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Examining participatory journalism through practice theory

The case of multilingual and volunteer-based online magazine

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Interest in **semi-institutional** organizations that are already established, but cannot not be seen as institutional or mainstream media.

In this context, we can find organizations that have adopted **participation as a key practice** of journalism.

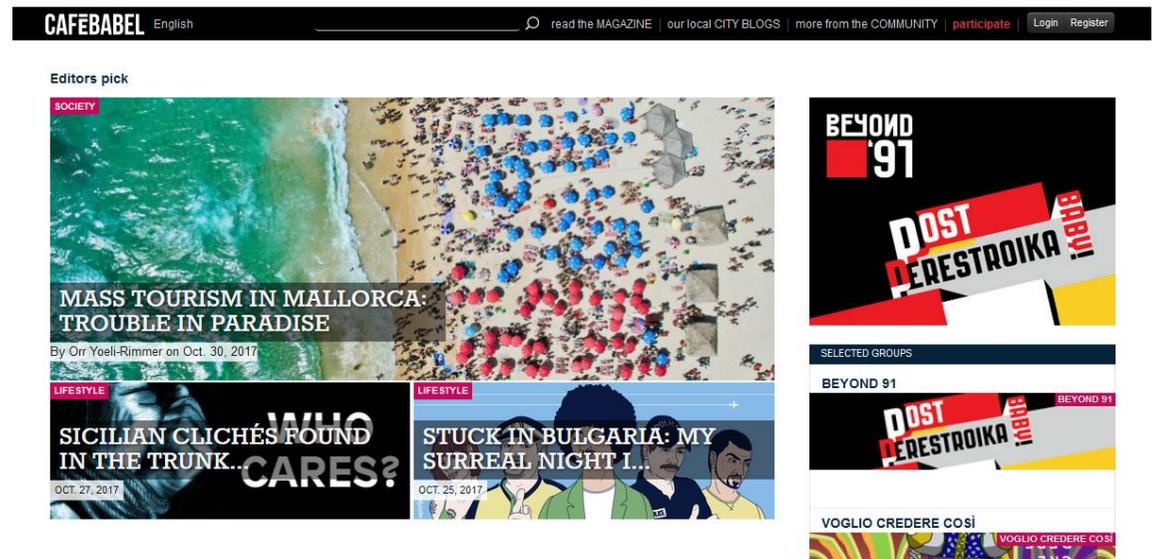
Participatory news organizations feature participation to such a degree that their journalistic operations would be nearly impossible without it.

In the context of journalism, participation means **co-deciding** over how, why and with what effect journalism is being done.

It always includes the idea of **sharing power** with non-professionals.

Participation has various **degrees** (maximalist or minimalist) (Peters & Witschge 2015).

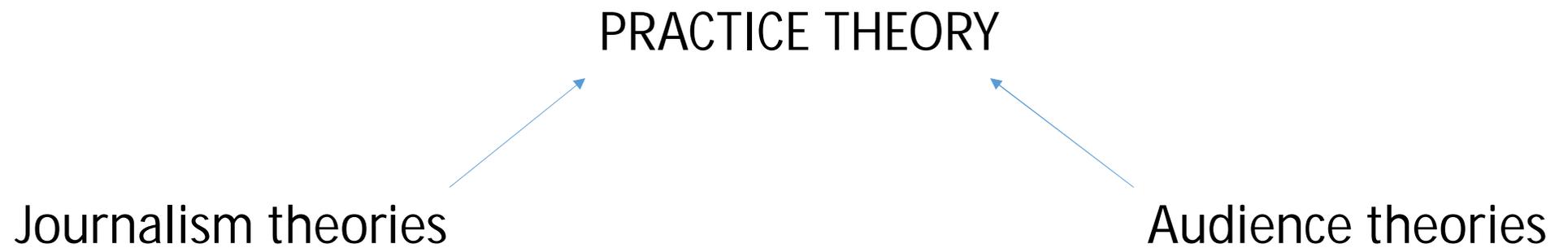
It also has various **orientations** (in or outwards of journalism) (Carpentier 2011; Ahva 2017a).



www.cafebabel.com

Online and multilingual magazine based on the idea of participatory journalism

- Started in 2001 by Erasmus students, now published by a non-profit association.
- Central office in Paris with 10-12 salaried journalists.
- Volunteers in about 20 city teams and hundreds of individual contributors from all over Europe. These participants play a central role in shaping what type of journalism is being produced and how.
- Covers European youthful lifestyle issues in six languages (English, French, Italian, Polish, Spanish, German).
- Funded by European Commission and private foundations, project-based.
- Possibility to publish in three layers: 1) community, 2) city blogs, 3) magazine.



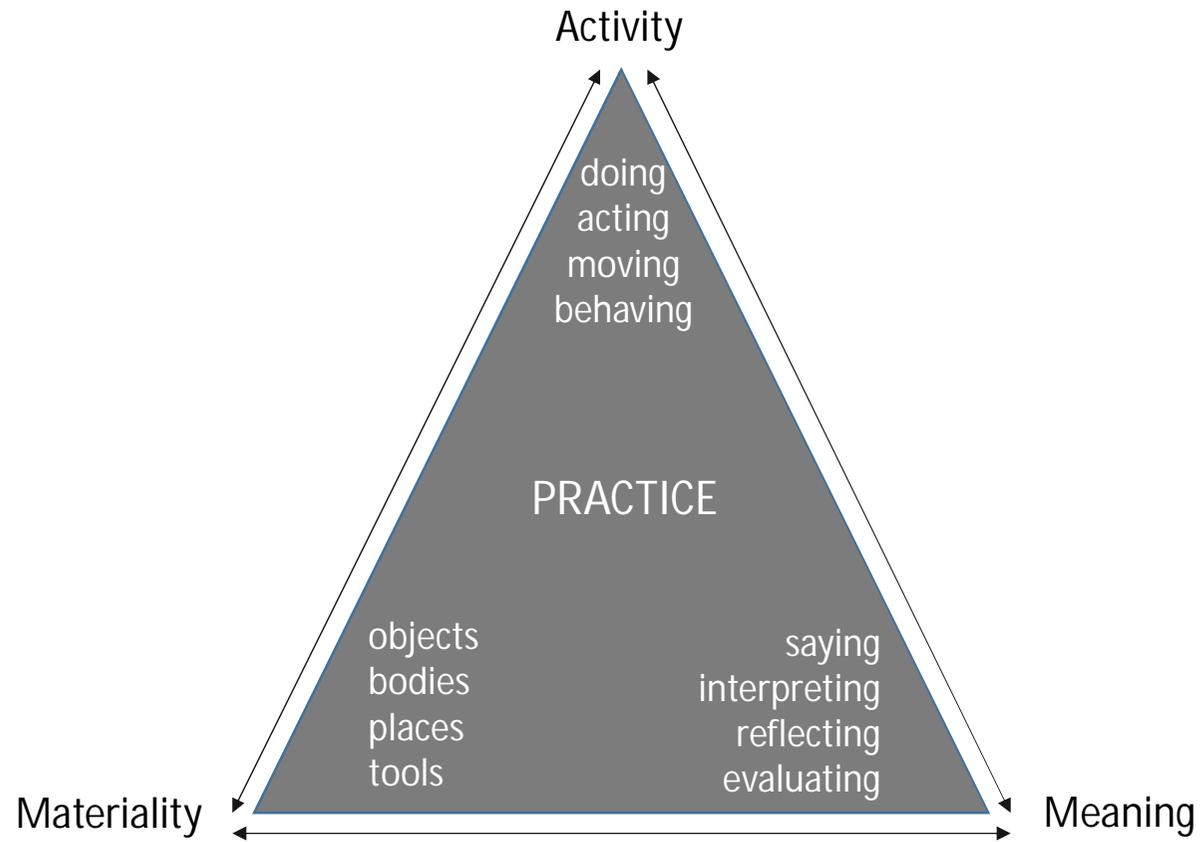
(Ahva 2017a)

Practice theory is not really a coherent stand-alone theory, but a collection of theories that touch upon how societies/cultures are constructed in practices .

It has been applied e.g. in sociology, anthropology, management, everyday life, environment studies, international relations and also in **media studies** (e.g. Couldry 2004, Bräuchler & Postill 2011).

Definition of practice, based on Reckwitz (2002), Schatzki (2001) and Barnes (2001):

practices are socially recognized, routinized and embodied enactments, in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, things are described and the world is understood (Ahva 2017b).



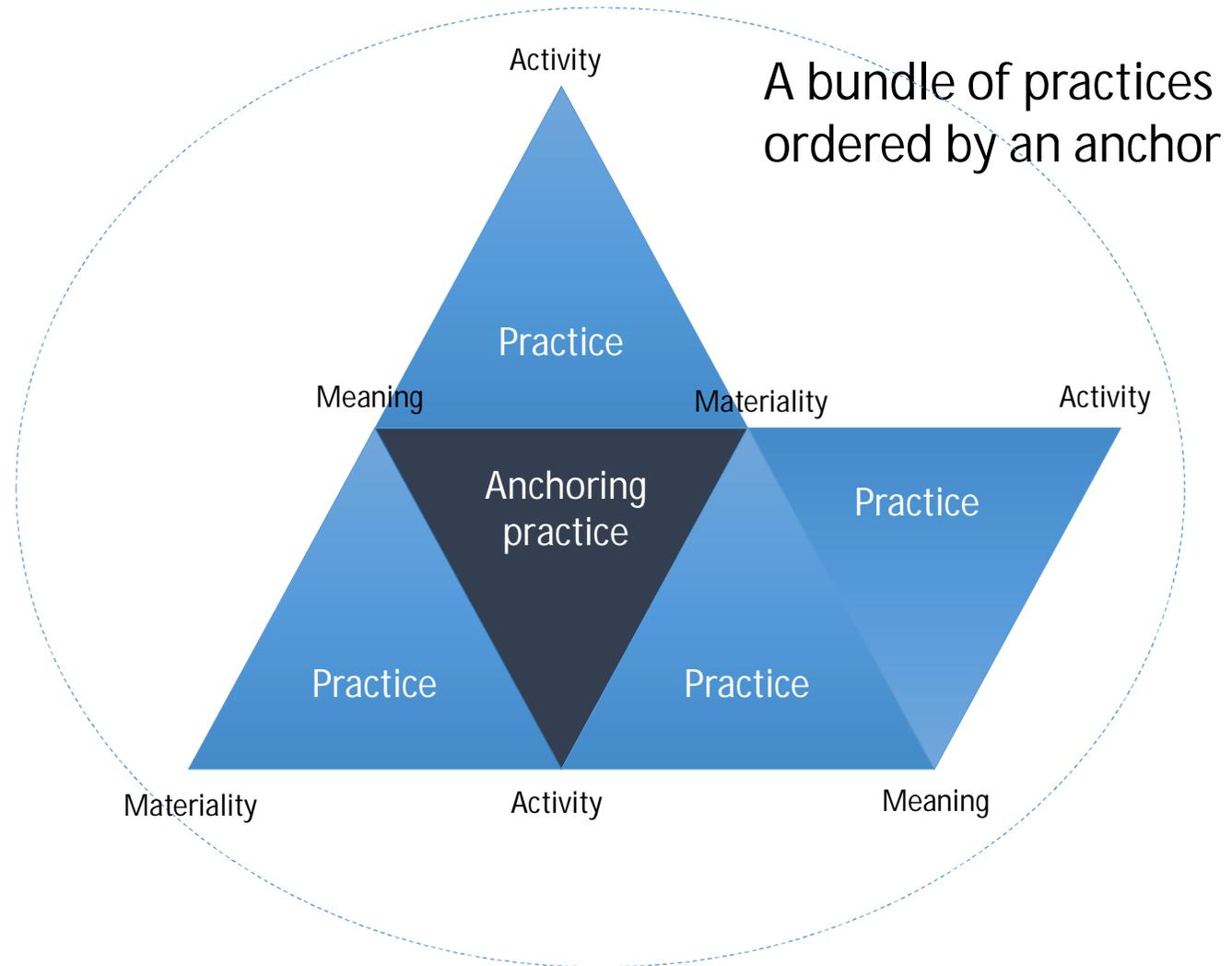
(Ahva 2017b; Shove, Pantzar, and Wattson 2012)

Provides **double exposure** to continuity and change.

As I am interested in **continuity** (how the organizations have been able to do participatory journalism for 10 years) I will focus on anchors.

Anchoring practices

are more central, controlling or determinative in given situations than others. They govern other practices and bundle them together (Swidler 2001).

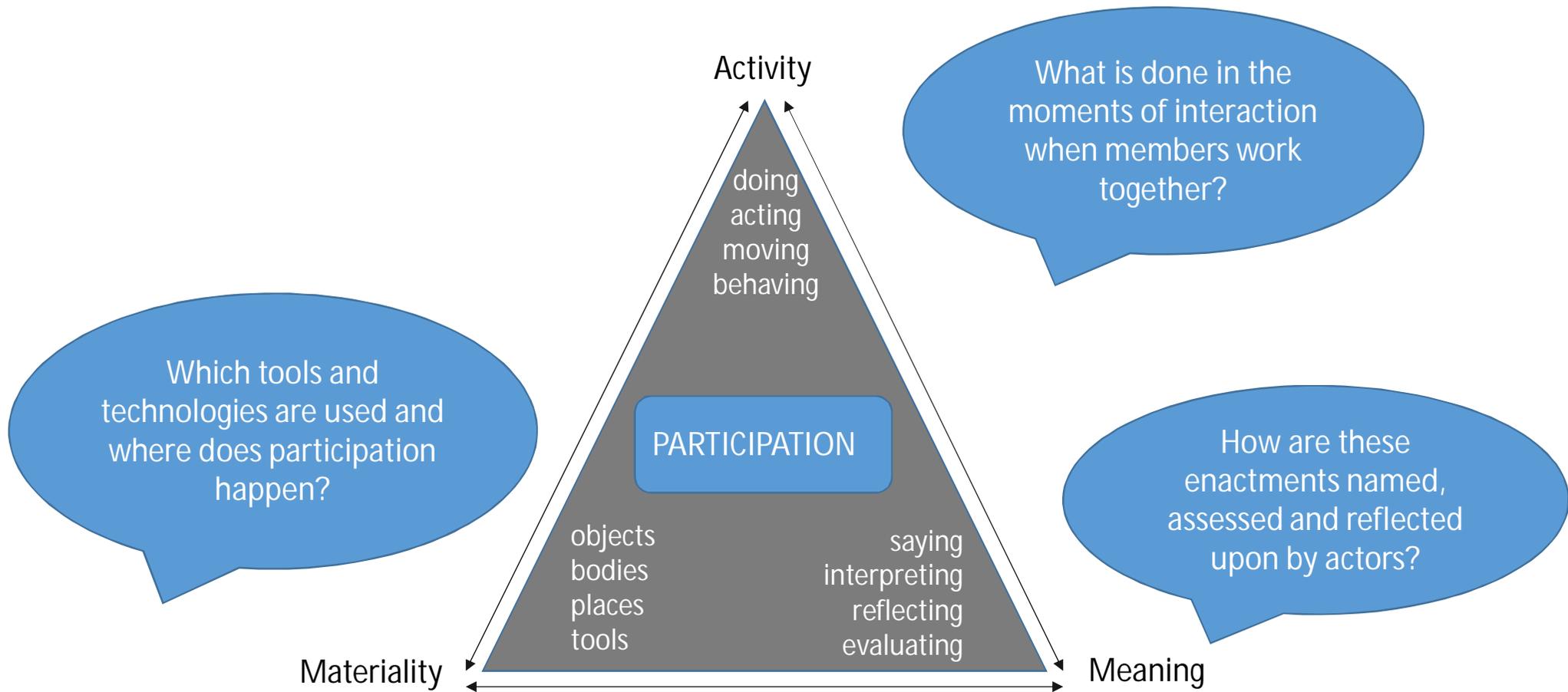


With practice theory, it is possible to **de-emphasize professional** boundaries of journalism and examine *“journalism as social practice, defined by the activities that are necessary for the creation of news, rather than by institutionalized structures and professional positions”* (Domingo and Le Cam 2015, 138).

The **core practices** of journalism are observation, selection, processing, distribution and interpretation (Domingo et al 2008). When these are enacted together and recurrently, they form a structure that we recognize and call as journalism (Raetzsch 2015; Ahva 2016).

In participatory news organizations, **participation** has been lifted as a new core practice (or rather, a bundle of practices). It is necessary for the creation of news.

Therefore, we need to observe and **de-construct** participation into the three elements: materials, acts, meanings.



What is participation as practice made out of at Cafébabel?

How does participatory journalism become possible through this practice?

Interviews (24) with professionals and volunteers related to Cafébabel.

Participant **observation**: 2 days in the central newsrooms in Paris, 3 editorial meetings by the city team of Brussels (+ writing an article myself).

Photos: 29 images from Paris and Brussels.



Resource management

A key anchor in Cafébabel is the management of scarce, unstable and unpredictable resources.

For journalists this means funding applications, project reporting and volunteer recruitment. Many volunteers work with the hopes for future salary and career.

Volunteers write and translate alongside their everyday duties (studies or work), which requires efficient time-management and prioritization from them.

Because stories cannot be assigned with fixed deadlines and compensations, a lot of delicate negotiation is needed: *"Who could be interested in doing...?"*

Quality control

Because of participation by various people from different backgrounds, selection and editing become central ways of maintaining quality of content.

Editing is a sensitive issue, because a sense of ownership of a text may be lost in the process.

However, many (student) volunteers appreciate editing, because they want to learn journalism and create professional portfolios.

Hence, quality becomes a shared anchor.

Emotional labour

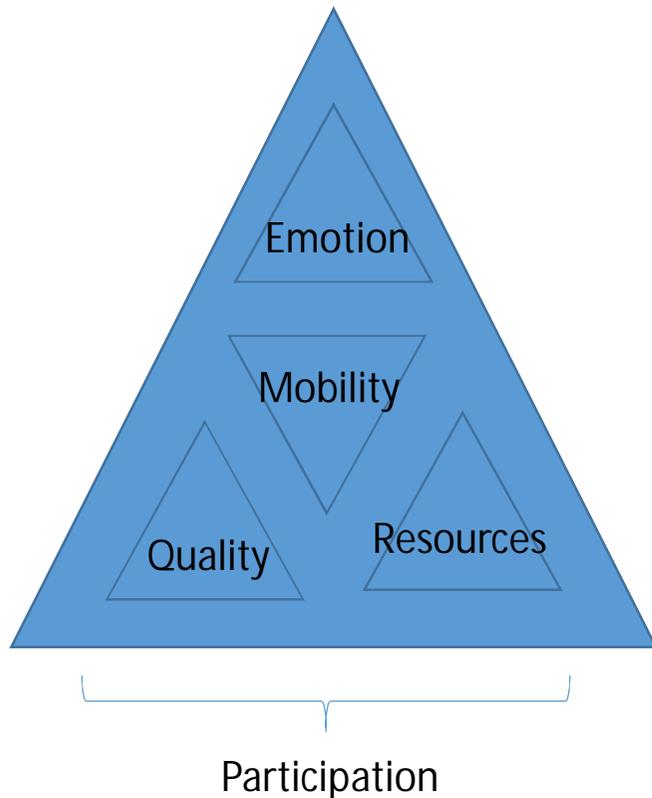
Lot of energy is put into fostering positive atmosphere via regulating emotions.

The less monetary compensation is offered, the more emotionally coloured interaction is needed: support, encouragement, conflict resolution.

Participants express a strong sense of appreciation towards the publications, which keeps them motivated.

Use of technology is vital, when there are limited face-to-face meetings. But participants wish to get to know people, and hence there are also social events organized. All this leads to the creation of the "inner-circle".

Branded t-shirts, mugs and bags are used for community creation.



When deconstructing participatory practice into elements of materiality, activity and reflexivity, and reconstructing the elements into underlying anchoring practices, we can see **what maintains participation.**

In the studied cases, participation becomes possible through **belonging, accomplishment, flexibility,** and **endless organizing** of means.

Participation becomes possible, **when the four anchors are apparent together.**

If one anchor fades, participatory journalism runs into trouble.

Some of the anchors are **contradictory**, which is a source of strain.

In addition, when examined alone, **the anchors are not equal or empowering** as such.

But if connected to other anchors, possibilities to co-decide over **organizational decisions, topic selection and matters of presentation**, are opened up.

Examining participatory journalism through practice theory enables us to see how participation is something that is **enacted and performed everyday**. It also offers us a way out examining only the tension caused by increased openness in journalism, but also a way out of merely celebrating the democratizing nature of participation.

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