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Who benefits from user participation in local media in Russia's towns?

In the second half of the 2000s the growth in popularity of social network sites (SNS) coincided with a dramatic rise in the number of Internet users in Russia that led to a more general shift in Russia's communicative culture (Roesen and Zvereva 2014). SNS also affected mass media - social media are seen as the fourth, and newest, sphere of the contemporary Russian hybrid media system (Toepfl 2011). In Russian towns, social media groups (SMG) in VKontakte (the most popular social network in Russia) have become an important source of local news for both ordinary citizens and the authorities. Such groups de-facto implement functions of local media in these towns, not only complementing, but often replacing traditional mass media (e.g. print newspapers). The content shared in these groups is generated primarily by users, but also by professional journalists and by group owners/moderators. How do different practices of user participation in such SMGs influence on the societal roles of media organizations in these towns? Does citizen participation lead to new forms of gatekeeping and agenda-setting power within local news? This paper analyses two types of participation practices – content-related participation and structural participation (Carpentier 2009) - on the example of local SMGs in Russia's towns. Studying such SMGs as local media from the perspective of political economy, it examines user participation in the context of power relations in order to understand who and in what way benefits from possibilities of user participation in local SMGs.