such it is definitely a new and in many ways promising space for critical, interactive discussions about media. What *Newsmill* offers its users, is a better chance of publicity than a personal blog might have, and there are several examples of cases where articles from *Newsmill*, written by ordinary citizens have been picked up by the mainstream media (much due to the editors' affiliations with Big media). But this also makes them accountable for the content on the site.

Conclusions

The debate at *Newsmill* and other similar commercial debate forums can be compared to televised audience discussion programmes, where members of the audience are invited to participate in cultural or political discussions in the show. In the 1990's, there was much discussion among scholars regarding this genre's democratic potential - similar to today's debates about the democratic potential of possibly existing digital public spheres. Much research was done about the actual quality of this kind of public debates, and Livingstone & Lunt (1994) for example, suggested that this type of programme, where ordinary men and women came together with experts of different sorts, created a new situation, where the views of ordinary people were taken seriously, and were often even favoured by the show-host - the audience was upgraded from passive to active and was participating in a new way.

Others had a more negative view on the quality of the audience participation: those who participated in these shows were selected strategically to create the dynamics of good TV; the debates were often staged and rigorously controlled (Svensson, 2001). Furthermore, big media still governed the actual topics of debate - some representatives of the audience were invited to the discussion, but media professionals selected the topic for discussion - often they tied into current themes in the news.

From this discussion, it is clear that the question about the improved conditions for citizens to act as media critics in the web 2.0 context - as in earlier periods - cannot be answered simply with a yes or a no. The difference between the debates about the launch of *Expressen* and the launch of *Newsmill* is that the latter represents a new type of medium where citizens can participate actively. However, the analysis of the criticism of *Newsmill* revealed several aspects that have directly to do with the participatory qualities. The possibility and technological ease of participating does not automatically create a more democratically involved citizenry. Nor does it automatically generate authentic media criticism by ordinary people. Aspects of context and engagement are crucial. The role of the citizen in the critical debate is no longer only as a consumer - for those who participate it now also includes taking responsibility for, and to some extent also to be held accountable for, the content that they themselves are part of creating. On the web, it is more dangerous than otherwise to generalize - the only way of gaining a better understanding of what these new developments imply for media criticism is to analyse specific cases systematically and comparatively. The case of *Newsmill* compared to the case of *Expressen* shows that although we now have a new abundance of sources to study, this new material contains its own limitations and complexities. And as the case of *Expressen* indicates, there are still many lessons to be sought and learned from the role of citizens in media criticism pre-internet; lessons that we may elaborate on in this new and changing mediascape.

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