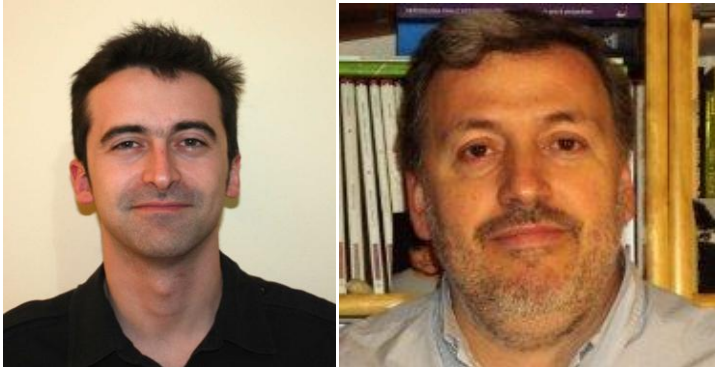


Active audiences and participation models in Spanish media

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Abstract: Starting from the analysis of the main Spanish and Catalan media, three participation models are identified and described: catch-all, user community and collaboration networks. To describe the models, we consider the presence, variety and typologies of participation tools, the connection established by the media to relate to their audiences and the focal points organising said connection.

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1. Introduction

Media have been a powerful element of agglutination, monitoring, control and regulation for a long time in every form of democratic government. At the present, and despite the changes derived from the introduction of information technologies and the criticism they have been subjected to, the democratic role of media remains relevant.

A significant part of the studies focused on analysing the impact of new media in democracy is focused on the euphoric discourses underlying the great democratizing potential for both journalism and society as a whole (Grossman, 1995; Negroponte, 1996; Castells, 2001). A recent study (Borger et al, 2013) analysing the research conducted for the last 16 years on the so-called 'citizen journalism' not only testifies to the growing interest on this phenomenon, but also demonstrates the existence of a mainstream discourse underlying the democratizing potential both for journalism and society as a whole. Nonetheless, the euphoria flooding through those researches tends to become progressively nuanced and to adopt a less enthusiastic form due to a triple disappointment: disappointment in the media that offer participation options, but are unwilling to modify the existing journalistic model; disappointment in the economic motivations of the majority of participatory initiatives, and disappointment in the passivity of the users.

Indeed, media have been quick to integrate user participation through their webpages. In most cases, the abovementioned democratizing possibilities offered by participation were highlighted, as well as the quality improvement thanks to the direct contact between journalists and citizens.

Nevertheless, and fundamentally, the generalization of a wide array of participation mechanisms is due to strictly economic motivations (Singer et al., 2011; Rosenstiel and Michell, 2011 Vujnovic et al., 2010; Masip and Micó, 2010; Becker, Clement and Schaedel, 2010). Media perceived participation as a valid strategy to generate traffic, attract visitors and encourage their loyalty. To that end, they developed a wide range of interaction tools: comments, surveys, forums, recommendations and so on, which several authors have tended to put on the same level (Thurman 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; García de Torres et al., 2009). Next to web analytics, these tools provide more insight regarding the interests of the readers. This information is particularly relevant considering that, according to Lee and Chyi (2013), almost two thirds of the published news are not relevant to the audience.

But not only content seems to stray from the interests of the audience. Despite the initial success of some new interaction forms, they do not achieve the goals they initially pursued: to create spaces for debate between citizens and journalists and to encourage readership loyalty. According to a report conducted in 2011, 77% of the traffic in main North American media comes from occasional users, and only 7% can be considered loyal users (Olmstead, Mitchell and Rosenstiel, 2011).

Despite initial hopes, media still have not managed to build real debate spaces, a new 2.0. public sphere offering an environment wherein citizens with different ideological stances are able to meet and exchange their perceptions and attitudes regarding the public field. The existence of those dialogue spaces defines real democracies and their

scarcity is precisely one of the reasons modern democracies are not working (Barber, 2006).

The present research is based on the conviction that more interaction between citizens and media is needed if issues of distrust and separation are drawn between both (Bohman, 2000). Besides, it is appropriate that media offer deliberation spaces and proper channels through which citizens can express themselves (Couldry, 2010) and become useful to revitalize the long lost public sphere (Papacharissi, 2010). Particularly if it is accepted that this is one of the main functions that media develop in democracy.

Despite media offer spaces, such as forums or comments, wherein citizens with different identities and political stances are able to meet and exchange their perceptions and attitudes regarding the public sphere (Mouffe, 2005), the fact is that neither forums nor comments are perceived as suitable spaces for debate about public issues. There are three reasons explaining this circumstance: the fact of not knowing the rest of the participants, the conviction that comments and forums are not spaces where to find new ideas, perspectives and sources, and the perception that online debates are too aggressive and offensive (Suau and Masip, 2013b). Indeed, the efforts to develop ways of interacting with users have not involved the introduction of control mechanisms and moderation of the participation (Reich, 2011). The studies conducted leave no doubt (Ruiz, et al. 2010, 2011; Richardson and Stainer, 2011; Diakopoulus and Naaman, 2011; Manosevich and Walker, 2009): participation has been discredited due to spam comments, insults and organized campaigns; debate and exchange of ideas have remained scarce.

2. Goals and Methodology

The present article has the main goal of ascertaining whether there are different participation models promoted by cybermedia, and, if so, to categorize their defining characteristics. To answer to those goals, two specific hypotheses are considered: the belief that several participation models can be defined in media, and that those models obey to several participation forms adopted and to the connection established between media and audience.

To reach those goals, the way in which a sample of the Spanish media organizes audience participation was analysed. The most popular Spanish media were examined, particularly taking into consideration Catalan media, and also trying to encompass media with different characteristics: quality media, free media, digital native media and so on. Finally, an analysis of the following media was conducted: *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, *El Punt-Avui*, *Ara*, *ABC*, *20 minutos*, *La Razón*, *El Huffington Post*, *Eldiario.es*, *Vilaweb*, *Nació Digital* and *324.cat*. The observation of these media was conducted during the third trimester of 2013.

The observation process took into consideration the presence, variety and typology of participation tools, the context wherein interactions between users and media took place, as well as among users themselves, and particularly the kind of connection established between media and users. To that end, a classification used in previous researches was employed (Suau and Masip, 2013a; Suau and Masip, in press). Although there are other classifications regarding participation forms in media (Thurman, 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Thurman and Hermida, 2010; Bivings Group, 2009; Xosé

López, 2008; Límia, 2008; Newman, 2009; Rodríguez, Codina and Pedraza, 2012), they were not used because they all tend to put the various participation forms on the same level, without realizing that, as Jönsson and Örnebring (2010) claimed, participation forms that demand different levels of connection cannot be considered in equal terms. To fulfil the goals of the current research, it was necessary to use a classification of participation tools allowing for the definition of different participation models. Previous studies have largely focused on the identification of the different tools adopted by media, so that the implications a specific tool selection presents for user participation and the engagement these tools require come second.

Based on the classic concept of interactivity developed by authors such as Schultz (1999), Massey and Levy (1999) and Jensen (1998), the classification employed in this article defines three levels of engagement and interactivity (Suau and Masip, 2013a). The lowest level of engagement is offered by those tools and services labelled under “selective interactivity” (Rost, 2006). Those mechanisms allow for minimal interaction between the audience and the system (including the journalists), and the adaptation of web content to users’ preferences: RSS, email alerts, the possibility of contacting the journalists of the medium, and so on. A second set of tools is considered under the name “participatory interactivity”. This kind of interactivity is conducted in a connection context largely involving the user and the medium. Despite being a potentially horizontal connection, which allows contact between users and journalists or other users, the said connection is developed within the parameters previously established by the medium. This group includes comments, polls, “likes” and so on --actions which do not actually involve creative activity by the users. Finally, the third set of tools included under the epigraph “productive interaction” already means the creation of original content and encompasses tools such as blogs or the possibility to send photographs, videos, texts, and so on. Wunsh-Vincent and Vickery (2007) define three essential characteristics that must be provided by audience-generated content, so that they are considered under this category: they have to be published by a medium, they have to involve a creative effort and they have to be produced outside the professional routines and practices. Table 1 shows all the different participation tools organized by typologies.

<i>Selective interactivity</i>	<i>Participatory interactivity</i>	<i>Productive interactivity</i>
Sign in	News rating	Readers sending news
RSS	Comments	Sending photographs
Newsletter	Reading more about a news item	Sending videos
Customization	Error notification	Sending audio
Contact with the medium	Reporting inappropriate comment	Letters to the editor
Contact with the journalists/sections	Answering comment	Participation in interviews / sending questions
	Polls / Recommending comments	Readers’ blogs
	Commenting op-eds	
	Tools to share articles	
	Links to social media	
	Forums	
	Lists of most viewed/commented/shared news	

	items	
	Surveys	

Table 1. Forms of participatory journalism, classified by types of interactivity

3. Results

As a result of the observation conducted, three different participation models have been identified. These models not only draw the kind of tools adopted, but also the kind of participation foreseen for the users and the forms of connection promoted between medium and user. Thus, the *catch-all* model is generally defined by the presence of a wide array of participation tools, but without a clear strategy about the role of participation in the productive, relational and marketing dynamics of the medium. On the contrary, the two other models –community and collaboration networks- do demand conscious decision-making and a specific application of participation mechanisms. They both draw clear participation strategies, although based on different suppositions: the first one advocates the creation of a community of users around the debate and exchange of ideas, whereas the second one strengthens the connection based on the productive possibilities of the audience.

3.1. *Catch-all* model

The *catch-all* model is based on the presence of a wide array of participation tools. Media focus their efforts on having as many interaction mechanisms as possible under the umbrella of the masthead. They call for user participation in many different ways, particularly emphasizing those that do not imply a high level of engagement or effort for the user or the medium itself. Participatory and selective interactivity tools, which bring traffic and visibility, predominate, and productive interactivity tools tend to be avoided. *ABC, Ara, El Punt/Avui, La Razón* and *Nació Digital* are included within this model.

Although the emphasis of participation is put on the forms of participatory interactivity, some options of selective interactivity are always offered, such as RSS, alerts or signing in. The requirements to sign in are scarce, and most media have adopted the possibility of signing in through social media profiles (Facebook, Twitter or Google +). This option allows for any interaction in the medium’s web to be published in each social network profile or timeline, thus increasing the medium’s presence in social networks.

The main tool to encourage user participation of these media websites are the comments on news, blogs or op-eds, as well the activity on social networks carried out by each medium. Comments are allowed in most cases without any previous control. Moderation tends to come after publishing comments, and when possible abuse or inappropriate use is reported by the other users. Users also tend to vote or “reward” comments from other users. There is no direct communication between users (for example, through private messages), thus limiting any communicative options to a user-medium connection (see figure 1).



Figure 1: Comments on ARA

Besides allowing comments, the media included within this model offer “classic” participation tools as the possibility to vote and recommend news, or to contribute to multiple-choice surveys. The productive interactivity mechanisms are scarce and normally reduced to the possibility of letters to the editor. Thus, the interaction forms demand low intensity interactions.

Considering all the media included in the *catch-all* model, *ABC*, *El Punt/Avui*, *ARA*, *La Razón* and *Nació Digital* are those focused on attracting users through their comments and by making their content viral through social networks. *ABC* does also offer digital meetings, interviews made with the questions sent by the users, which have been previously moderated. *La Razón* presents the lowest profile regarding participation: they have recently established a paywall to their content, thus also limiting comments. The Catalan newspaper *ARA* also establishes a soft paywall, but unlike *La Razón* it does admit comments to most of their news and op-eds.

Despite being included in the *catch-all* model, *El Punt/Avui* slightly deviates from the general tendency. Unlike the previous media, it has a varied participation section which allows sending photographs to galleries of anniversaries, landscapes and weather, and even sections to put users in contact with their city council or to send letters to the editor. The forms of participation they offer facilitate the increase of user loyalty to the medium, but they do not encourage a close connection beyond a mere showcase

wherein readers can show their pictures, announce anniversaries or other events. The newspaper from the Hermes group has introduced a very singular variable in Spanish media: the requirement to pay a euro to be able to comment on the news. The payment, which allows commenting up to 10 news items per month, is thought, according to the medium, to guarantee security, transparency and responsibility when sending comments.

3.2. *User community*

The main characteristic of this model is the adoption of a series of tools oriented towards the creation of a community. The nature of these tools can be very different, but all of them share the trait of being designed to increase interaction among users. These tools are included within those of participatory interactivity, or selective interactivity to a lesser degree, whereas the options of productive interactivity are not a priority for the media adopting this model. The goal is to create a community of users within the medium, facilitating the establishment of links between them and turning the medium into the key element of the interaction process between users. In this model, media try to reproduce a horizontal connection structure similar to that of networks, which facilitates exchanging ideas and opinions.

As can be seen in figures 2 and 3, the user profile is particularly important in this model because it shows his or her activity in the medium's site: which news he or she has commented on or voted for, which articles he or she has read, etc. In some cases, such as in *El Huffington Post*, it even exposes the activity of other users followed, allowing seeing their comments as if it was the timeline of a social network. The media adopting this model provide users with access to the profiles of other users, thus showing several activity indicators the purpose of which is to reflect the most active users on the site. Regarding *El Huffington Post*, these indicators adopt the form of "medals" to be won by the users achieving a certain amount of contacts or commenting frequently. Medals can be seen not only in the users' profiles, but also in their comments. Thus, the comments section distinguishes between the users who are most loyal to the medium and those who comment only on occasion, through a mechanism reminding of forums. In the case of *El Mundo*, user activity is represented with "karma" points to be won similarly to *El Huffington Post*, but including a secret algorithm which takes into account how many times the web is accessed and the time spent navigating.

TU COMUNIDAD HUFFPOST



Superusuario de El HuffPost

Usuario desde mayo 2011

Comentarios (5988) | Amigos (90)

Informar sobre perfil ofensivo

Seguir a este miembro

Comentarios
Fans

Comentarios de [Redacted]

Ver comentarios: Todo Ordenar: Los más recientes 1 - 25



El preservativo es el principal anticonceptivo en España, pero un 25% reconoce usarlo mal

Comentado 29 mar 2014 a 12:14:16 en Spain

"Todas las lecciones referentes al sexo vienen bien. Somos un país muy ignorante en el tema porque los curas, que son los vigilantes de nuestras costumbres y moral, decidieron desde siempre que el sexo era algo malo de lo que teníamos que avergonzarnos. De ahí, QUE SIENDO UN PAÍS DE TANTO MACHO, sepamos tan poco de sexo."

Permalink Compartir



Montoro niega los datos sobre pobreza: "El debate no se corresponde con la realidad"

Estadísticas

Comentarios	En tu perfil
Total: 5988	Amigos: 90
En noticias: 5527	Fans: 90
En blogs: 461	Sigues: 90

Amigos




ajoblanco



ALFXXI2010

Figure 2: Comments and user profile on *El Huffington Post*

[+ Seguir](#)

[Mensaje privado](#)

[Bloquear a este usuario](#)

Sobre mí


Desde que falta "alguno" se respira un aire más puro en el foro...¡mmm!

Le siguen



Sigo aterrorizada como la de Psicosis, ¿cuándo va a terminar tu violencia? Quiero volver a estar guapa.


Actividad Filtrar tipo de actividad



[Redacted] ha comentado en: [La familia Suárez Illana, a punto de romper por un título nobiliario](#)

hoy

#65 @elquisquilla. Jajajajaja si, como anillo al dedo. Lo que no tengo muy seguro es cómo ha quedado ese contencioso. Seguiré buscando cual perdiguero de Burgos.



[Redacted] ha comentado en: [Rubalcaba critica que el PP 'arremeta contra Cáritas' y dice que 'para muchos lo peor está por llegar'](#)

hoy

Yo no sé por qué iba a mentir Cáritas pero desde luego me parece increíble estar a la cabeza de todos esos países en índice de pobreza.



[Redacted] ha comentado en: [La familia Suárez Illana, a punto de romper por un título nobiliario](#)

Figure 3: User profile on *El Mundo*

User participation in this model is limited to the comments in news and op-eds. Forums or other debate spaces are uncommon, as well productive interactivity tools. Comments

in news tend to present most of the options available: answer to previous comments, voting or rating comments and reporting abusive comments. Some of the media even foresee the option of following other users, specifically through the comments bar, to facilitate the process of following the users whose comments are interesting to us. Direct interaction between users does not tend to be allowed beside the comments section except in *El Mundo*, which allows for this option through private comments.

The influence of social media is obvious in this model. Media are highly interested in creating a participation model which attracts and connects audiences in the same way as they connect to social networks. This is most obvious on the website of *El País*. This newspaper includes its own social network, *Eskup* (figure 4), which is devoted to sharing and commenting politically themed news. Launched in 2010, its goal was to draw users towards the political debate, creating a space where users and journalists could interact. Despite being launched with great expectations and publicity, users were less participative than was expected.

The image displays the Eskup social network interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with a lock icon and a button that says "Llévate el widget". The main content area is titled "Política" and includes a list of categories: "Política, Moncloa, Congreso, Ferraz, Génova, elecciones". Below the title, there is a description: "Un espacio para los apasionados de la información política en su sentido más amplio. Para seguir la actualidad de los partidos, instituciones, tribunales pero también la económica, social y todas las decisiones que nos afectan como ciudadanos." To the left of the main content, there is a sidebar with a "POLÍT" logo and the text "Administrado por: politica_elpais". Below the description, there are two summary boxes: "Usuarios" (Lo siguen: 1140, Pueden escribir: 155) and "Mensajes" (Total: 10000+, El último: HACE 7 MINUTOS). At the bottom, there is a post from "politica_elpais" with the title "Primarias PSC de Barcelona. Hasta las dos habían votado 4.107 personas: 806 militantes, 503 simpatizantes y 2.798 ciudadanos sin relación con el partido. Las urnas se han abierto a las diez y media de la mañana y se cerrarán a las siete de la tarde. http://cort.as/8PsA". The post includes a "Responder" button, a "Más opciones" dropdown, and a timestamp "Hace 7 minutos".

Figure 4. Eskup, the social network of *El País*

3.3. Collaboration networks

The model of *collaboration networks* pursues the creation of a community link through a productive approach. Unlike the previous model, it promotes the construction of affinity feelings between the users and the medium, so that the first ones share the process of information production. The existence of this community often materializes in the presence of their own meeting space.

The forms of productive interactivity are of course predominant in this model, although several levels of intensity can be distinguished depending on the medium. In the cases of *El Periódico*, *20 minutos* or *324.cat*, a productive interactivity is present in low intensity. In the case of *20 minutos* it is limited to letters and photographs from the readers, as well as a gallery of the most active users and the most replied comments. There is also a list of news originated by information sent by the readers. *El Periódico* also focuses its participation section “Entre todos” (All together) in showing news developed by journalists but originating by complaints and warnings from the users. Comments are not allowed in this last case. Regarding *324.cat*, there is “ElMeu324”, a space where previously moderated user-generated content (mainly videos) is admitted to be published,

Regarding *La Vanguardia*, it increases the range of participation options and groups them in a well-identified space of its own. Figure 5 shows the participation section in *La Vanguardia*. This section groups all the participation tools allowed in the website which are not included as options related to news or op-eds. When some information is particularly relevant, this section generally opens with a piece written by a staff journalist which gathers the several related comments posted by the readers on that particular news. Another recurring section is that of “Lectores corresponsales” (Correspondent readers), which gathers contributions made by *La Vanguardia* readers living abroad. Photographs taken by the readers, digital meetings (interviews with user-made questions), contests, letters from the readers and surveys complete this section. Despite the diversity of options, users cannot send their own content and publish it on the newspaper’s website without passing a previous filter from the medium.

Consultorio de Inglés

1 de 5

IPAR TICI PAI

LA VIÑETA DEL LECTOR
¿Eres ilustrador y quieres mostrar tus dibujos?

2 de 5

FOTOATLAS
Comparte tus fotos y experiencias viajeras con otros usuarios

3 de 5

¿Cuál es la calle de Barcelona más sucia por excrementos de perro?



Mónica Cebrian - Este es el mapa colaborativo hecho a partir de las aportaciones de los usuarios de LaVanguardia.com

125 Comentarios

Seguimos ampliando el mapa. ¿Conoces otras calles? Dínoslo en Twitter o en participacion@lavanguardia.es

LVD

VIDEO




1 de 2

ESP/ Miguel Ángel Molina

CONCURSOS

Gana un viaje a Sierra Nevada por Semana Santa

Participa en el concurso de Lugares de nieve y podrás ganar pack para dos personas de estancia y forfait en Sierra Nevada para los días 17, 18, 19 y 20 de abril

ESPACIOS DE PARTICIPACIÓN

- + TENGO UN BLOG
- + LA VUELTA AL MUNDO CON...
- + MI RINCÓN FAVORITO
- + DE SCUBRE
- + GUÍA DE VIAJES
- + EL LECTOR DEL MES
- + CONSEJO EDITORIAL DE LOS USUARIOS
- + LECTOR & CRONISTA

Figure 5: Participation section on *La Vanguardia*

Finally, media such as *Vilaweb* or *Eldiario.es* seek a higher level of engagement with the users, even assigning them some of the power and responsibility, in what Carpentier (2011) considers “true participation” in media. In both cases, participation politics is based on a voluntary system of economic donations to the medium. In *Vilaweb*, users might even influence staff decisions and the process of information production. Subscribed users receive a digest version of the contents the medium is planning to include for the next day, and might answer suggesting topics or ways of dealing with information. They also have the possibility of hosting a blog in the medium’s website, which they can update without previous control, and might attend the annual meeting where the newspaper’s editor presents new projects and analyses the situation of the medium. Higher donations allow access to group interviews conducted at the newspaper’s office (see figure 6) and to monthly meetings with journalists and/or the editor.

Eldiario.es works similarly to *Vilaweb* regarding the links between participation and economic donations. By paying 60 euros per year, subscribers are invited to periodic staff meetings and their comments are particularly highlighted. It is remarkable that both media present a very clear ideological line, which facilitates the identification between the medium and those users sharing the same ideology.



Figure 6: Vilaweb subscribers conduct a group interview in the newspaper’s offices

The characteristics defining the three participation models identified can be summarized (Table 2) according to the intensity of the interactivity forms developed by the media, and to the connection established between the medium and its users and between the users themselves.

	Selective interactivity	Participatory interactivity	Productive interactivity	Medium-user connection	User-user connection
Catch all	Medium	High	Low	Low	Low
User community	High	High	Low	High	High
Collaboration networks	Medium	High	High	High	Low

Table 2. Characteristics of the participation models according to the degree of intensity of the interactivity forms

4. Conclusions

Participation mechanisms are fully integrated into media. Comments on news, rating news, viral news, interventions in forums, interviews, surveys, user-sent content... are part of the habitual landscape of information websites all over the world. All of them were conceived as forms to keep audiences loyal and to increase the number of users. Nonetheless, it is unclear that participation as it has been understood for years is useful to achieve the goals initially pursued. Users are more demanding, the explosion of social networks has facilitated the appearance of new interaction spaces and an adequate participation management demands human and economic resources.

Considering the previously described situation, most media have rethought their participation strategies, progressively abandoning classic formulas based on a mere multiplication of participation tools. As a consequence of this evolution, the initial research hypothesis is confirmed, and three different participation models have been identified. The *catch-all* model keeps the essence of participation understood as a combination of interaction mechanisms. These mechanisms demand a low level of engagement from the users, but also from the medium. The media including this model generally lack a participation strategy. They tend to follow the inertia of the sector, which leads to a proliferation of options. The lack of strategy means that their interactions with the audience do not translate into a better journalistic practice, or into an increased income to take into consideration, since the links created in the participation process are weak. Actually, loyalty might be particularly attributed to ideological reasons, since most of the media included within this category hold very definite political stances.

The other two models identified involve an obvious evolution from the *catch-all* model. They are both built around two different participation strategies. The *collaboration network* model seeks the complicity of the readers, turning them into protagonists of the productive process. Citizens are both source and producers; they are given both voice and space. Active audiences are present and constitute a whole, although final control about what is published remains in the hands of the medium.

Regarding the *user community* model, it is also built by creating close links and complicities between the medium and the users, but, unlike the previous model, the focus of the connection does not fall on production but on debate. Prominence shifts and is shared by the medium and the users. This model takes the elements defining social networks and tries to build a community based on a horizontal connection between the users themselves and between the users and the medium. The community becomes an environment conducive to debate “among friends” regarding the topics they are interested in: the news provided by the medium.

It is notable that the presence of certain forms of interactivity and the development of one model or another does not imply one medium is more perfect or of higher quality than the other. Nor have these diverse models to be understood as an evolutionary process, so that the last one is the goal to reach. The goodness of each model is exclusively due to the strategies defined by each medium and their contributions to secure the planned goals.

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