

>> Chapter 6 <<

CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Overview

This chapter introduces the concept of ‘citizen journalism’ and examines some of the key ideas that inform this new movement: the public sphere; the network society; and public or civic journalism. In comparison with other chapters this contains more of the ‘why we do things’, and less of the ‘what we are doing’. Although this chapter may appear more abstract than others, an understanding of the ideas and motives of the players in the field of social media, as well a grounding in the philosophy of the internet and of journalism, is important in order to be able to understand and prepare for the changes that have already happened, and the ones that are still coming.

Key concepts

- Citizen journalism
- Fourth estate
- Industrial journalism
- Network society
- Non-profit journalism
- Online activism
- Public sphere
- Social capital

Springboard

- *Activist, citizen and public journalism*: this collection of terms refers generally to journalism that has an agenda other than the production of news as a commodity to be sold. Conceived in part as a response to the perceived hyper-commercialism of the news industry in the last part of the twentieth century, these new forms of journalism also hark back to the early days of the news media, to the pamphleteers and campaigners of the eighteenth century.
- *Public sphere*: the public sphere is envisioned as the space, whether real or virtual, in which the citizens of a society discuss and negotiate the ways in which that society will be constructed. The internet, the World Wide Web and social media are often presented as the new form of the public sphere.
- *Social capital*: this is the idea that one's value within a community or network can be measured in the impact one's ideas or reputation has, rather than simply in monetary terms.
- *Fourth estate*: in Anglo-Saxon countries, the fourth estate is the media, the watchdog that guards and represents the interests of the public against the activities of the other three estates: the church, the aristocracy and the commons. Nowadays, the phrase is used to refer to the news media in its function as watchdog and protector of the public interest.
- *Online activism*: the internet has become a locus for organising of political and social activism. Online activism may refer specifically to activities conducted online, such as virtual protests, or to activities conducted in all spheres, but planned and organised online.

Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new phrase 'citizen journalism' began to be circulated. Two documents started this discussion: Dan Gillmor's book *We The Media* (2004), and Bowman and Willis's *We Media* report for the American Press Institute (2003). Both works owe something to a seminal article by Jay Rosen, 'Beyond Objectivity' (1993), in which he exhorted the American news media to reinvent itself in a voice and manner that was more engaged with the audience, more subjective, and would create a closer relationship. Although Rosen's article was written

before the World Wide Web became the phenomenon it now is, the web was quickly left on as the catalyst and location of these possible new forms of journalism: collectively (and loosely) named citizen journalism.

It is important to understand that the citizen journalism movement as it started in the USA was a response to a specific set of circumstances: the rise of corporate news media in the last decade of the twentieth century, and the overall lack of trust in journalists that was prevalent in the USA at the time (some would say as a consequence of the corporatisation). Rosen's call for more subjective, engaged journalism is a response to the American journalistic ideal of objectivity, something that European thinkers had already rejected as impossible and possibly meaningless. However, the corporatisation and commercialisation of the industrial news media remains an issue in many countries, as does the control of the media by political interests in many others.

However, despite the specificity of the circumstances, the phrase citizen journalism caught on and was presented as both a threat to, and possible saviour of, mainstream, commercial, professional journalism. This also tied in with the considerable activist and alternative news organisations which had existed alongside mainstream news for hundreds of years, but which were starting to undergo something of a revival, thanks to the internet.

Traditional news media organisations need to be large industrialised organisations. The cost of printing presses, of broadcast towers (and broadcast licences) means that an organisation needs to have a minimum size and revenue in order to be viable. The nature of advertising revenue also tends to favour larger organisations – the more audience you can reach and the more efficient that reach, the more the advertisers will be interested in your product. Corporatisation – the process of bringing small companies together into a single networked organisation – also helps to increase the profits of news organisations, by allowing them to save costs on duplicated services and functions.

Technology has broken the stranglehold that news organisations used to have by virtue of their ownership of the means of production and distribution, and made it more possible for smaller news organisations to compete: freedom of the press belonged to those who had one. Now everyone has one, or access to one. In this new landscape, news organisations are competing and collaborating not only with each other, but with organisations and individuals who provide news content and information, but do not adhere to the techniques, intents and principle of

the mainstream.

New forms of activist and engaged journalism are not necessarily functions of new technologies, and some of them clearly predate the changes brought by the World Wide Web, but they are greatly enhanced by the lower barriers to entry and ease of distribution that technological changes have provided. These forms of journalism are then themselves informed by ideas about the network and how it functions, while the network is also informed by ideas about communication and politics. It is these interlinking ideas that inform this chapter, and its discussion of the highly confused terms of citizen, public, activist and new journalism.

Citizen journalism

The key ideas that underpin grassroots media and citizen journalism are outlined in Dan Gillmor's 2006 book *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*, and in the *We Media* report, published by the American Press Institute (Bowman and Willis, 2003). Both documents are informed by the call to arms for a journalism that moves 'Beyond Objectivity' published by Jay Rosen in 1993.

The phrase 'citizen journalism' is both widely circulated and inconsistently defined. Jay Rosen refers to 'the people formerly known as the audience' as 'citizen journalists', but that definition is too loose for some commenters, including as it does all forms of public engagement and response to the news (Rosen, 2006). Mark Deuze characterises citizen journalists as 'news-producing consumers', but also in opposition to professional journalists – as 'competitor-colleagues' (Deuze 2007: 122). Neither of these definitions go as far as to explain what citizen journalists do, and whether that is different from other forms of journalism.

Citizen journalism

Citizen journalism as a term has been used to signify many different things and ideas over the last two decades. In its original form it was taken to refer to groups of citizens using the internet to report on events in their own communities, something the increasingly corporatised and commercialised press was failing to do. It has also been used to refer to people

providing media content to other, more formal, outlets, such as the provision of video footage of events although this is more commonly distinguished as user-generated content.

Stuart Allan and Einar Thorsen do not attempt to define citizen journalism in their book of the same name, but they do discuss the forms of citizen journalism: blogs, citizen newsgathering and, implicitly, something other than ‘corporate’ news ventures (Allan and Thorsen, 2009).

What is clear from the literature is that the term embraces everything from people commenting on stories or responding to polls (Lewis et al., 2010), to news material provided by the public to mainstream news organisations (Allan and Thorsen, 2009), to personal blogs, to fully fledged, professionally run news organisations that exist in parallel to the mainstream news (Bowman and Willis, 2003).

It is this last definition, that of the *We Media* manifesto, that is used in this chapter. As they put it: ‘The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.’ (Bowman and Willis, 2003). This locates citizen journalism firmly within the field of activism, and within the roles not only of collecting (what we would call user-generated content), but also of producing and distributing the news they have collected: there is a degree of motivation to act in some way journalistically. This narrows down the scope of this chapter, but still leaves a fairly wide range of possibilities to be considered, and two main sub-fields of citizen journalism: public and activist journalism, which inform the citizen journalism movement.

Public journalism

At the time of writing, public journalism as a phrase is almost uniquely American, although the ideas and practices that underpin it are not. Public, or civic, journalism is journalism that has explicitly abandoned the ideology of objectivity or neutrality and has become engaged in civic life, and especially in the defence of democracy. As with other forms of citizen and activist journalism, public journalism is responding to a specific set of circumstances: the corporatisation of the media, and its perceived

subsequent move away from the communities it serves (Friedland, 2010).

Public journalism has been advocated by the Kettering Foundation, and its President, David Mathews, as well as by organisations like the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, the Knight Foundation and others. Public journalism is similar to Dan Gillmor's grassroots journalism in conception: the move away from dispassionate observation and reporting to engagement and activism is key to both ideas, and there are considerable overlaps in these ideas, at least in the USA. In some instances, public journalism is constructed as a deliberate alternative to commercial or corporate forms of journalism, but this is not universal to the movement. In contrast to the more radical form of activist citizen journalism (discussed below), public journalism seeks more to inform and improve existing journalistic forms and outlets than to overthrow them (Rosenberry and St John III, 2010).

ProPublica was launched in 2008 as a non-profit organisation dedicated to investigative journalism in the public interest. Working collaboratively with a number of professional news organisations, and with funding from donations and philanthropic foundations, it provides stories both on its own site and in syndication to its partners: 'In the best traditions of American journalism in the public service, we seek to stimulate positive change. We uncover unsavory practices in order to stimulate reform. We do this in an entirely non-partisan and non-ideological manner, adhering to the strictest standards of journalistic impartiality. We won't lobby. We won't ally with politicians or advocacy groups. We look hard at the critical functions of business and of government, the two biggest centers of power, in areas ranging from product safety to securities fraud, from flaws in our system of criminal justice to practices that undermine fair elections.' (ProPublica, n.d.).

ProPublica is not a citizen-journalist organisation: it is staffed by experienced and professional investigative journalists, but in its ideals it has much in common with forms of journalism that are called citizen journalism, and it is clearly intent on enhancing and supporting the civic public sphere.

Alternative and activist journalism

Alternative news sources (pirate and community radio, underground or alternative newspapers and magazines) have been around for as long as there has been a mainstream press, with a greater or lesser presence,

depending on the circumstances. In western societies, these outlets have been largely tolerated; some have even become mainstream themselves over time. The Village Voice in New York has gone from scrappy newsletter presenting the ideas of the beats and hippies to being an entertainment and lifestyle guide for the city; the original Manchester Guardian newspaper founded after the Peterloo Massacre is now firmly part of the British media establishment, although with its original ideals intact (Atton, 2002).

In non-western societies, especially repressive ones, alternative news sources remain(ed) important, although often repressed. Technology made a massive difference to these alternative sources of information. Prior to the development of the internet, these outlets were limited by their access to printing or broadcasting technology and distribution mechanisms. These are expensive, and fairly easily disrupted by the interests of the state. Even in democratic societies, where alternative sources of news were tolerated, they were limited by financial constraints (the number of papers published, the footprint of the broadcast tower). The internet suddenly changed all of that, and alternative and mainstream sources of news were now competing on the relatively level playing field of the internet.

These two ideals, of a new movement of amateur journalism based on the internet, and the existing activist movements that had been using old media forms moving onto the internet, have been joined in the minds of many as a movement of citizen journalists, one that is part of a new, revived, public sphere.

Citizen journalism, inasmuch as it exists, poses a theoretical challenge to the professional identity of journalists, and the boundaries of the journalistic field. Much of the discourse within the commercialised mainstream media regarding social media and citizen journalism constructs it as this – a threat to the very existence of professional news practitioners.

Theoretical understandings

This section introduces some of the key theoretical concepts that underpin this new practice of journalism. In usual practice, traditional journalism has simple motives: for commercial organisations – making money; for public and state-funded organisations – fulfilling social and political requirements. New forms of journalism have more complex varied motives: social engagement, political activism and abstract pursuits of ‘truth’ or ‘justice’. This is not to say that the people working within traditional news structures

do not have altruistic or world-changing motives, or that activist and citizen journalists may not be concerned with money, but that as institutions, these organisations tend to concern themselves primarily with these goals.

Citizen, public, activist and non-industrialised journalism locates itself firmly within the context of democratisation and activism, rather than a purely neutral activity, or one located only within economic or technological concerns. The theory of journalism practice has always considered journalism within its context of political, social and economic factors. Journalism must always negotiate its relations with the power elites in a society and, within the new, computer-networked environment, all of those considerations remain.

There is a library of works that discuss and analyse the role of journalism and its function within society, but within this chapter we aim to set out some of the key ideas which we believe are most useful in understanding this new media environment. We then show how these ideas can be seen as influencing journalism, especially within the new (or newly rediscovered) forms of citizen and activist journalism.

The public sphere

The public sphere is the space, whether physical or conceptual, in which citizens engage with the broader society, and in which consensus is reached as to the nature of that society. It is not necessarily the explicit spaces in which issues are debated, such as parliaments and congresses, but also includes the media and other areas of public engagement, the places where public, as opposed to private, life is carried out.

Although this is not the first use of the phrase, 'public sphere' is most often associated with Jürgen Habermas's *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, originally published in 1962, and translated into English in 1989 as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. It is a difficult but extremely rewarding book. Craig Calhoun's 1993 book *Habermas and the Public Sphere* provides an excellent introduction to Habermas's ideas, and to their impact on specific areas of theory, including the media.

Habermas's book is famously dense, and spans history, economics, politics, sociology and philosophy, dealing only peripherally with the media, but the key idea for media and journalism theorists is the way in which the media functioned as an enabler of the public sphere (through the first

literary products, newspapers and books, in the eighteenth century), and that the modern mass media then served to replace the original ‘authentic’ public sphere with an illusory one: one in which the ‘public’ is replaced by the illusion of participation. Critical engagement with society via the public sphere is replaced by mindless consumption (Habermas, 1989; Calhoun, 1993a; Calhoun, 1993b; Garnham, 1993).

Jürgen Habermas is usually considered a member, or at least the inheritor, of the Frankfurt School – a group of Marxist social theorists based first at Frankfurt University, and then in the USA after the Nazis came to power in Germany. The Frankfurt School has had a great impact on almost all areas of thought in the twentieth century, including media studies.

The network society

The publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in English coincided with the rise of the new internet-enabled ‘networked’ society. The ‘Network Society’ was described by Jan van Dijk and Manuel Castells as one in which society was structured through electronic networks of relationships. Drawing on theories of the information society, as well as on the technological mechanisms used in the construction of computer networks, both argue that communication technology has fundamentally changed society. Castells argues that this new, electronically mediated form of relationship is entirely constructed by computer networks; van Dijk holds that other social relationships still have weight, although they may be mediated by electronic, rather than organic, communication networks; but they both agree that the nature of engagement and communication within society has been changed by networked communications (Castells, 2000; van Dijk, 2006).

Computer networks such as the internet are not necessarily hierarchical. Egalitarian ones are generally more stable than hierarchical ones – for technical reasons. The internet was largely developed as a collaborative research tool among universities, and it is a legacy of this that access to the network is largely open to the public, and the legacy of collaboration and transparency has persisted into the new social networks. Unlike other mass-media technologies, the differential between the cost of production and that of consumption (compare the cost of a printing press and the cost of a newspaper) is minimal, although not entirely vanished – a server and a web-hosting agreement to run a blog does not cost that much more than a home

computer and internet access. Social media, even more so, erase this strictly financial barrier to entry, although other barriers remain.

The internet

The internet was originally designed as a robust communication network that would function well in times of war and disaster. Unlike other networks, such as broadcasting or telephone networks, it has no central hub that can be easily damaged. Instead, each node on the network connects to multiple other nodes, providing redundancy, and meaning that, even if nodes are destroyed, communication will continue to flow around the gaps. In practice, this is not always the case; many parts of the world are connected to the network by a single cable, and entire countries and regions have spent days and weeks cut off when that cable has failed.

The matrix discussed in [Chapter 1](#) of this book lays out the landscape as one in which technology, financial capital and infrastructure are less important than reach, intent and voice. Intent and voice are choices, not constraints, and, although reach is something that can be increased through financial investment, money is not a prerequisite. Andy Carvin's reach through Twitter is substantial, and costs only the investment of social relationships and time.

The network, therefore, that makes up the backbone of the network society is one which does not place a huge amount of emphasis on one's status or role within the network (or at least, on the status of the node with which one connects to the network), or the wider community. To the network, you are simply an Internet Protocol (IP) address, just like every other IP address. Unlike the traditional mass media, there is no technological or structural differential between producers and consumers.

Commodification

Commodification refers to the process of turning something into

an object that can be traded, and that has economic value. The commodification of information is a fundamental aspect of the practice of media — information is what is being traded. Habermas and others believe that this commodification is damaging to society as a whole — moving knowledge from a public good to a scarce commodity.

This is something of a fantasy, though: although the technology cannot see the difference between a student in a high school in Nairobi and the president of the United States, the internet is still made up of people and as soon as one's identity is known, status can usually be inferred. The fact remains that although the technological barriers to entry are much lower than for other mass media, the content and recognition barriers are not, and it is the best-known organisations that have the largest audiences. The original structure and concept of the network, though, was one which does not recognise or credit importance or wealth to messages, but one which allowed free communication to all parties.

It is this that has led thinkers to posit the network as the salvation of the public sphere. Where Habermas saw that commodification of information (through the commercial mass media) and the rise of consumerism had transformed the public sphere from an open forum for discourse and engagement into one in which the mass media simply reinforced the ideas of the dominant elites in society, that is capitalism, proponents saw in the internet the potential for the revival of the original, supposedly egalitarian, public sphere, one in which rational discourse among equals was paramount (Boeder, 2005; Jan, 2011).

The way online interaction is structured and substantially different from other forms of communication is discussed in the works of Manuel Castells (2000) and Jan van Dijk (2006) on network theory, the new, engaged form of computer-aided communication and interaction that informs online lives. Both of these thinkers are informed by Stewart Brand's (1987) discussion of the way the network works. Another internet theorist, Henry Jenkins (2006a, 2006b), discusses participatory and fan cultures online, which although not specific to journalism, have a lot to say about all kinds of online cultures.

Social capital and the journalistic field

Another theorist whose ideas have contributed to our understanding of the communication and human networks in which we are all engaged is Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu was a French sociologist and philosopher whose work spanned a wide range of disciplines, but the concept that is most often applied to these discussions is that of social capital.

Social capital

Social capital may be a relatively new concept for English speakers, but in many societies it is a clearly recognised and structured part of society. Known in Arabic as Wasta and in Chinese as Guanxi, for example, influence is simply part and parcel of all social interactions. The fact that there is no English-word equivalent does not mean that social capital has less influence within western society, simply that we are perhaps less likely to acknowledge it.

Capital can be defined as the base resource one brings to society, and it usually refers to financial capital. Financial or economic capital is the main source of power in capitalist societies, but Bourdieu and others posited different kinds of capital to the simply financial. Human capital is the resources an individual commands – time and skills – and for most people it is this that they use to engage in the economic marketplace, and gain power in society, but there are still other forms of capital. Cultural capital consists of the knowledge, skills and information one can access and use – one's education; social capital derives from one's relationships – memberships of groups and networks within society; and symbolic capital is capital one accrues through status or prestige (Jenkins, 2002).

Objectivity

Objectivity has often been held up as the ideal of journalistic practice — the completely disinterested and uninvolved

commentator, presenting all sides of an argument ‘without fear or favor’ (Allan, 2010). More recent thinkers, influenced by postmodernism’s contention that objective truth is an impossibility, maintain that objectivity is also an impossible goal.

Bourdieu and others argue that capital of all kinds can be traded or negotiated for power within society, or within the social network and community one operates within. In structured societies, the ability to gain and use the various forms of capital may be constrained by other factors (access to education may be limited to those with economic means, group membership may be limited on the basis of gender, or race), and people’s ability to advance within the system may be limited (Bourdieu, 1993; Jenkins, 2002; Benson, 2005).

Social capital is usually constructed within a field of endeavour or expertise, so journalists accrue social capital through their status and links within the field of journalism. This is a key idea for students of media, especially of journalism, because despite the importance of the audience to the industry as a whole, journalists look most often to their peers for affirmation, and for judgement on their work (Bourdieu, 1993b).

The rigid hierarchy and boundaries of the field are challenged by the network society, in that the technology of the internet allows access to all newcomers, without the requirement of prior membership of the field itself. In the mid-nineties, shortly after the development of the World Wide Web, theorists and activists began to posit the idea that this meant the end of professional (commercial) journalism; that the field would be dismantled by the network society and replaced by alternative forms of journalism (Rosen, 1993; Bowman and Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004).

This projected death of professional journalism led to the development of the concept of citizen journalism.

Profession or trade?

The question of whether journalism is a profession or a trade is a complex one. In Anglo-Saxon societies, professional status has certain rights, such as the formal right to regulate access to the

profession through accreditation, and the right to maintain standards and discipline within the profession (as through medical or legal councils). This grants the professions considerable status within these societies. Journalism is not legally a profession, but it has pretensions to being one, through training councils and self-regulation. The internet, and social media specifically, presents a considerable challenge to the professional identity of journalists. These issues are further discussed in [Chapter 10](#), especially in terms of legal and ethical constraints.

Citizen journalism in practice

Although citizen journalism may or may not exist in the form which Gillmor, Rosen, Bowman and Willis envisioned, it is repeatedly invoked by both professional journalists and the public as an entity, sometimes even a monolithic one. The fear of citizen journalism is evident in much of the public discourse around it, and far in excess of the actual prevalence of citizen journalism in practice.

Sites and practices identified as examples of ‘citizen journalism’ generally take one of the following forms: user-generated content, blogs, hyperlocal community sites, and activist or alternative sites.

Sites, pages, blogs, channels, feeds

As technology and social media change, the specifics of what people do online changes. Although initially the website was the common denominator of web-based content and for citizen-journalism activities, increasingly the activities may be centred around a Facebook page, a YouTube channel, a Twitter feed or an actual site that aggregates all of the above. However, it is impossible to refer to a list of sites, pages, blogs, channels or feeds every time one mentions them, so the term site is being used to incorporate all of these things.

User-generated content is discussed more extensively in the following chapter, but it refers to either raw news material (images, footage, audio recordings or information) that is provided to a news organisation by the public for use within their own edited, constructed news product, or to the comments, discussion and interaction which is created around a formal news product. User-generated content always exists within the constructed news product of a formal outlet, and is mediated by them.

In this book we distinguish citizen journalism from user-generated content, based on the final product: citizen journalism is its own discrete product; user-generated content exists within and forms part of a mainstream news product. This can be a complex distinction, especially where commercial news organisations construct their own sites for the contribution of user-generated content which can both exist as discrete product and provide material for the main site.

Citizen-journalism projects

It is tempting to refer to these, unironically, as ‘true’ or ‘traditional’ citizen-journalism projects, so much has the phrase been borrowed, changed, adapted and abused. We won’t do that, but there are citizen-journalism projects that best embody the principles of citizen journalism, inasmuch as there are concrete principles. There is, however, no one way to do citizen journalism, no one ideal perfect site.

OhMyNews, launched in 2000, in South Korea, is often considered the original citizen-journalism site. The site uses material provided by some 20,000 volunteer reporters, which is posted to the site after being checked by the team of professional journalists. OhMyNews is often held up as the ideal of a successful citizen-journalism project; it is also a commercial enterprise, selling advertising to the same organisations as the mainstream media (Gillmor, 2004).

Although OhMyNews’s contributors are encouraged to cover stories not included in the mainstream press, the process of publication is similar to any news organisation using a network of freelancers: material is edited and placed on the page by the professional staff. Citizen reporters working for OhMyNews are paid according to how important and useful the professional editors consider their contributions, creating the possibility that the site’s content will eventually reflect not the interests of the contributors but the professionally paid staff (Kim and Hamilton, 2006).

WikiNews is based on the model of Wikipedia, and is one of the projects run by Wikipedia's parent organisation, the Wikimedia foundation. WikiNews is a collaborative, citizen-led news site, with contributions from anyone who registers and chooses to upload content. Unlike other citizen-journalism sites, the site does not mimic a news site, but instead follows the structure of Wikipedia, with links and references, the ability of any user to edit the story, and no bylines. The identification of journalists through bylines is one of the hallmarks of traditional journalism, and the lack of bylines makes WikiNews possibly unique among citizen-journalism projects (Wikinews, n.d.).

Wikiwhat

'Wiki' is a Hawaiian word meaning quick, but in internet culture it is a kind of shorthand for an open-source, collaborative publishing project such as Wikipedia, the open-source encyclopaedia, WikiLeaks and WikiNews. A wiki can also refer to any site using an interlinked and collaborative structure, as exemplified by Wikipedia.

The site does not impose a news diary or structure on its contributors, but work is reviewed by more experienced volunteers, and rated on a number of key points including newsworthiness, verifiability and a neutral point of view – all traditional journalistic goals. The neutral point of view is key to the Wikimedia Foundation's goals, but is uncommon among citizen-journalism projects, which tend to embrace opinion and subjectivity (Thorsen, 2008).

Mainstream media's citizen journalism

CNN's iReport, Bild's (Germany) Leserreporter and Avusa's (South Africa) Reporter.co.za are examples. These sites appear(ed) as separate entities from the parent site, but exist as a way for the main news organisation to attract aspiring citizen journalists who will post stories and videos (especially in the case of Bild) which can then be used as a resource by the parent organisation to attract audience, sell advertising and provide content for the main product (Knight, 2010).

As an example of this, CNN's iReport was launched in 2006 to allow non-journalists to upload images, stories and video to a website, www.ireport.com. Stories and material can be viewed on the iReport site, but can also be incorporated into CNN's own coverage. Despite the rhetoric of being a truly independent and collaborative site, and one which attempts to 'expand the current definition of news' (CNN, n.d.), CNN maintains editorial control, suggesting assignments, vetting stories and content, and controlling the news agenda. Although it is true that any citizen can contribute to the site, the overall feel is very much that of a formal news organisation, and the news values and angles that are presented are hardly different from that of the parent organisation.

This form of citizen journalism has been criticised for co-opting the voice and ideas of true citizen journalism, but these sites remain a substantive forum for citizen journalism and contribution (Kperogi, 2010).

Hyperlocal

Hyperlocal news sites are small news organisations, whether commercial, amateur or a mix of both, which represent a community and its interests. First posited (albeit indirectly, since he does not use the term) by John Pavlik in *Journalism and New Media* (Pavlik, 2001), hyperlocal sites are constructed as an alternative to the increasing corporatisation of news outlets within the western world, and the ensuing lack of news available for citizens of smaller communities and towns. Thanks to the increasing financial pressure on news organisations in the twenty-first century, more and more towns and cities in the developed world have no local news outlet, it having been closed or merged with a larger news outlet; hyperlocal sites are arising to fill this gap (Kurpius et al., 2010).

Hyperlocal sites provide an imitation of the norms and behaviours of professional and commercial news production, often using the same funding models and being staffed by professionally trained journalists. Hyperlocal sites in many ways are the strongest evidence of new forms of journalism posing a financial and cultural threat to the entrenched professional and commercial news interests, except for the fact that they tend to thrive best in communities that have been abandoned by those very same interests.

Blogpreston (<http://blogpreston.co.uk/>) is a hyperlocal site, covering the small city of Preston in northern England. The site was launched in January

2009 as ‘a hub of news, views and information about the city’ (Blog Preston, n.d.), and contains a range of content from professionally written news stories to citizen-submitted photos of the city, to reports on social events organised by the team of volunteers. The site runs advertisements and has also received funding to train local people as community journalists – combining the goals of hyperlocal and public journalism. The site is a challenge to the local corporate newspaper in many ways – covering the same ground, in the same ways, and even, to some extent, going after the same advertising.

Activist citizen journalism

Activist citizen-journalism sites are probably the most common form of the medium worldwide, being the direct inheritors of the tradition of activist and alternative news sources that has remained intact through technological and social change. The number of sites and projects have increased, however, since the internet substantially lowers the technological and financial barriers to entry for would-be activists and journalists, and provides considerable sanctuary for sites and projects that would otherwise have been shut down by authorities. The increased dispersion of social media as well has meant that more individual channels exist for people to express their opinions: individual blogs, Twitter feeds and Facebook pages abound, some more ‘journalistic’ than others.

The speed with which these new forms of online publishing can be launched and start functioning is also a factor in their favour. It takes only a minute to create a new feed or channel and, provided the information is newsworthy enough, it will be picked up and circulated immediately. The events of the so-called Arab Spring were publicised in this way, and the speed of the network directly fed into the events, bringing them to the fore much faster than would have happened in the days of samizdat printing presses and pirate radio (Hermida, 2012a).

In addition, a number of projects exist which provide frameworks, expertise, training and infrastructure for those wishing to set up a citizen-journalism site, or wishing to participate in one. Allvoices (www.allvoices.com), Global Voices Online (globalvoices.org), the Guerrilla News Network (GNN.tv – now defunct) and Indymedia (www.indymedia.org) all provide a locus for gathering disparate groups of citizen journalists into a single identifiable framework. Most of these

projects are explicitly activist, and many receive funding through charitable organisations and political groups. These kinds of projects are of interest to mainstream journalists primarily because of the insight and information they can provide to reporters and researchers, and their primary journalistic impact is on the news agendas of the world's media. The events of the so-called Arab Spring of 2011 were heavily discussed and reported on within these networks of activists, social media users, bloggers, citizen journalists and the like, and this did filter its way through to the agenda of the mainstream media (Akinfemisoye, 2011; Knight, 2012, 2013).

Issues in citizen journalism

These forms of citizen journalism are important, at least for the communities in which they function, and interesting, but the questions remain as to their role in relationship to mainstream forms of news media. Whether they pose genuine challenges to mainstream commercial news is hard to quantify, but in specific areas and sectors they may prove to do so.

Financial constraints

The main constraint facing these kinds of projects is financial. Although the barriers to entry are lower than for mainstream media, financial clout (capital, in Bourdieu's words) is still important. Web hosting and development are also expensive, although these costs can be mitigated against with the use of freely available services. Free services tend to make it difficult to generate revenue, though, since control of the linked advertising may remain with the hosting company, and once sites begin to generate enough traffic for the linked revenue to be more than negligible, the hosting costs can become prohibitive.

It is, however, the cost of content that remains the substantive barrier. Journalists need to be paid and, simply put, the more you pay, the better the journalism you get (up to a point). Some citizen journalism sites are run entirely with volunteers, but this can create its own problems, especially with consistency and range of product, and with issues of overall control. Left to their own devices, most people would rather write opinion or columns. Several citizen-journalism projects such as Reporter.co.za, Demotix, Blottr and Global Voices Online tend(ed) to be repositories of comment pieces and photography, all interesting, but it is unclear how they

can form a replacement for the mainstream or commercial news sector (Knight, 2010).

Consistency

Audiences expect and want a consistent and predictable news product: a certain amount of hard news, a certain amount of comment, some entertainment or light news, sport, a weather report and, in a printed product, the horoscope, the TV guide and a crossword. This is a reductive list of the content of mainstream news products, yes, but there is considerable truth in it. Citizen or activist journalism products that are looking to become the comprehensive news source for a community may find it hard to provide this kind of range. Many sites at best form a counterpoint to or commentary on the news provided in other contexts and forms.

Sites also need to provide enough material on a regular enough schedule that readers will return consistently. Random updates don't drive audience or advertising. The consistent product which drives loyal readers also drives advertisers – it is difficult to make revenue from advertising unless you can show that you have a consistent product (automatically served Google ads have limited revenue-generating possibility).

For activist projects, one assumes that money is less relevant, or that money is being provided through other means to maintain the project. In addition, in an activist context, the drive and motivation to maintain the project and its content is rooted in something other than the product itself. Most projects function either until the aim is achieved, or the movement that inspired them burns out entirely.

Accusations of bias

One of the main criticisms of amateur journalism from the mainstream media is that it is biased. This bias, whether perceived or real, forms much of the debate around amateur-journalism sites, at least in the way it is presented in professional-journalism contexts. There is considerable doubt as to whether this matters at all to either the audience or the advertisers. Certainly, some of the most popular blogs, forums and information sites on the internet are informed by very clear political aims and points of view (from all parts of the spectrum), and, if anything, the readership is more loyal than that of more middle-of-the-road sites. It is apparent that despite the stated need of communities for unbiased information provided to the

audience in a neutral space (a key tenet of democratisation, as reiterated in documents from the American Constitution to the UN Charter of Rights and Freedoms), the desire of people is for news and information that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs. The popularity of news organisations that hold specific and clear political views – from Fox News in the USA to the more extreme of the British tabloids – shows that giving the people what they want often means giving them biased and prejudicial information.

But neutrality and freedom from bias is a key part of the ideology of professional journalism (Allan, 2010). The construction of a journalistic identity is built on the bedrock of ‘objectivity’, which in western democratic societies is clearly linked to the independence of the media from political interference or regulation. It is this supposed objectivity that is the magic that transforms ordinary writing into journalism, and then grants it specific legal protections, such as the right to protect ones sources, and the defence of public interest against other possible charges (discussed further in [Chapter 10](#)).

The myth of objectivity, which has been thoroughly unpicked and discredited among the media theorists, at least remains firmly entrenched in the professional practice of journalism, and the more the profession comes under fire, the more objectivity is defended as a necessary part of the contribution that news organisations make to society as a whole. Even in countries like the UK, where it is accepted that newspapers, at least, have clear political-party allegiances, the ideal of objectivity is upheld. The UK’s Leveson Inquiry into press standards and phone hacking was more concerned with issues of corruption and illegal behaviour, but the journalists and editors who appeared before it roared their defence of the importance of the free press, on the grounds that professional, objective, neutral journalism is an essential part of a democratic society. Whether any citizens of that democratic society are paying any attention, or whether this, and numerous other, similar, debates that occupy the media pages of the newspapers, or the academic textbooks, are of any interest to the public whose interests we are supposedly so concerned with is an open debate.

Conclusion

The question remains as to whether any of the supposed conflict between citizen or amateur journalism and the more traditional, mainstream journalism is genuine, or whether there is, in fact, any serious threat to the

mainstream or commercial news sector posed by these projects.

Certainly, activist news organisations may pose a structural or political threat to the state-backed news organisations that control the free flow of information in undemocratic societies. These contexts, however, move journalism clearly into the realm of politics, and the conflict is inherently political, not journalistic. In societies where there has been a transition of power, the activist news organisations either closed down, or became simply the news media of the new society, in a relationship with the political power of the society that is mirrored across democratic societies worldwide.

In other contexts, however, activist news organisations are a valuable resource for other journalists – every foreign correspondent needs to know the sites and projects that offer an alternative take on events to the state-controlled media.

Other forms of citizen journalism, hyperlocal sites, social-aggregation projects like the Huffington Post and community alternative sites either remain too small and focused on the interests of a specific community (whether geographic, cultural, political or sub-cultural) to be of interest to a larger organisation (although they may well be completely viable as projects in and of themselves), or they are large enough to compete with the mainstream organisations, in which case the distinction between them is irrelevant – media pundits may go on at length about the structural, economic and philosophical differences between the Huffington Post and USA Today, but readers and advertisers don't often care. The fact remains that, despite the constructed tension between 'professional' and 'amateur' journalism, in practice, and to the audience, there is little to be found between them.

Less-constructed forms of 'citizen' information sharing, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, Google+ circles, may well be part of the public sphere that Habermas envisioned, and for a social theorist they are fascinating. It seems unlikely, however, that they would pose any kind of threat to the existence of more traditional, constructed and managed forms of news (if anything, the managed product that news organisations are now moving into these spaces is more of a threat to the amateur efforts than the other way round).

However, it is important to remember that news is an ecosystem, and the effect of amateur, activist and alternative news sites on other sites within that ecosystem is noticeable. Social media might not have provided the perfect public sphere, but the existence of these projects within the same

landscape as the more traditional news media can be seen to have an effect. The higher level of engagement with the audience, the greater proportion of opinion to hard news, and the lowered formality of language are all hallmarks of amateur journalism that are increasingly visible within the mainstream. The network has changed everyone within it, not simply the newcomers.

CASE STUDY

‘Netizen’ journalism in China

In July 2011 two high-speed trains running through the eastern city of Wenzhou, China, collided while crossing a viaduct. Four cars were derailed and 40 people died. The accident, as well as being a tragedy, was a great embarrassment for China’s much-publicised high-speed rail programme, and the government moved to limit the public-relations damage by issuing media directives, limiting access to the site and clearing away the wreckage as soon as possible (Blanchard and Wee, 2011).

Media directives are a common way for the Chinese authorities to control a news story: instructions are given to news editors as to what angles to use, and how to construct the story. In the case of the train crash, directives instructed that: ‘Reporting of the accident is to use “in the face of great tragedy, there’s great love” as the major theme. Do not question. Do not elaborate. Do not associate. No re-posting on micro-blogs will be allowed!’ (Hernandez, 2011).

Three years earlier, the Wenchuan earthquake had provoked a similar response from the government, but the prevalence of mobile phones and internet access had resulted in images, news and information being spread across social networks, embarrassing the Chinese authorities and undermining their control of information (Nip, 2009).

In the time between the Wenchuan earthquake and the Wenzhou train crash, Chinese use of the internet rose to some 450 million users (China Internet Watch, 2011), known as ‘netizens’ in China, many of them using microblogging and discussion platforms such as Weibo (a Chinese version of Twitter), Tianye and QQ.

This growing online public was horrified by the news of the train crash, and reports began to appear on the social-media networks in China, reports

that contradicted the official version as to the time of the accident, and that began to create a picture not just of 'in the face of great tragedy, there's great love', but of a disaster being covered up because it did not tally with the government's desires and plans. As the story unfolded, the demands by the families for explanation and compensation was highlighted on the networks, something the directives had not wanted discussed (Chen, 2011).

The mainstream Chinese media became caught between the official version of events, and the version they could see unfolding online, faster than the online censors could erase it. Many news organisations began to report what was happening on social media, a move that at least one senior editor believed would be seminal in changing the Chinese media: 'Thanks to micro-blogs, it was providing a convenient platform for people to collect variety information together. Micro-blog can make people get their power together and foster citizen consciousness to help people who need to help, also can supervise our government and society. It's seems like that micro-blog offer a microphone to everyone, If you got 10 million followers, then what you post on your micro-blog will be concerned by your followers. I think it can be an individual media and everyone can be a journalist in the future. It will make the media in China become more freedom and be responsibility to expose the truth.' (Liu Xiang, quoted in Chen, 2011)

Whether or not the Chinese media is more free, it is certainly more subject to scrutiny by the new networked and connected educated population, who do use social media as a way to hold the mainstream media to account. The more activist news organisations, the ones that chafed against central government controls, have been emboldened by online activism, and many took the opportunity of repeating and amplifying what was being said online, taking their news agenda guidance from the public, rather than from the state.

Social-media and citizen-media activism in China is still evolving. Certainly there are changes, and the ways in which social media can influence public opinion, and possibly public activism, can be seen. The rising influence of social media can be evidenced in the new guidelines on their use issued by the Beijing government in December 2011. These controls, which include a prohibition against 'rumour-mongering' and a ban on accounts not linked to a genuine name, are clearly designed to prevent similar responses to events like the Wenzhou train crash (Bandurski, 2011).

Note: Thanks to Chen Dan Qi, for her assistance with this case study.

Key reflections

- Within this new, fluid environment it is possible for ideas and individuals that do not have access to the elite power structures to be heard, but it is not a given: access must still be fought for.
- Can commercial journalism still maintain the goals of public journalism while serving business interests?
- Is the online space more egalitarian and accessible for people left isolated and ignored by mainstream media, or does it simply reflect the rest of the media?
- Is non-professional journalism still journalism? Does it matter if the people doing it are not trained or certified?
- What can mainstream commercial journalism learn from citizen journalism and community engagement?
- Is social capital in the new media space more useful than financial capital? Why?



Readings and resources

Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) is a key text for this chapter. Craig Calhoun's 1993 book *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (1993a) is a slightly more accessible introduction to the original text, and Pieter Boeder's essay 'Habermas' heritage: the future of the public sphere in a network society' (2005) is a good starting point for the subject.

The network society is discussed primarily by Manuel Castells in *The Rise of the Network Society* (2000) and by Jan van Dijk in *The Network Society* (2006). Henry Jenkins is the leading thinker on fan and participatory culture. His main works are the books *Convergence Culture* (2006a) and *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers* (2006b), and he maintains a blog at <http://henryjenkins.org/>.

Dan Gillmor's book *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People for the People* (2004) can almost be considered the manifesto of the citizen-journalism movement. This book, along with Bowman and Willis's 2003 report *We Media*, is core reading for anyone interested in the subject. Dan Gillmor maintains a blog at <http://dangillmor.com/>.

The main works on alternative and activist media are Chris Atton's books *Alternative Media* (2002) and *An Alternative Internet* (2004).

Einar Thorsen writes about citizen journalism in the book *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives* (co-edited with Stuart Allan), and in journal articles and other works. He maintains a website at <http://multimediajournalism.info/> and tweets as @einarthorsen.

Indymedia (www.indymedia.org/en/index.shtml) and Global Voices Online (<http://globalvoicesonline.org/>) both provide technology, training and support for citizen journalists, as well as hosting news and material from citizen journalists around the world. Indymedia maintains local organisations in a number of countries as well.

A number of initiatives exist to promote public journalism, including the Knight Community News Network, which is part of the John S. and James L. Knight foundation, and provides a wealth of information and services for aspiring community and public journalists.

The Center for Investigative Reporting (<http://centerforinvestigativereporting.org/>) and ProPublica (www.propublica.org/) both do independent investigative journalism, and provide tools and support for journalists as well.

For a development of alternative media since the 1970s see Tony Harcup's *Alternative Journalism, Alternative Voices* (Routledge, 2012).