

# Practice Theory for Journalism Studies

## Operationalizing the Concept of Practice for the Study of Participation

### ABSTRACT

This article offers a theoretical-methodological contribution to the discussion on the relationship between practice theory and journalism. The article argues that the domain of practice theory—combining elements from cultural and social theories—offers the opportunity to both move away from industrial or professional frameworks of studying journalism and to examine how journalism is reproduced in practices of various agents involved in its enactment. Firstly, the article presents a model in which the concept of practice is deconstructed into three elements (activity, materiality and reflexivity), which can be used as the basis for empirical analysis. Secondly, it provides methodological insight and proposes a way in which citizen participation, as an emerging practice of journalism, can be scrutinized by operationalizing practice theory. This theoretical-methodological avenue enables us to see the multiple orientations and meanings that participation has in journalism. Moreover, studying journalism through the concepts provided by practice theory, can eventually help us understand how journalism maintains itself and is capable of renewal through (and despite) increasing participation.

**KEYWORDS:** activity, materiality, methods, participation, participatory journalism, practice, practice theory, reflexivity

### Introduction

While studying the everyday work in and around small, participatory newsrooms and teams in Helsinki, Stockholm, Paris and Brussels, I increasingly understood that if us researchers look at journalism merely as a profession, we lose sight of many of its important aspects. If we want to fully understand current journalism and its entire breadth, we need to adopt ways to grasp the object of our research in inclusive and non-restrictive means.

Notably, scholars have recently offered an array of inclusive conceptualizations of journalism such as “network journalism” (Heinrich 2012) and “ambient journalism” (Hermida 2010). They have also underlined the need to study the “news ecosystem” (Anderson 2010) or “news landscape” (Peters and Broersma 2013) to enable understanding of how journalism works in the current social and cultural context, in which legacy media is not the only agent shaping the news. Deuze (2008) argues that journalism has become “liquid”: it cannot stay in shape or stay on course for long. In this liquidity of journalism, we see a mixture of top-down, hierarchical and extremely closed-off types of corporate media existing next to peer-driven forms of collaborative ownership, regarding the manufacture of news (Deuze 2008, 860).

In this process, journalism has also become increasingly “participatory” (Singer et al. 2011). Anderson, Bell, and Shirky (2012, 117) summarize:

The production of news has moved from being a set of jobs to a set of activities; there will always be a core of full-time practitioners, but there will be an increasing amount of participation by people working part time, often as volunteers, and distributed by people who will concentrate less on questions of what is news and what isn't than on questions like, "Will my friends or followers like this"?

This situation proposes a challenge for the study of journalism. We need to find ways to understand and theorize journalism that are not only industrial or professional but also participatory. This means that we must keep the view open to all types of actors who are part of making journalism to discern what participation, in the context of journalism, actually entails or can entail.

In journalism studies, participation has, for quite some time, been studied mainly from the viewpoint of the profession (Borger et al. 2013, 129). However, studies that draw from professionalism as the main theoretical frame end up positioning—willingly or unwillingly—the emerging participatory trends in media technologies and user cultures *against* the sense of control that surfaces from the professional community when it experiments with or adapts to citizen participation (Lewis 2012). Furthermore, there often appears to be a conflict between ideals and practice regarding citizen participation (Ahva 2010). Hence, if we wish to understand the role that participation currently plays in journalism and avoid replicating this kind of oppositional positioning between professionals and amateurs, there is a need for a more open-ended theorization of journalism. This kind of open-endedness might also help us considering participatory practices in a spectrum: some forms of participation are more mainstream and controlled, some more radical and unpredictable.

An emerging example of open-endedness is a move to study journalism and its use through the notion of *practice* (e.g. O'Donnell 2009; Schneider 2013; Raetzsch 2015; Domingo, Masip and Costera Meijer 2015). In this line of thought, journalism is seen as a set of practices. The notion of practice has been part of the conceptual repertoire of journalism studies for quite some time (e.g. Zelizer 2004), but it has not gained a central position in the analysis and has therefore remained relatively under-theorized until recently (Cottle 2003, 17: 4). A new spark for lifting practice to the forefront in journalism studies seems to have originated from at least two inputs: Latour's (2005) theorization around actor-networks (see, e.g. Primo and Zago 2015) and Couldry's (2004) suggestion to theorize media as practice (see e.g. Raetzsch 2015). These theorizations are examples of how the entire domain of "practice theory" (Schatzki 2001a; Stern 2003) has recently influenced journalism studies.

In this article, I wish to join the discussion from a theoretical-methodological angle. I will here develop the argument for the usability of practice theory to the study of journalism in general and participation in particular. The article draws from—but does not aim to fully analyse—a project in which I examined the practice of participation at three different journalistic organizations: *Voima* in Finland, *Södra Sidan* in Sweden and *Cafébabel* in France and Belgium. By referring to these cases, I will join the discussion on participation at the "heavier" end of the spectrum, even if the proposed ideas may also be useful for the analysis of more mainstream forms of participation.

To date, the discussion on practice theory in journalism studies has not delved deeply into methodologies. Hence, this article aims to fill that gap by providing a suggestion as to how to operationalize practice theory into a research design. In the suggested operationalization, participation is analysed through the notion of practice as deconstructed into the elements of activity, materiality and reflexivity. The case of participation is offered here as an example of how practice theory can help analyse this particular—and often problematic—aspect of journalism.

However, the methodological discussion can provide insight for studying various other practices within journalism as well.

### The domain of practice theory

The idea of studying society or culture as a practice has long guided research, especially in sociology (e.g. Giddens 1984) and anthropology (e.g. Ortner 1984). Ortner outlined the emergence of “practice” as the key symbol of theoretical orientation in anthropology in the 1980s and saw it as a promising avenue. Drawing on Giddens, she summarized that practice theory “seeks to explain the genesis, reproduction, and change of form and meaning of a given social/cultural whole” (Ortner 1984: 149) through focusing on questions of how practices shape what she called “the system” – and how the system shapes the practices.

In recent years, practice theory has taken on increased importance that has spread beyond sociology and anthropology. It has been applied to various fields of study such as everyday life (Shove et al. 2012), management (Tengblad 2012) and international relations (Bueger and Gadinger 2014). Bueger and Gadinger (ibid.) noted that, in this framework, “practice” has been lifted up as the primary organizing concept, whereas it used to be mostly a supporting one (see also Rouse 2006, 501). The focus on practice helps avoid the overemphasis of the role of institutions or norms, texts or representations, beliefs or individual mental processes as the primary explainers of the social and cultural (Reckwitz 2002, 246–249; Rouse 2006, 504; Barnes 2001, 25).

At the same time, the interdisciplinary landscape of practice theory has become even more complex. Currently, practice theory draws at least partially from philosophy, gender theory, cultural theory and science and technology studies. Due to this wide pool of inspiration and influence, practice theory cannot be regarded as a unified theory in a conventional sense, such that it would provide generalized explanations to social phenomena (Schatzki 2001a, 12–13). It can rather be defined as a “praxeological family of theories” (Reckwitz 2022, 244) or as a “trading zone”, where scholars exchange ideas on how to theorize practice to help organize empirical research and thus our understanding of the world in which we live (Bueger and Gadinger 2014, 5).

Notably, within this trading zone, there are sharp differences. These include the very definition of the concept of practice as well as the role of practice in constructing society. For instance, in the 1980s, Giddens (1984) underlined that practices play an important part in how societies are *structured* and held together (also Ortner 1984). However, newer theorizations, such as Latour’s (2005; Latour et al. 2012), propose that practices do *not* amount to a fixed structure on a macro level and hence focus on *associations*. For me, it is these differences that make practice theory an inspiring resource to think with, even if I have—as here—chosen to think or trade ideas with theorists who maintain the idea of *how the world becomes ordered and meaningful through shared and regular social activities* (Giddens 1984; Swidler 2001) instead of, say, adopting the practice conception of the actor-network-theory as such (Latour 2005).

In all situations, the domain of practice theory challenges each researcher to think through the very basic concepts that she decides to work with. This invited me to return to the concept of practice and break it down into separate elements.

### The definition and elements of practice

Here, I propose the following definition of practice, based on Reckwitz (2002, 250), Schatzki (2001a, 11; 2001b, 56-61) and Barnes (2001, 27): practices are socially recognized,

routinized and embodied enactments, in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, things are described and the world is understood.

If we start unpacking this definition, we first see that practices are *socially recognized*. Practice is thus a form of action that is possible to perform and identifiable to more than separate individuals. Moreover, as socially recognized enactments, practices can be performed well or badly, which is a feature that distinguishes them from habit (Barnes 2001, 27, 34). This entails that practices have the ability to be evaluated by actors as well as others. Secondly, practices are *routinized*, which means that a practice is always a question of regularity (Stern 2003, 186; Couldry 2012, 33). Practices are repeatable, and this is how they become collective and shared. Thirdly, practices, in this definition, are also seen as *embodied*. This refers to the idea that practices are enacted by humans. However they are also closely linked with nonhuman elements (Schatzki 2001b, 63).

In addition to being a recognized, regular and embodied manifestation, we can see from the definition above that a practice as an enactment is a combination of (a) activity (*moving, handling*), (b) materiality (*things, objects*) and (c) discursive reflexivity (*describing, understanding*). In short, practice can be understood as a nexus of doings, objects and sayings (cf. Barnes 2001; Couldry 2004).

Figure 1 presents my summary of these elements. The triangular shape aims to illuminate that each practice consists of the three elements together. This conceptualization is new in that it gives equal weight to all of the aspects, whereas the material and discursive aspects are sometimes discussed separately from each other in practice theories. However, Shove et al. have recently proposed a model that similarly underlines the links between the basic elements of practice, and a comparable line of thought is applied in this article (cf. Shove et al. 2012).

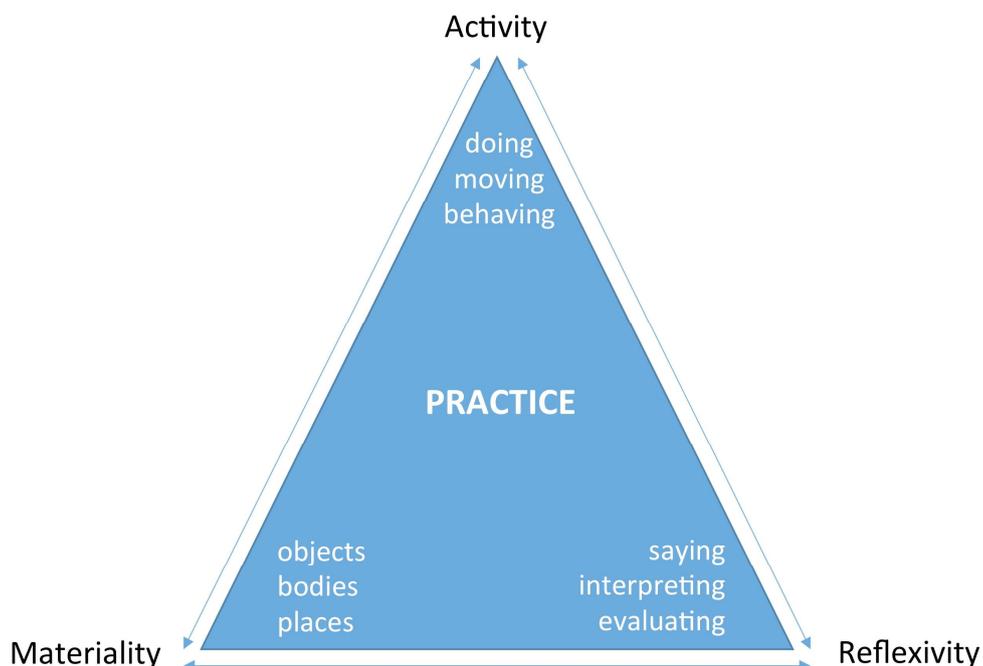


Figure 1: The elements of "practice".

Firstly, *activity* refers to the ways in which people behave, do things or move about. Typically, a practice consists of a *set* of actions that are related to each other (Schatzki 2001b, 56; Reckwitz 2002, 251). In everyday use, the term practice is often regarded as this kind of activity, but there is more to practice than doing. Therefore, for an activity (or bundle of activities) to become a practice, it needs to be connected to the other ends of the triangle: reflexivity and materiality.

*Materiality* refers to the objects, tools, technologies or places that are part of practices—an aspect that has become more acknowledged in the Latourian tradition (Latour 2005) as well as in current theorizations of everyday life (Shove et al. 2012, 9). In my proposed conceptualization, however, the element of materiality is additionally connected to the embodied nature of practice (Bourdieu 1977, 87): the materiality of the human body as the main site of doings and sayings.

Lastly, the element of *reflexivity* underlines self-referential discursivity that is embedded in the notion of practice: saying, describing, naming and evaluating enactments. Some definitions of practice emphasize the taken-for-granted, even automated, nature of practice (for an outline, see Swidler 2001, 83–84); however, I regard it important to include reflexivity to the definition to avoid the idea that people would merely “act out” practices. In performing practices, people also give symbolic meanings to their acts and the objects they use (Shove et al. 2012, 14)—they interpret and evaluate. Furthermore, because interpretative reflexivity is never fixed, I see it as one important locus of change in practices and hence also in structures.

The three elements of activity, materiality and reflexivity are related to each other in different ways, such as spatially, causally, intentionally or prefiguratively (i.e. enabling and constraining each other), when they constitute a practice (Schatzki 2001b, 51; cf. Shove et al. 2012, Chapter 2). In addition, the elements can be related to each other temporally (Bourdieu 1977, 8). For instance, de Certeau (1984, 39) has argued that the non-institutionalized practices enacted by the less powerful in society especially make “a clever utilization of time”; therefore, temporal relations must be especially considered when identifying marginal practices.

### **Practices create permanence via anchoring and change via variation**

The richness of practice theory lies in the opportunity to deconstruct observed units of analysis into the discussed three elements. Furthermore, practice theory provides double exposure to continuity and change (Shove et al. 2012, 15). Giddens (1984) famously discussed this dual nature of structure as the medium as well as the outcome of practices.

In regard to the question of continuity, Swidler (2001) has argued that the focus on practice assists us with the initial question of what it is that directs, guides or explains our actions and hence *gives form and meaning* to our culture. She has suggested that this can be studied through the idea of “anchoring” (see also Couldry 2004). Her main argument is that certain practices govern other practices in that they are more central, controlling or determinative in given situations (Swidler 2001, 90). Such anchoring practices often lie behind others and can be taken-for-granted to the point of becoming nearly invisible (ibid., 89). These anchoring practices then result in the formation of dominant schemas, which govern other practices and hence reproduce structure. Therefore, if an analyst is able to identify anchoring practices, she might also be able to expose elements that are giving form and stability to the studied cultural domain.

To develop Swidler’s ideas further, I propose that anchoring practices can be identified by first observing those practices that are easily identifiable and subsequently deconstructing them into their primary elements of activity, materiality and reflexivity. When elements are found through deconstruction, it is then possible to reconstruct them into “new” practices by finding causal, spatial, temporal or prefigurative relations between the various elements. This is a way to

recognize the almost hidden, but governing, anchoring practices beneath the immediate ones. This route will also tie the analysis more tightly with the context of the practices in question.

In addition to continuity, practice theory may help an analyst grasp change within a cultural domain. Practice theorists recognize the co-existence of alternative and dominant practices within the same cultural milieu (Rouse 2006, 506; de Certeau 1984). Structure is not reproduced without tensions. Structural changes can naturally be brought about by publicly visible and actively generated breaches in the dominant practice (Swidler 2001, 96), but change is also possible through *small variations* (Ortner 1984, 155). Structures change and adapt through minute deviations in practice, such as variations to a theme in a piece of music, that eventually evolve into something different without distorting the original theme altogether (cf. Raetzsch 2015, 71).

Here, the element of reflexivity becomes especially important. Ortner (1984, 155) summarizes that radical change need not always be equated with the coming to power of groups with alternate visions of the world; more important might be noticing the changes of meaning in existing relations (see also Shove et al. 2012, Chapter 3). The analyst interested in studying the slow changes that practices bring forth may thus benefit from paying special attention to the self-referential reflexive aspect in practices—the “full range of thought and feeling” (Ortner 1984, 156). By making a note of critical, affective or evaluative moments of meaning-making around objects and activities (personal or collective), it may become possible to understand why and how certain practices are under a change in a given context. However, I suggest that, in addition to paying attention to *thickenings in the reflexive aspects of practice*, it is equally important to consider them in relation to *material or active aspects*, especially when they *do not find easy matches* with the other elements. These mismatches point to variation and hence to potential moments of change. Thickenings in any element are bound to create pressure for other elements and eventually also in the emergence of a new practice.

Next, I will continue to argue how this framework can help us study journalism, especially its emerging practice of participation. This first requires us to conceptualize journalism through the notion of practice.

### **Journalism as enacted public communication of fact-based representations**

Couldry (2004; 2012) has stated that the epicentre of media studies should no longer lie in the study of media texts, production or consumption but rather in practice. He has suggested that the media could be studied as the open set of practices relating to or oriented around it. This idea can readily be reoriented to guide exploration of journalism (O'Donnell 2009, 508) as a more specified domain within media studies. Couldry's (2004, 121) suggestion was to focus on two aspects of practice in the media: 1) What types of things do people *do* in relation to media? 2) What types of things do people *say* in relation to media? I would add a third organizing question based on the conceptualization above: 3) What types of material *objects* are people's media-related practices organized around? As a trio, these questions can guide media and journalism studies in an open-ended manner.

Practice theory seems fitting for journalism studies, because journalism is certainly characterized by routine enactments. In its simplest form, journalism consists of regular core practices of selection, production and distribution of information to a public not previously known to the author or to each other (cf. Raetzsch 2011, 151). However, as noted, these core practices are currently happening in more diverse settings than before, and they are enacted by increasingly varying actors, largely due to digitalization of communication technologies and the emergence of new user cultures.

Therefore, following Raetzsch (2011; 2015) and Hemánus (1990, 14), I suggest to conceptualize journalism as a structure of public communication that is enacted through practices by various actors—journalists and citizens alike—and assembled into fact-based, verified and timely representations in sites that exceed the newsroom. These representations are distributed via different platforms in a recurring manner to audiences (Raetzsch 2011, 151).

This definition is arguably very open and remains on an abstract level (Hemánus 1990, 14). However, I see it as necessary to widen the scope of our gaze toward all people, things and meanings that might be crucial in shaping journalism today. In addition—even if factuality, timelines and verification are included in the definition to provide demarcation—the definition lacks the typical value-based approaches of defining journalism through the norms of objectivity and autonomy (cf. Deuze 2005). The possibility here is to examine *whether* these or other norms appear if the study of journalism starts from practices.

### Participation as an emerging core practice of journalism

The practice-based and open definition of journalism as a structure of public communication brings us to the theme of participation. Borger et al. (2013) have identified how the field of journalism studies has constructed “participatory journalism” as an object of study, which peaked in 2008–2010. They propose that the most common understanding of participatory journalism is that digital technologies enable the audience to become involved in making and disseminating news (ibid., 117). However, their analysis also reveals how citizens in the studies have become subordinate to journalists and what journalists think they can do with audience participation (ibid., 130).

A common approach for understanding participatory journalism has thus been to assess how and to what degree the existing practices—identified, for example, by Domingo et al. (2008) as observation, selection, processing, distribution and interpretation—of *professional journalism are being re-shaped by non-professional participation*. This strategy seems feasible if participation is studied in the context of mainstream journalism only. For example, Peters and Witschge (2015, 20–24) point out that many participatory possibilities that journalistic outlets offer for citizens are rather limited in scope, individualized in nature and based on seeking economic benefit. Therefore, a close and critical look at these possibilities is in place.

Another approach, as suggested in this article, is to regard *participation itself as a practice* that is becoming ever more important in how the entire domain of journalism is shaped. In addition to professionals who invite citizens to participate in the journalistic process in the contexts of specific projects, such as in the civic/public journalism approach (Ahva 2010) or through online platforms designed and owned by media organizations (Singer et al. 2011), citizens may take part in the journalistic process by acting as distributors and commentators of news stories on social media, thus enacting journalism for their part (Bruns & Highfield 2012).

Furthermore, there are journalistic outlets built almost entirely around citizen participation. In those cases, participation is such an essential part of their operations that the outlets would be nearly unable to function without the practice. This was the situation with the journalistic organizations I studied. Publishing articles at *Voima*, *Södra Sidan* and *Cafébabel* would not be possible without participating citizens: students, freelancers, local residents or volunteer teams. Therefore, the suggested second approach—lifting participation alongside other core practices of journalism—seems especially feasible if participation is studied in the current liquid (Deuze 2007) and post-industrial (Anderson et al. 2012) context of journalism, where independent and collaborative forms of journalism co-exist with professional forms.

However, even in this context, participation should not be taken as a naturally beneficial aspect of journalism but rather as a practice that needs critical examination (Carpentier and Dahlgren 2011, 8). Carpentier (2011, 54) argues that, in some uses, the notion of participation has become domesticated away from its radical roots, where the concept was focused on the dimensions of power and decision-making rather than citizens' presence in the media. Hence in these "mild" forms of inquiry, it counts as participation if citizens have presence and recognition in the media (cf. Turner 2010, 2–3), but in the "strict", radical-critical tradition, participation is considered to exist if the actors involved in decision-making are positioned towards each other through egalitarian power relationships (Carpentier 2011, 354). In this vein, by taking part in decision-making (co-deciding) and other activities in the journalistic context, people should be able to make an impact on public issues.

I agree with Carpentier that mere presence is not enough for participation, but I suggest we return to the idea of a spectrum. I propose to use journalistic participation as a notion that entails various degrees and orientations of co-deciding. It remains the task of researchers to evaluate the orientations that participation as a practice is taking in current journalism. In doing so, the researcher can draw from Carpentier's (2011, 66–70) useful analytical distinction between two aspects of participation: *participation in the media* (the production of content or taking part in decision-making within media organizations) and *participation through the media* (engaging in public debate or taking part in decision-making related to public matters, politics or societal reforms).

To apply this distinction to journalism, we can outline that *participation in journalism* refers to moments where citizens are regarded as "producers" (Bruns & Highfield 2012), who are invited to participate in the production of journalism such as providers of user-generated content. Here, participation is oriented to and ends in the formation of a journalistic artefact: a photo, commented news story, an online questionnaire, for example. However, when we refer to *participation through journalism*, the idea of participation does not end in the journalistic artefact, but orients towards the public life. Here, citizens are regarded as social and political agents who may become part of society and its public sphere through the opportunities that journalism offers for public debate and public self-representation, and eventually co-deciding (Carpentier 2011, 67).

These two aspects of participation are intertwined in today's media landscape. For analytical purposes, it is valid to separate them to see how the two aspects are apparent in journalism and whether or not they feed each other. However, even more orientations of participation may exist. Here practice theory can help us identify several ways of "doing" participation and their orientations (cf. Shove et al. 2012, 37, on "doing" driving). Practitioners may well understand and enact participation in ways that are *not* themselves about journalistic artefacts or democratic public debate at all (cf. Couldry 2004, 125; Spitulnik 2010, 111; Turner 2010). Hence, in journalism studies, it is necessary to address a question of what different actors do, say and use when they participate – and thereafter: *what do they become part of?* Is participation oriented to public life, content production or something else, and in what ways?

### **Studying participation in the context of semi-institutional journalism**

Practice theory provides a useful counterweight in media research to regard established centres of media as "all there is" (Couldry 2004, 125). This implies that, for exploring practices of participation in journalism, we need to turn our attention to a broad range of practitioners. For example, in the "semi-institutional" environment of journalism, we can find small start-up initiatives or alternative journalism efforts that have evolved into viable actors but are not yet considered as

part of established mainstream journalism. Currently, a great deal of unexplored participatory journalistic work is taking place in this context.

In the following methodological discussion, I will draw from my own experiences of studying participation in three different types of semi-institutional journalism outlets. First, is a transnational NGO-based online magazine: the pan-European and multilingual *Cafébabel*, based in France (established 2001). *Cafébabel* is run by a small team of salaried journalists in Paris and assisted by a vast network of non-paid volunteers all over Europe. The second initiative is a local weekly print newspaper called *Södra Sidan*, published in the southern suburbs of Stockholm, Sweden (est. 2006). Here, participation manifests in the newsroom's orientation to the local community in a manner inspired by the ideals of public journalism (Rosen 1999). The third initiative is an alternative print and online magazine *Voima* in Helsinki, Finland (est. 1999). *Voima* provides a professionally edited outlet for a large network of authors, which mainly includes left-green activists, freelance journalists and academics. While the contributors are paid, their monetary compensation is not competitive with regular journalistic freelancing rates.

The motivations and manifestations of participation in these initiatives vary from generating a youthful European public sphere to contributing to a fairer representation of a local neighbourhood and its ethnic minorities to offering an alternative arena for discussing issues that are side-lined in the mainstream media. Furthermore, they all operate in different national contexts. Nevertheless, participation as practice unites these publications because they could not function properly without some degree of participation. Hence, participation in these initiatives appears as a core practice of journalism.

My project can be described as a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995). This refers to the fact that any given social phenomenon may be illuminated by approaching multiple different sites or locations in which the phenomenon appears (Saukko 2003, 176–197). The idea of a multi-sited research is not to compare different cases but rather to consider different aspects of the same phenomenon (ibid.).

I will next discuss the ways in which I operationalized practice theory in this project. I wanted to study participation in semi-institutional journalism by openly exploring what do practitioners do and say, and what objects do they use when participating. The operationalization process was far from straightforward, but it nevertheless highlighted the ways in which practice theory can fruitfully challenge journalism research.

#### *Research objects and data collection: Who, what and where to study?*

The first task was to operationalize the idea of open-endedness in terms of *who to study*. In my research project, this meant I could not differentiate between “journalists” and “citizens”. Instead, I aimed at focusing on both groups, especially on all the actors in between these positions. By identifying the actors (Figure 2), I was able to roughly map the “communities of practice” that were organized around each publication. People in communities of practice do not necessarily work together on an ongoing basis; yet, they find value and connection in their interactions (Wenger et al. 2002, 4).

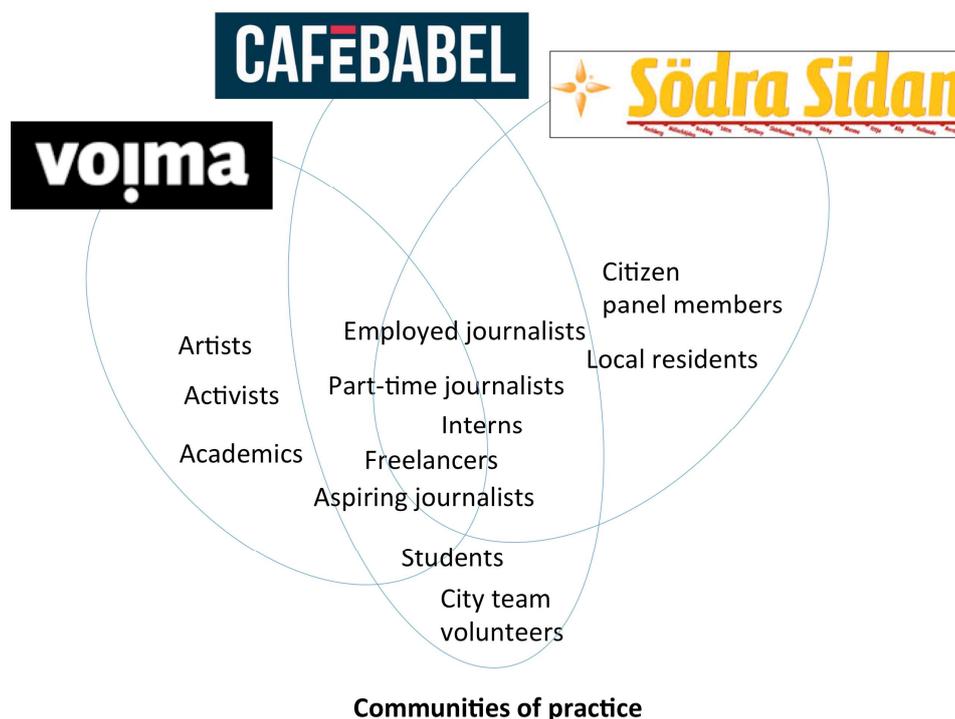


Figure 2: The communities of practice in Voima, Cafébabel and Södra Sidan.

Wenger et al. (ibid., 4) define communities of practice as a “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis”. In these cases it was the passion for journalism itself, certain topics, world views or the well-being of a region that tied the communities of practice loosely together around the central newsrooms.

In my project, the main method for material collection from these dispersed communities was interview. This meant face-to-face meetings, phone and Skype talks as well as e-mail correspondence with 93 people altogether; I listened to how they identified themselves, described each other and told about their practices. I also observed and photographed the hubs of these practice communities, i.e. all the central newsrooms (3–7 days each). In the case of *Cafébabel*, I additionally observed three editorial meetings and the related online communication of a group of volunteers organized as a city team in Brussels, Belgium.

Secondly, I had to operationalize *what to study* in terms of deciding my focus within participation as practice. The idea of open-endedness is tricky; without focus, the analyst is simply lost in practice. However, the concept of communities of practice relieved me from the impossible burden of trying to make note of *all* the potentially relevant practices related to participation. Because communities of practice are defined as actors who interact on an ongoing basis, it gave me a clue to focus on interaction between the members of these communities. I therefore focused in my observations (Quandt 2008, 135) and interviews on the ways in which journalists communicated and were in contact with the contributors and vice versa—making contracts, providing guidance, giving feedback, suggesting stories—and how this interaction was described and evaluated by the actors.

The leading questions in my interview and observation guides were: What are the recurring material elements of participation in this community and its communication? What are the regular activities of participation? What are the issues that evoke frequent reflections?

Another challenge with trying to decide what to study was related to the need to balance human-orientation with materiality. Even if the version of practice theory discussed in this article is actor-oriented, we must remember that practices also entail non-humans or actants. Actants are defined by Lewis and Westlund (2015, 23)—who knowingly depart from Latour—as the “material objects that are notable for their association with human actors and the activities they undertake in conjunction with such objects”. In the study, I focused on actants related to communication and collaboration between newsrooms and participants such as newsroom architecture and facilities, the use of phones and computers. The difficulty here was to remember to make note of what appeared to be the mundane use of appliances such as making a phone call. Therefore I also photographed all the places I visited to facilitate good recall of the material aspects of the sites and to be able to interpret spatial relations of practices. At the analysis stage, the photos were visual material to “think with” (Latham and McCormack 2008).

I also had to choose *where to study* participation. This question challenges the long-lasting trend in journalism studies of making the newsroom the centre of attention (Anderson 2011). Whereas the newsrooms remained as the central hubs in which much of the communication and interaction took place, participation enacted by the members of these communities took place elsewhere, too. I tried to avoid too much emphasis on newsrooms referring to the idea of communities of practice. Therefore, in addition to newsroom observations and face-to-face interviews, I collected mobile “practice stories” (O’Reilly 2012, 154) from the networks. In my case, the activities of practitioners were significantly spread around (from Poland to California) and participation was enacted simultaneously in such a large number of settings that the task of being present everywhere was impossible (Czarniawska 2007). The remote members of the communities of practice were thus given the opportunity to provide their verbal or textual practice stories typically via Skype or e-mail. There are, of course, numerous other ways to grasp the dispersed practice of journalism such as focusing on controversies around which various actors come together (Domingo and Le Cam 2104), shadowing actions of individuals not bound to a set location or collecting simultaneous diaries (Czarniawska 2007).

The data collection on each research site followed roughly this order: 1) interviewing editorial teams, 2) collecting practice stories from the networks, 3) observing and 4) taking photographs of the newsrooms and surroundings. The biggest limitation of this order is that I could not use the photos in the interviews to promote reflexivity around material objects (Murdoch and Pink 2005). However, conducting interviews first provided me with the necessary contacts to approach the networks. Even if the order is by no means fixed, the benefit of conducting observations at a later stage lies in the fact that so much is left unsaid in everyday communication that the researcher profits from having preceding information.

This operationalization requires flexibility from the researcher. It is unlikely that a researcher remains a distant observer in this kind of research design: she has to be ready to step into a reciprocal position. For example, while observing the local team of *Cafébabel* in Brussels, I had to switch my own position from “nonparticipant” to “participant” observer (Miller 1996) for a while. I decided to write and submit a piece to their online publishing system in order to grasp the otherwise hidden aspect of technology in the participatory process. I did this like any regular volunteer in the team so that it was not necessary to have specific journalistic skills, rather active participant skills. All in all, it became a pattern to give something back to each community: in one

newsroom I took part in drafting a grant application, and in another I gave feedback on their most recent project.

Naturally, there were also limitations and risks to the data collection methodology. Two aspects can be highlighted. First is the limited ability to gain understanding of the technologically-aided and dispersed interaction and work. The described approach would therefore benefit from more methodical use of online ethnography. The second touches upon the question of *where*: despite attempts, the approach remained newsroom-focused. In the future it could therefore be enhanced by utilizing informant-produced image collection (Murdoch and Pink 2005, 157; Gillárová, Tejkalová, and Láb 2014) from the networks to better understand the material conditions of dispersed participation.

### *Steps of analysis: How to organize and analyse the material?*

I completed the data collection with approximately 340 sheets of transcribed interview text and written practice stories, 80 pages of field notes and 90 photographs. This or any pool of research material requires organization and analysis. Next, I will describe the three steps used to analyse this material (see Figure 3).

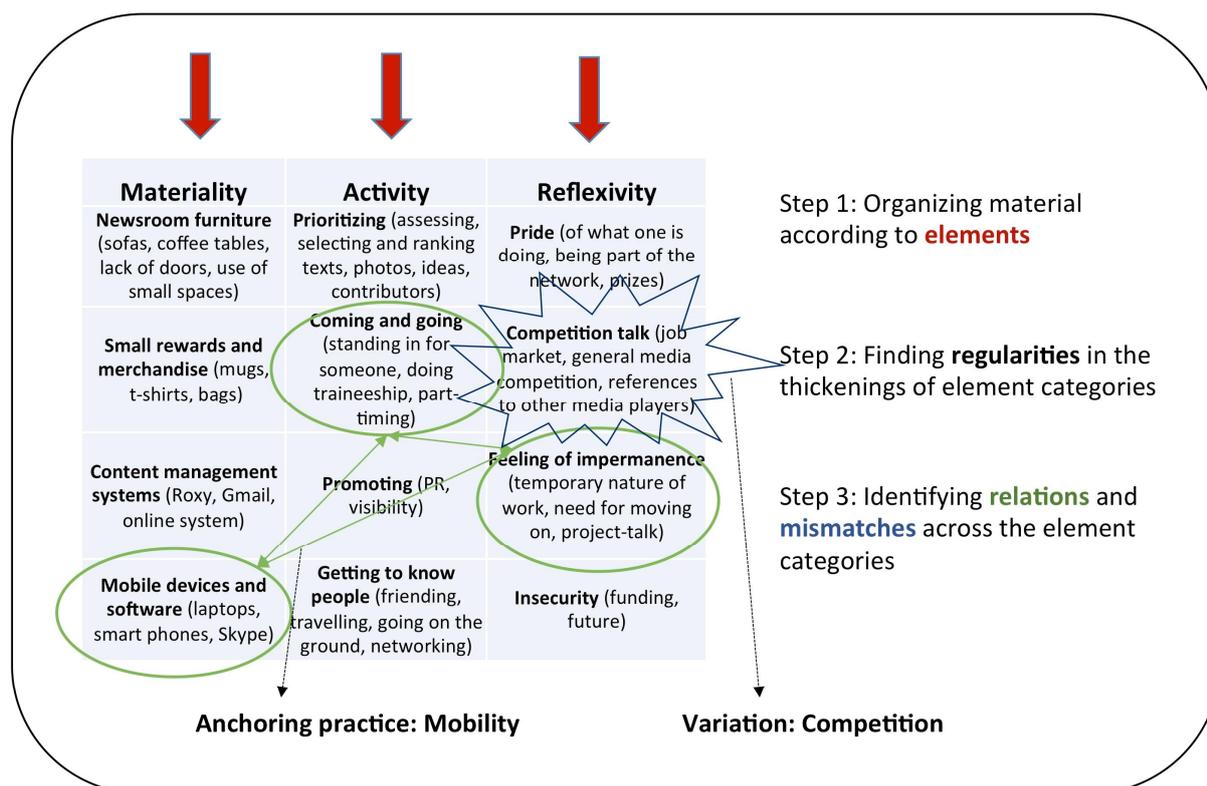


Figure 3: Steps of analysis.

*First step: Organizing the material according to the elements of practice.* First, I organized all the material into three categories. My aim was to get a sense of what the material could tell me about participation as a practice, when broken down into its basic elements. Under the (1) activity, I organized all such excerpts from the material that dealt with tasks, movements or positions. Secondly, under the (2) materiality, I organized references to things, bodies, and places—the

concrete surroundings. Finally, I coded all moments in the data that featured criticism, appraisal or affectivity as (3) reflexivity. In this vein, I organized field notes, transcribed interviews, e-mail interviews and photos into three different files that contained excerpts of raw data (indicated as columns in Figure 3).

This was a way of utilizing the classic anthropological move of “making things strange” (cf. Spitulnik 2010, 110) via deconstruction. The key was to regard the entire data set as the texture with which to work. At times, I found it difficult to work against my own tendency to separate the sets of interviews with salaried journalists from those of other participants. Practice theory clearly challenges journalism researchers like me to start from the practices and their enactment and only gradually to make conclusions about the types of actors that take part in enacting journalism.

*Second step: Finding patterns of regularity.* Secondly, I worked on the three element-based files to identify thickenings and patterns of regularity within these sets. Because practice is about constancy, it made sense to condense the material according to prominent features that appeared in the data regularly. This step followed a typical qualitative approach to grouping the material, according to the themes arising from the material itself. Here, I still kept each file or element category separate. For example, the activity category featured the themes of “getting to know people”, “coming and going”; materiality had “mobile devices”, “newsroom furniture”; and reflexivity included “pride”, “sense of impermanence” (see Figure 3 for more examples).

*The third step: Identifying relations and mismatches.* The third step was about identifying anchoring as well as variation. To find the underlying anchoring practices, I made a note of cross-references or indications of resonance (such as spatial, temporal or causal connections) between certain themes in the activity, materiality and reflexivity categories. For example, I noticed how spatial-temporality connected certain themes in each category, such as “mobile devices”, “coming and going” and “sense of impermanence”. I interpreted that these elements composed together an underlying practice that I named “mobility” (Figure 3). Hence mobility appeared as an anchoring practice that organized and enabled participation as well as controlled other more subtle practices. In other words, participation in these organizations would not have been possible without the mobility of people, devices and mentalities.

In terms of variation, I worked on themes that appeared thickly in only one or two element categories but did not comprise an identifiable practice due to mismatches between the categories. For example, in the category of reflexivity, the theme of “competition” was clearly identifiable, but it did not resonate with the categories under materiality or activity. In fact, a lack of real journalistic competitors was identified in *Cafébabel* and *Voima*. The discourse on competition therefore appeared as a way to underline the significance of one’s “own” organization in comparison to others and identify with the organization rather than competition being an overarching practice, which would have organized participation on a fundamental level. However, the prevalence of “competition talk” indicated that participation as a journalistic practice is currently being moulded in regard to how harsh the media market is considered by practitioners.

The risks in this type of analysis pertain especially to the difficulties in being open to numerous ways in which elements can compose a practice. It is challenging, for instance, to search for temporal and spatial connections instead of thematic bundles. More methodological work on the lines of Shove et al. (2012) should therefore be done to identify the typical patterns in which elements are linked (as well as broken down) to support future analyses. I also hope the steps described above can in their part assist scholars in journalism studies to design and execute research that is theoretically and methodologically practice-based.

## Conclusion

In this article, I discussed how we can deconstruct the concept of practice in order to find fresh theoretical and methodological rigor for journalism studies interested in understanding journalism as a structure of public communication, which is constantly being reproduced in practice. I also demonstrated how practice can be employed as a tripartite unit (activity, materiality and reflexivity) of empirical analysis to identify anchoring and variance within the texture of practices.

This theorization is suggested as an alternative to the tradition of professionalism that has been the most explicit theoretical framework for journalism studies since the start of the millennium (Steensen and Ahva 2015). In principle, the proposed theorization could be applicable to other fields of occupational practice that have been characterized by the notion of professionalism, such as teaching, translation or health care, but that are currently challenged by participatory trends and digitalization.

Another way to employ the ideas presented in this article is to use them to study other practices of journalism, not only participation. For instance, when we scrutinize emerging practices of journalism—be them about digital data, crowdfunding or entrepreneurship—it appears fruitful to start in an open-ended manner by first mapping the elements related to these practices and only then moving on to discussing the firmness or fragility of the practices and their significance for journalism.

In my view, this helps keep emerging practices from becoming pre-determining definers or empty buzzwords of journalism without the knowledge of what these practices entail. For example, by analysing “participation” or “entrepreneurship” as practices, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of that which “participatory journalism” or “entrepreneurial journalism” are made. We can locate the anchoring practices that order participation or entrepreneurship and simultaneously zoom into elements within the practices that are still on the move and could create change. All this can be done in mainstream as well as alternative journalistic contexts.

Regarding participation in the context of semi-institutional journalism, my early observations based on the presented operationalization point out that, even if the anchoring practices, such as mobility, give structure to participation as a journalistic practice, they are unlikely to form a clearly demarcated system of “participatory journalism” with specific democratic functions and stability. Instead, the anchoring practices indicate various ways of participating with multiple orientations.

Namely, it appeared in my initial findings that much of what was done around the journalistic organizations I studied, in terms of participation, extended far over the realm of journalism itself (*participation in journalism* anchored by mobility, for example). In addition, even if the orientation of having an impact on public issues (*participation through journalism*) was strong in all the studied cases, there was also a common theme in my material in which many activities, objects and reflections by members of practice communities extended to neighbouring cultural and societal domains of journalism such as art, politics or social work. This requires us to consider the aspect of *participation around journalism* where co-deciding is anchored by non-journalistic project work (debates, exhibitions, theatre, neighbourhood projects etc.).

In addition, some ways of participating were clearly oriented to the journalistic community in question and were anchored by practices of friending. This orientation could, tentatively, be named as *participation with journalism*. Furthermore, many ways of participating in these cases were rather self-serving and career-oriented, which requires us to discuss, whether *participation as*

*journalism* could be a useful notion to understand participation as a practice that is a likely path or an extension to professional journalism, anchored by learning.

Hence it appears that we can and need to go beyond the notions of participation *in* and *through* journalism to fully understand how participation as a practice is becoming a part of journalism. These early findings point out that with a thorough open-ended examination and analysis of participation as practice, we can say a lot more about the meanings, materials and actions behind various orientations of participating. This framework enables us to see what it is that people become part of when they participate in journalism and how journalism as a structure is being transformed or sustained in this practice. Furthermore, this approach might help us refine our conceptualization of participation and discuss its limits.

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