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Title: Professional identity and work routines as sources of resistance to participatory innovation

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between participation and innovation through a Slovak case study of a media start-up company which staked its reputation on a model of participatory journalism. By describing the difficulties encountered in implementing the model, drawing on ethnographic observation and interview data, it points towards two important sources of resistance to participatory innovation: one operates at the level of professional identity, counterposing professional and organisational logics of action; a second operates at the level of work routines and their mediating technological artefacts. The findings are important because, in examining the case of a new organisation, they suggest that resistance to change is likely even when it cannot be attributed to the inertia of a given 'organisational culture'.

In relation to professional identity, Rothmann & Koch (2014) argue that digital innovation in newspaper publishing has been more path dependent than in other creative industries. One of the causes may be that the very ethos of journalism is founded on maintaining a watertight barrier between publishing (commercial) and editorial (professional) logics: it is thus difficult for an innovation that originates in one organisational domain to 'flow' across to the other. Professional identity hence becomes a source of resistance to innovation if the latter is perceived as a heteronomous force that impinges on the competence of professionals and the autonomy of professional judgement.

A second explanation emerges from the study of practice at the level of work routines. Routines themselves are not necessarily sources of resistance to change, and are in fact mediators of constant, mostly incremental, change (Feldman 2000). The performance of routines is itself mediated by a variety of technological artefacts and scripts that constrain how the artefacts are used without excluding interpretative variation in the context of specific performative situations. The paper develops this line of analysis by describing the configuration of a routine and associated web interface for managing comments and enabling-persuading journalists to participate in online discussion. This attempted innovation met with muted success even though the organisation was explicitly committed to participatory journalism. In practice, nevertheless, devolving control of the commenting routine to journalists (in order to engage them in participation) had the paradoxical effect of stifling participation since it gave them control over decisions about whether to switch on or off discussion and how much public criticism to tolerate before intervening. Although practice varied from one individual to another, it was apparent that both disabling and deferring from participation often became direct expressions of journalistic autonomy. We can interpret journalists' reconfiguration of the commenting routine as an attempt to delegate one of the new forms of 'dirty work' of the profession to other devices and actors, according to a logic of occupational mobility (Hughes 1958: 52), and a rejection of the alternative to embrace online discussion as a dispositif for continuous learning and creativity which could boost their status as independent cultural producers vis-a-vis their employers (Borzeix et al 2015: 13).

In focusing on sociotechnical devices and the micro-processes whereby participants make sense of their own engagement, we see how an organisational mission to innovate was reinterpreted by actors who had to reconcile it with both professional standards and norms and the pragmatic demands of situated action.

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