

## Conversational Journalism: An Evolving Strategy

Journalism in the 21st century looks much different than it did in the 20th. The creation and commonality of the internet provides larger spaces for citizen participation (Sookanan and Thomas, 2019). This is why today's journalists offer conversational opportunities to the public simply by publishing their work. Some journalists encourage such participation: many publications regularly look to their readers for new stories. However, not all journalists view citizen input as a positive addition to their work. This divide is why the journalist's own encouragement — or lack thereof — is only partially responsible for the conversation itself.

Journalists no longer serve as the public's dominant informant. "Audience participation in news... stands in contrast to decades of traditional journalism as a *lecture*" (Marchionni 2013: 131). During the peak of traditional journalism, the public relied on journalists to stay updated on current events. This gave the journalist the power to manipulate their readers based on their (or the publication's) own bias.

Today, due to the vast majority having easy access to the internet, readers have an infinite number of resources to form an individual opinion. This independence contributes to a wide distrust of journalists, and less of the public relies on the informant for a side to take.

While some journalists view reader independence negatively, many publications have embraced the change with open arms. A notable example is the *New York Times*. Public participation in news media has become so popular at the *Times* that the publication created a website for public conversation they call the Reader Center. The platform has shown incredible success, and from 2013-2018, the *Times* put out nearly 600 calls for reader stories. Their participation creates more of a connection for the reader and offers an empathetic take on journalism. Here, the journalist is the public's messenger instead of its "professor" and validates the individual perspective (Marchionni, 2013: 141).

One influential story from the Reader Center was published in 2018 with a message still relevant today. It shares the many stories of struggling educators across the United States who have been affected by the government's neglect of public education. Kathryn Vaughn was among them as an art teacher from Tennessee, finding it increasingly difficult to teach her class with scarce supplies. A teacher from New York read the published article and offered to send her stacks of extra supplies to Vaughn. Because the *Times* wrote about the experience, Vaughn was able to continue teaching and receive the donations she needed (Sedgwick, 2018). Without a platform like the Reader Center, the exchange wouldn't have been possible.

In addition to Vaughn's story, many others have been published by the *Times* that have started essential conversations, connecting readers to each other in a unique way. Examples include the Affordable Care Act, living conditions in Saudi Arabia, and the commonality of racial profiling (Van Syckle, 2018: A2).

While a number of publications offer their own platform for reader interaction, many gather responses through existing social media accounts. 70% of verified businesses have acquired customers through Facebook, and the site offers post promotion and high reach at a low cost. Twitter is another platform that publications frequent, since it's arguably the most interactive form of social media. Media corporations like Variety and Vogue often reach out to Twitter and Instagram users for questions to ask public figures in an interview as a way to connect the public to both the figure and the publication itself.

Despite this example, though, it's rare for entertainment journalists to encourage open public participation. Movie reviews, celebrity gossip and critique all offer little room for differing opinions — a prime example is the Depp/Heard trial earlier this year. Journalists have the ability to put humanity's worst moments on display, and quite often, entertainment journalists are the first to volunteer. Many published obscenely misogynistic articles in June that painted Depp as a heroic inspiration and Heard as an evil, calculated monster. The internet took a clear side, and the few in

opposition were ridiculed (Richards 2022). Journalism thrives when a public figure is despised by society, and when this is the case, the only participation that the journalist will encourage is from those furthering the narrative.

Similar to celebrity gossip, journalist encouragement depends heavily on political bias as well. In the United States, FOX News is the go-to source of media among the Conservative population. The channel often encourages public commentary when discussing Democratic officials. The same can be said for CNN when discussing Republicans. The publication will encourage the response of those in agreement, but shun those in opposition.

Public participation has proved to be a great aid regarding investigative and crime journalism. Many cases ranging from low-grade robbery to mass murder have been successfully closed due to coverage in the media. Widespread conversation is not only encouraged but *vital* for investigative journalists. Reader involvement often snowballs, with one story encouraging dozens more, and the exponential growth is particularly miraculous in cases of widespread assault.

In 2001, Spotlight — *The Boston Globe*'s investigative journalism team of 4 — picked up a case regarding a local Catholic priest who had a history of sexually abusing more than a dozen young boys. No other team had touched the story, since the Catholic Church had great influence over the city of Boston. The team quietly began following up with the few sources they had, and were astonished to find that they had proof of the Church knowingly protecting almost 90 local priests who were abusing children.

In January of 2002, the *Globe* published 'Church allowed abuse by priest for years' (Rezendes, 2002) and expected the worst. As predicted, the article shocked the public and angered Church officials. One thing the journalists did not expect was the immediate response from other victims, hundreds of them, sharing their own stories that many had kept hidden well through adulthood. Through reader participation, disparagement towards the Church spread rapidly, even reaching the Vatican.

As previously stated, the modern public will usually participate in the conversation without an invitation from the journalist. Readership guarantees much more than an audience. Of course, an active invitation will garner more response — but it's not a prerequisite to the conversation itself. The divisiveness of journalist encouragement is what makes generalising a motive impossible. In summary, factors like personal and publication bias, environment, subject and marketing strategies affect the involvement of the public. However, as discussed, accurate predictions can be made based on these variables. Entertainment and lifestyle journalism tends to follow a more traditional style of public interaction, whilst articles written on the human experience are more open-ended and often rely on reader responses. Topics with heavy bias, such as politics, will encourage those in agreement to add to the conversation; a space where opposing views are often unwelcome. There are many different journalistic approaches in communicating with the public, which is why generalising the diverse industry is impossible.