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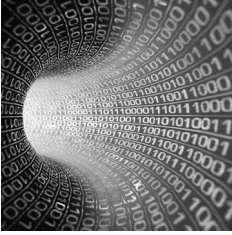
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# Social news, citizen journalism and democracy

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## Abstract

This article aims to contribute to a critical research agenda for investigating the democratic implications of citizen journalism and social news. The article calls for a broad conception of ‘citizen journalism’ which is (1) not an exclusively online phenomenon, (2) not confined to explicitly ‘alternative’ news sources, and (3) includes ‘metajournalism’ as well as the practices of journalism itself. A case is made for seeing democratic implications not simply in the horizontal or ‘peer-to-peer’ public sphere of citizen journalism networks, but also in the possibility of a more ‘reflexive’ culture of news consumption through citizen participation. The article calls for a research agenda that investigates new forms of gatekeeping and agenda-setting power within social news and citizen journalism networks and, drawing on the example of three sites, highlights the importance of both formal and informal status differentials and of the software ‘code’ structuring these new modes of news production.

## Key words

agenda-setting • citizen journalism • democracy • gatekeepers • metajournalism • social news • Web 2.0

## INTRODUCTION

Social news websites such as Digg.com and Newsvine offer users the chance to submit, rate, recommend and comment on news stories. This article begins by discussing the phenomenon of social news as ‘metajournalism’.

In particular, it discusses online social news in conjunction with another related phenomenon that has received considerably more attention to date, namely the rise of online 'citizen journalism'. It argues that, whilst social news serves a somewhat different function to citizen journalism, the distinction is not always clear-cut. There are overlaps as well as distinctions between these phenomena that are discussed in the first section of this article. It is argued that examining the relationship between citizen journalism and social news can help to illuminate the potential implications that social news holds for democracy and the public sphere. These potential implications are discussed in the second section of the article. A third section then considers three examples of social news sites, highlighting some of the issues they raise from a democratic perspective. This involves considering some of the ways in which power operates within sites purporting to provide a service that is considerably more democratic than 'traditional' news providers. Finally, the article considers some areas for future research and debate in this important but relatively uncharted area of new media.

## **SOCIAL NEWS AND CITIZEN JOURNALISM**

'Citizen journalism' refers to a range of web-based practices whereby 'ordinary' users engage in journalistic practices. Citizen journalism includes practices such as current affairs-based blogging, photo and video sharing, and posting eyewitness commentary on current events. Sometimes the term is used quite broadly to include activities such as re-posting, linking, 'tagging' (labeling with keywords), rating, modifying or commenting upon news materials posted by other users or by professional news outlets, whereby citizens participate in the news process without necessarily acting as 'content creators'. In other words, the definition of citizen journalism does not have completely settled boundaries (Lasica, 2003). It is possible to adopt a relatively narrow or 'strict' definition of citizen journalism or a broader or 'looser' definition. It is true that the broader in scope the definition, the more nebulous and potentially unwieldy the term 'citizen journalism' becomes. However, it can also be argued that a narrower conception creates artificial distinctions within a complex network of participatory practices. In particular, there are three areas in which the 'boundaries' of citizen journalism can be questioned and it is worthwhile considering each of these in turn.

Firstly, citizen journalism is generally associated with the internet and yet does not begin and end online or even with digital-interactive media. Broadcast news, for example, sometimes feeds off and incorporates elements of citizen journalism: examples include eyewitness footage from cell phones, reporting of stories originally broken by citizen journalism initiatives on the web, or even guest reporter slots in which citizens front and participate in packaging an item for a television or radio newscast. Print media too

can serve as vehicles of citizen journalism – from grassroots magazines to ‘soapbox’ features in newspapers. It might be objected that the citizen journalism phenomenon that is the current focus of attention is, indeed, a resolutely digital-interactive affair, underpinned by a Web 2.0 technical infrastructure (real-time posting and commenting, hyperlinking, RSS tagging and so forth). But when such practices come to impact on both the news agendas and editorial practices of the offline news media (as, for example, with the Current.tv site, which gathers user-created content for cable television), then the boundaries start to blur.

Secondly, given that citizen journalism is seen to present a challenge to mainstream corporate media, it is tempting to conceive of it as a ‘movement’ with intrinsically oppositional characteristics. For example, Dan Gillmor paints a compelling portrait of citizen journalism as a grassroots movement whose historical antecedents include Tom Paine and the revolutionary pamphleteers (Gillmor, 2006). However, without disregarding the radical implications of this ‘movement’, there may be little gain in restricting analysis of citizen journalism to sites that are set up explicitly as *alternatives* to ‘mainstream’ or ‘traditional’ journalism. The connotations of *alterity* attached to the concept of citizen journalism are potentially appealing but there is a need for caution. To begin with, the political economy of citizen journalism is in flux with large-scale commerce and advertising dollars (and in some cases traditional media corporations) encroaching steadily into this area. Yahoo’s purchase of Flickr (the photo-sharing site housing many interesting developments in citizen photojournalism) in 2005, Google’s acquisition of Blogger.com in 2003 and YouTube in 2006, and MSNBC’s acquisition of Newsvine in 2007 are salient examples. Even where there is clear institutional independence from ‘traditional’ media, citizen journalism sites may draw (consciously or otherwise) on norms and traditions associated with mainstream journalism. Alterity is, of course, always relative. But more importantly still, critical research in this field must acknowledge and investigate the incorporation of citizen journalism practices by traditional news organizations – dominant players such as CNN and BBC, for example, are not monolithic structures but allow for internal complexity and new media scholarship should analyze the possibilities for alterity (different perspectives, modes of address and story selection) which may emerge as citizen journalism features are incorporated into mainstream news websites. Such a task lies beyond the scope of this article, but the point here is to emphasize that it is rather too easy to dismiss such developments as somehow inauthentic or ‘recuperative’ practices of ‘digital capitalism’ (Schiller, 1999) that automatically dilute or even obstruct the more radical and democratic possibilities at stake within the citizen journalism movement. It makes sense, at least, to resist installing those kinds of binaries prior to sustained critical

interrogation of citizen journalism – a growing, yet still underdeveloped, field of research.

But perhaps the most vexing question about the boundaries of citizen journalism remains that alluded to already, namely whether we should restrict its definition to practices in which citizens act as *content creators*, producing original news material. A case can be made against ‘purifying’ the notion of citizen journalism to a putative moment of primary production. There may be a temptation to dismiss the ‘metajournalism’ (Dvorak, 2006) of rating, commenting, tagging and reposting as considerably less significant than ‘real’ citizen journalism which heralds an apparently more radical mode of public engagement: the heroes of ‘authentic’ citizen journalism are those who capture events on their cameras, break stories about events in their locales (‘hyperlocalists’), expose the failings of public and private institutions and their personnel, and sometimes become celebrated opinion-leaders, having circumvented the traditional journalistic career path. In fact, debates about citizen journalism have so far reflected an interesting tension. On one hand, the collaborative nature of a seemingly more postmodern journalistic form (Matheson, 2004; Wall, 2005) generates an emphasis on processes of circulation, reworking and interpretation – the ‘viral mutations’, in digital parlance, of public information and discourse, whereby notions of ‘collective intelligence’ (Lévy, 1997), ‘crowdsourcing’ (Crawford, 2007) and ‘folksonomy’ (Vanderwal, 2005) loom large. On the other hand, there remains a tendency to invoke a modernist, heroic narrative in which individual citizens (Matt Drudge and Salam Pax, the celebrated ‘Baghdad Blogger’, are particularly high profile cases) serve as fitting descendants of the radical pioneers of modern journalism prior to its corruption by commerce and vested interests (Barlow, 2007; Habermas, 1989). In such narratives, these figures become flag bearers of a nascent ‘fifth estate’ (Cooper, 2006; Curran and Seaton, 1997).

It is worth pausing to reflect on the practice and profession of journalism itself. One can avoid vexed philosophical debate around objectivity and simply draw on pragmatic observations of journalistic routines (Cohen, 2002) to see that journalism is in no small measure a craft of *re-telling* stories rather than simply disclosing them. One may consider the common practice within mainstream journalism of reworking press releases and agency feeds. But even at the other end of the spectrum, genuinely investigative reportage invariably involves important elements of re-telling and ‘translating’ both human and documentary sources. The point here is not to dismiss or downgrade the significance of uncovering and bringing to light events, issues and ideas that would otherwise remain hidden from public view. This constitutes a vital democratic function of professional journalism (and, to a lesser extent, some variants of citizen journalism). But by emphasizing how this ‘revelatory’

aspect of journalistic work cannot be divorced from processes of meaning-making, interpretation and re-articulation that, by definition, shape the public sphere, it can be argued that we should not dismiss out of hand the new modes of citizen participation afforded by the internet at this level (the 'metajournalism' of social news sites) as somehow unconnected with the 'real' business of journalism or news-making. The production of news routinely implies a complex and multilayered chain of communication and sense-making: events, issues and ideas will be subject to the influence of various 'filters' or 'gatekeepers' (sources, journalists, sub-editors) before reaching their public destination. What blogging, citizen journalism and social news sites yield are new possibilities for citizen participation at various points along those chains of sense-making that shape news – not only new possibilities for citizens to 'break' news.

The point here, then, is to suggest that a serious assessment of the relative impact, significance and radicalism of citizen journalism should not be constrained from the outset by excluding 'metajournalism' as somehow separate from, or even peripheral to, 'actual' journalism and news making. It is possible to maintain an analytical distinction between journalism and metajournalism but their separation also risks obscuring the potentially radical implications for democracy and the public sphere as citizens increasingly engage in aspects of news making that were previously opaque and, for the most part, off limits. Treating journalism and metajournalism as distinct but not separate is to acknowledge that, whilst they are not equivalent, the 're-telling' activities that are often disdained as 'metajournalism' in the non-professional and online sphere are an integral part of journalism itself: journalists themselves are filters and mediators, not merely disclosers.

Rather than treating news as revelation, then, it is possible to situate citizen journalism within a framework of *mediation* that can account for a wide spectrum of news-making practices, from activists blogging about local public body corruption, through cell phone photojournalists, to taggers who contribute to shifting memes of public discourse through the simple act of labeling news stories already in circulation. By situating these practices within the framework of mediation, it can be argued that citizen journalism constitutes a complex and layered mix of *representation*, interpretation (and re-interpretation), translation, and, indeed, *remediation* (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) whereby news and comment, discourse and information, is reshaped as it traverses a range of sites and varying media platforms. In this sense, then, whether the 'metajournalism' of social news sites such as those discussed later in this article can be considered part of citizen journalism depends upon whether a broad or narrow definition of citizen journalism – and, indeed, journalism per se – is adopted. The case for a broader definition is reinforced by the blending of journalistic and metajournalistic practices on individual

sites. Some social news sites (such as Guerilla News Network and Newsvine, discussed later) invite users to post original content as well as commenting on existing content. But even without this duality at a structural level, there are many instances where the boundaries are blurred: for example, if a user posts a comment on an existing news story but, in doing so, brings to light new knowledge about that event or topic, then it is not clear that this contribution can be classified only as 'metajournalism'. As such, a broad conception of citizen journalism appears warranted on the proviso that the important democratic function of bringing new knowledge into the public sphere is not downgraded as equivalent to secondary commentary, in much the same way that a piece of investigative journalism in a newspaper would not be treated as equivalent to a reader's letter to the editor written in response to the article.

## SOCIAL NEWS AND THE DEMOCRATIC IMAGINATION

Certain characteristics of citizen journalism appear to present interesting possibilities for a reinvigorated public culture. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to emphasize the *potential* rather than actual democratic impact by situating this trend in context: the proportion of internet users (let alone the population at large) which has to date engaged in any form of 'Web 2.0' activity (photo sharing, blogging, etc.), let alone with a news or journalism focus, remains relatively modest at around 25 percent (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007). Growth rates allow us to speculate on but not to assume a more popular uptake and mainstream engagement in the coming few years. Nevertheless, several characteristics of citizen journalism may potentially feed the democratic imagination.

As a significant amount of communications research into news media practices underscores, the factors which shape the news agenda – commercial and ideological influences, journalistic routines, constraints, professional norms and news values – are relatively non-transparent to audiences. It is common to hear the argument that news media professionals serve the public interest most effectively by bringing their expertise to bear on the story selection process: they have an appreciation for and intuitive understanding of news values, as well as expertise in accessing and explaining events and information. This argument is valid but tends to miss a key point: the democratic deficit lies in the non-transparency and over-determination of the story selection process and the incapacity for audiences to question or challenge those selections. In a mediascape characterized by scarcity, that is, finite numbers of news outlets which often share similar routines, primary sources and journalistic cultures, audience 'power' may be reduced to little more than blunt veto, that is, the option to disengage from news media as, indeed, increasing numbers of especially younger audiences have been doing (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006). The democratic

appeal of *online news* lies in the prospect of alleviating that scarcity and the additional democratic appeal of *citizen journalism*, more specifically, lies in the prospect of citizens themselves participating in the agenda-setting process. This occurs not merely through passive bespoke consumption (though much online news delivery does of course allow for precisely this), but through active engagement: blogging, re-posting, commenting, recommending, rating, tagging and the like. The citizen journalism movement does not signal the end of agenda-setting by professional or elite media organizations. Such institutions still break *and* frame a large proportion of the news stories circulating through the online sphere and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. But those institutions must now vie for attention in competition with a diverse range of alternative news sources, from hyperlocal sites to unofficial and untamed celebrity gossip sites (news media dealing in scandal and salacious rumor-mongering can now be beaten at their own game by online sites more free of ethical and even legal constraints than they). Moreover, the stories that professional news outlets break and frame will now routinely serve as raw material rather than finished product – they become just one more link in the news production chain which, in fact, may often begin with the ‘wholesale’ news (and public relations) agencies (Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen, 1998) rather than the ‘retail’ news outlets with which communications scholarship primarily engages.

This notion of a chain of production which does not end with the news outlet has already been extensively theorized within media studies through the active audience paradigm which emphasizes the role of audiences themselves as *producers* of meaning as they read, process and discuss media texts in diverse ways, often reframing them in the process (Moores, 1993). Citizen journalism, including the metajournalism of social news, can to some extent be seen as an extension of this active audience engagement as opposed to a sudden rupture in a previously settled producer–consumer dichotomy. But the life cycle of news stories broken by professional media now takes on a new level of complexity and indeterminacy. Stories, once online, confront various possible fates: they may be more easily buried in this vast new attention economy if they do not capture the imagination quickly and strongly enough; or they may be amplified, sustained and potentially morphed as they are re-circulated, reworked, and reframed by online networks. This point is somewhat obscured by focusing exclusively on possibilities for citizens *making* their own news. Citizen journalism allows members of the public to engage in agenda-setting not merely by producing original content (though this is certainly a significant development) but also by rendering the agenda-setting processes of established professional media outlets radically provisional, malleable and susceptible to critical intervention. Citizens exercising a form of journalistic and editorial intervention acquire



first-hand experience of the decisions and selection processes involved in news making. The *constructed* nature of news is laid bare to these citizen journalists through their own practices.

It remains unclear the extent to which this promotes a culture of increased reflexivity and media literacy and whether a critical attitude to the fallacy of transparency (i.e. the notion of news as a 'window on the world') does more to promote a culture of civic engagement than one of cynicism or nihilism (Lovink, 2008: 1–38). But in broad terms, citizen journalism feeds the democratic imagination largely because it fosters an unprecedented potential, at least, for news and journalism to become part of a *conversation* – something that resonates with the ideals of both Jürgen Habermas (1989) and James Carey (1998). The suggestion here is that news ceases to be a product which is merely consumed. But it is necessary to break down this principle (or aspiration) to understand its full force. Much of the conversation generated within the sphere of citizen journalism is *horizontal*, that is, peer-to-peer in nature. Citizens share, discuss, provoke and argue with each other in this environment. But there is also a need to account for the many and significant threads of communication that run vertically within this environment: professionals, elites, power-holders and experts (including professional journalists and editors) *feed into and feed off* this ongoing conversation. Professional news outlets provide stories and information sourced from power-holders, for example, and this, of course, is essential fuel for a functional democracy; and increasingly politicians and other public figures can ill-afford to neglect the online communities in which their credibility is subject to ongoing scrutiny and turbulent reassessment. The 2007 US presidential candidates' debate on CNN in which candidates faced questions from YouTube contributors was a particularly high-profile reflection of this increased concern with the online citizenry on the part of powerful institutions. Both normatively and descriptively, any model of democracy that fails to account for the hierarchical threads of communication and conversation (and the relations of power contained therein), in addition to the peer-to-peer interactions of the 21st century 'virtual coffee house' (Connery, 1997; Goode, 2005: 85–110), is one-sided.

One critically important dimension of power at stake in the public sphere is the role played by 'gatekeepers' (McQuail, 1993: 213–14): media personnel, opinion-leaders and censors all help to shape the parameters of public discourse. The term 'gatekeeper' is a useful shorthand but an imperfect metaphor as it implies intentionality and conscious human agency when in fact many gatekeeping processes involve systemic dynamics that exceed the design and control of specific personnel. As the analysis later in this article shows, this is equally, if not more, true of the online news sphere than of 'traditional' journalism. Bruns (2003) has argued for 'gatewatcher' as a

better term than 'gatekeeper' to apply to online news, reflecting the user practice of *publicizing* rather than controlling information under conditions of information abundance in contrast to the scarcity of the pre-digital age. The term 'gatekeeper' is retained here, though, because visibility and attention, if not information, remain scarce resources in the online news sphere: whether or not a particular story reaches the front page of a popular online news site or remains buried several pages deep has consequences akin to 'traditional' gatekeeping processes even if the underlying process differs significantly.

In fact, it is necessary to acknowledge the enduring role and relevance of many 'traditional' gatekeepers in this radically altered environment. Venture capital, larger scale corporations, advertising revenue and commercialism in general are increasingly important factors shaping the citizen journalism environment. For example, significant citizen journalism sites, such as OhMyNews, NowPublic, Digg and even the avowedly 'alternative' Guerrilla News Network, are all based on 'for-profit' business models. Moreover, the professional media outlets and personnel that provide source material for a large proportion of citizen journalism practices, along with public and private institutions (and their PR agencies), experts, celebrities and so forth, continue to exert gatekeeping powers, albeit under more complex and challenging circumstances for the reasons outlined already. That is one reason not to dismiss the notion of gatekeeping out of hand as a relic of the 20th century made obsolete by a supposedly unlimited and 'friction-free' marketplace (Gates, 1996) where anyone can find the news they want (or perhaps even produce it themselves!). But it is also necessary to explore what *new* modes of gatekeeping power may be emerging. What follows is a brief discussion of three social news sites analysed from this perspective. The analysis is preliminary and inevitably impressionistic, with the modest aim of signposting potential directions for future research which will be discussed in the final section.

## DIGG.COM

Digg is a metajournalism site where members post and rate news stories from external web sites (including those of mainstream news providers as well as blogs and amateur content). The relative prominence of a story is related to the number of users who 'Digg' it. The site is skewed towards a particular demographic – young, male, predominantly American, and tech-savvy. This is clearly manifested in the pattern of stories with a strong emphasis on technology, scandal, humour and celebrity. But the concern here is less with content and more with form in order to assess the potential implications of such newsmaking structures for the exercise of citizen participation more generally. In other words, there is a case for studying sites such as Digg as potential models for emerging news production, consumption and

participation practices and assessing the ways in which they may help to reconfigure the public sphere, rather than simply as isolated phenomena.

Aesthetically, Digg trades on a currently popular minimalist 'look and feel' associated with many Web 2.0 initiatives. Such an aesthetic conveys a sense of user-control. It underscores a sense that news, once strongly linked to carefully composed *narrative*, is now structured as a *database*, that is, an endlessly shifting agglomeration of data to be navigated, reconfigured, customized and 'mined' in seemingly limitless permutations (Manovich, 2001). This is not a trivial side issue if consideration is given to the role news may once have played in the 'cognitive mapping' citizens engage in as they attempt to make sense of the world around them, their place in the world (globally, nationally, locally), and their scope for intervening in it (Jameson, 1990: 162-3; Anderson, 1991). News as database (a matrix of individually chosen possibilities) as opposed to news as a given, shared and, by comparison, stable narrative, raises some challenging questions about those cognitive mapping processes. The look and feel of sites like Digg, and not merely the technical infrastructure, contributes to this shift from narrative to database news.

The company rhetoric of Digg trades easily on the notion that taking the agenda-setting and editorial selection process out of the hands of a professional elite and devolving it to a community of users strikes a blow for democracy. The site proclaims that 'Digg is democratizing digital media. As a user, you participate in determining all site content by discovering, selecting, sharing, and discussing the news, videos, and podcasts that appeal to you' (<http://www.digg.com/how>). There is, of course, a convenient elision of democracy and populism at play here: democratization is equated with popular appeal (a quantitative value) as opposed to the qualitative values of newsworthiness (popularly dismissed as intrinsically elitist, patrician or, at least, undemocratic). However, it would be rather too easy to dismiss such a site out of hand as nothing more than a populist and quantitative aggregation process given that the site does foster a degree of dialogue, debate and commentary on posted news stories. So critical investigation of a site such as this requires an open mind towards the merits and pitfalls, the strengths and limitations, of its functioning as a 'public sphere'.

The information architecture and interface of a site like Digg merits attention for these purposes. By default, Digg sorts stories on its front page by 'most recent'. Top stories by popularity are confined to a less prominent side bar although the front page can be re-sorted by popularity. (Users can also customize their news agendas according to topics and even filter out profanity.) However, the casual visitor, with default settings, may not immediately realize that for a story to be on the front page it has already been through a voting process in the 'upcoming' section of the site. Stories have

to receive a critical mass of votes before being promoted to the main section of the site. In other words, the default view (that which does not require conscious effort to modify) values stories according to currency only after a threshold of popularity has been passed. What this structure means is that the site relies on the concerted effort of users to visit the ‘upcoming’ section and vote for stories currently buried beneath the surface. This raises the possibility of a two-tier agenda-setting process in which a core of motivated users do the initial ‘digging’ required to bring stories to the surface, whilst other users rate stories already having high visibility (a ‘snowball’ effect), and casual visitors merely read. A ‘cloud view’ interface is also available which uses variable font sizes to provide an instant visual representation of a topic’s popularity. This, too, lends itself to a ‘snowball’ effect by making the most popular topics the most prominent and therefore most likely to attract further attention and increased popularity.

Although dialogue (through comments) can occur, there is a very binary mechanism at the root of this structure, whereby stories can either be ‘Digg’ or buried (which translates as casting a vote for the story’s removal). This superficiality can only be reinforced by the fact that it is possible – perhaps even encouraged – to ‘Digg’ or bury at a glance without even clicking to access the entire story first. A header and first line can make or break a story in this environment and, anecdotally, Digg forums sometimes discuss (and bemoan) the phenomenon of click-happy users influencing the site without any regard to the merits of the story itself. Whilst it would be interesting to know more about the effect this phenomenon may have on patterns of story topic, the concern that exercises diligent users worried about the integrity of the process is not a skew towards certain story topics, but, rather, a skew towards certain story contributors. Whilst the stated values of the site are democracy and meritocracy, controversies around Digg’s integrity draw on a range of alternative tropes including ‘aristocracy’, ‘popularity contest’, ‘Digg mafia’ and even ‘censorship’. As one search engine optimization (SEO) expert puts it:

When folks think of Digg, they’re often misled into believing that the content seen on the homepage is representative of what a wide base of Internet users think is news-worthy and important. The numbers tell a different story – that of all stories that make it to the front page of Digg, more than 20% come from a select group of 20 users. Digg isn’t shy about hiding this fact ... Many of these top users have ... a popular ratio of 30% and higher, meaning that almost 1 out of every 3 stories they submit will reach the homepage. Several users ... have popular ratios of over 60% ... The top 100 Digg users have contributed 14,249 stories to the homepage, or 56.41%. (Fishkin, 2006)

In other words, there seems to be *prima facie* evidence of a powerful core or ‘elite’ at work on this social news site. It is actually not entirely clear

just how far at odds this phenomenon is with the claims of a meritocracy. Certainly, the site has defended itself by pointing out that users with high popular ratios *earn* their reputations through skill and hard work. Nevertheless, the site's credibility has been questioned by those who believe that the facility for signing up 'friends' on the site leads to a herd mentality in which friends automatically vote for each other's content and members with the most friends thereby acquire the most power. Digg's algorithm (like Google's) for sorting and ranking content has never been transparent or as simple as it might seem: ostensibly, to avoid hacking and manipulation of the system, a range of factors and not merely the raw number of 'Diggs' a story receives contribute to its ranking. But in response to the controversy over the 'aristocracy' phenomenon, the algorithm was modified further in a way which is intended to make corrections for the problem of friends automatically voting for friends by taking into account the 'diversity' of 'Diggs'. But by increasing the obscurity and complexity of the proprietary algorithm, such that votes are now differentially weighted in non-transparent ways, the controversy has not been removed. Now accusations of 'censorship' and of seeking to penalize success, popularity and hard work are voiced in the user community.

### GUERRILLA NEWS NETWORK

Founded in 2000, then re-launched as a Web 2.0 initiative in 2004, Guerilla News Network is an independent for-profit news site. A significant proportion of the site's content is user-generated, but sits alongside content produced by the company itself. The site's FAQ page invites perspectives from across the political spectrum but there is no mistaking GNN's youthful, left-leaning activist and anti-corporate profile. The aesthetics of the site reinforce this profile with graphics, colour scheme and typography signaling its alterity. The layout differs somewhat from the uncluttered Web 2.0 design of Digg. If the look and feel of Digg conveys a sense that 'you, the user' are in control of the news you consume (it invites a kind of 'mastery' in that sense), then the busier look of GNN could be said to convey a messier worldview, an urgency that invites intervention more than mastery. Indeed, the site's mission statement makes a more modest claim than that of Digg. It does not promise democracy. Rather, 'our mission is to expose people to important global issues through cross-platform guerilla programming' (site FAQs).

Unlike Digg, GNN carries original articles, as well as links to external news stories (including audio, video and blogs). Rather like Digg's 'upcoming' section, GNN incorporates what it calls the 'yard' where articles are housed awaiting approval of the user base before being promoted to the front page. Unlike Digg, however, the approval process is confined to the yard and

articles are not continually rated once they make the homepage. Because the site includes original user-generated content, the approval process can contain an extra layer. In addition to the binary vote for and against, users can post editorial comments to encourage writers to polish and refine their work ready for publication on the homepage. A vote against is also couched as indicating that an article should be sent 'back to draft' rather than simply excluded (though this will often be the consequence). The idea is to foster a degree of discussion, collaboration and peer-based editing (though this does not have the open structure of a wiki – users cannot actually edit each other's work). The 'click-happy' syndrome of Digg is at least discouraged here as it is not possible to assess a story without clicking to the full article (though, of course, it does not guarantee that articles will be fully read or that members won't vote for known contacts above others).

The software code driving GNN is somewhat less obscure than that of Digg's secretive algorithm. Whilst the parameters shift with traffic levels, users are informed of how many votes for or against are required to earn promotion to the front page (or indeed demotion to draft stage) at a particular time. Matters become a little more complex (though not secretive) as the site weights the votes of users differentially according to their status or 'rank'. A novice user who has posted few articles herself and received few approvals, will be classified as a 'conscript' and carry just one vote when assessing the work of others. Higher ranks (such as 'rebel', 'guerilla' and 'commandante') achieve progressively higher weighting and therefore have more editorial influence as a result of their own contributions.

But whilst this has the appearance of a relatively organic status system – one perhaps containing some admixture of meritocracy and aristocracy – GNN is overlaid with a 'hardwired' hierarchy that is the cause of controversy and some chagrin amongst sections of the user base. Site editors moderate for what they perceive as pornographic, defamatory or potentially libelous content. But more than this, site editors are effectively able to veto content. An article may require the endorsement of a high-ranking member in order to have a realistic chance of being promoted to the front page of the site. But even once such a hurdle has been crossed, there is no guarantee that the article will actually appear on the front page. In forum discussions on the matter, the site editors point out that users often promote articles that still require a great deal of work before they are deemed fit for the front page and that it is sometimes not feasible to have an editor spend the time required to do the necessary editing. Unsurprisingly, not all users are convinced that the editorial blocks are pragmatically as opposed to politically motivated. But the point here is that a site like GNN is caught between its mission to be a social platform with horizontal, peer-based gatekeeping, on the one hand, and, on the other, a respectable alternative news source which upholds the journalistic

and editorial standards required to serve the interests of an enlightened public sphere.

## NEWSVINE

Founded in 2006 by former senior Disney/ESPN staff and acquired by MSNBC in 2007, Newsvine incorporates user blogs, stories from external news sites posted by users, and Associated Press news feeds. 'Updated continuously by citizens like you, Newsvine is an instant reflection of what the world is talking about at any given moment' declares the homepage. Obvious lines of questioning arise here: Citizens 'like us' in what sense? How does the user base of Newsvine reflect 'the world'? To begin with, one can discern a somewhat older, more risk averse and less tech-oriented membership than Digg, for example.

Aesthetically, Newsvine has a look and feel that combines the Web 2.0 minimalism referred to above with a more image-led and column-based layout associated with established news sites. In this sense it appears to convey a sensible compromise between citizen and professional journalism. It suggests the credibility of a professional news site existing in tandem with the democracy and 'real time' structure of a social news site. There is a strong emphasis on respected external sources and corporate logos appear against stories from CNN, BBC and other mainstream media. And the front page images are often visually arresting shots from Associated Press (AP).

The automated flow of AP feeds provides a selling point for the site and waiting for news to go through the filter of 'retail' news outlets and the intervention of human editors is highlighted as an unnecessary inconvenience. But in addition to such benefits, reputation and trust are highlighted as major assets in this social network. Users can vote for stories (without necessarily accessing the full text), and they can rate comments on stories too. Users reading comments can easily skip between positively rated comments and save themselves the trouble of scrolling through the less highly regarded ones. Again, the likelihood of a 'snowball' effect increases with features such as this in which less popular perspectives can be easily and automatically filtered out, and within a structure which allows for votes to be attracted towards users with large friendship networks. Like Digg, a proprietary algorithm works to try and limit distortions such as this as well as deliberate manipulation of the system by users (or marketing agents) intent on artificially engineering a high profile for a story.

Search engine optimization (SEO) consultants work out the best ways to secure high rankings for site listings on major search engines such as Google. They do not need to 'crack the code' of Google's PageRank algorithm to do this but, rather, they research the behavior of search engines to determine how companies and organizations (and sometimes individuals) can best rise to

the top of search engine listings. This is renewable enterprise as search engines continually strive to refine their algorithms and render them immune to easily deployable tactics by webmasters. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of social sites (such as Digg, Newsvine and YouTube) which aggregate and rank (often through complex algorithms) user-generated and user-selected content (as opposed to content discovered by automated 'bots' or hired professional editors). As such, a new variation on SEO has emerged: social media optimization (SMO) is the name given to this new field of expertise. One SEO/SMO consultant (Whyte, 2007) publicly discloses his tips on how to secure high rankings for stories on Newsvine. His list of criteria includes: the number of friends in the user's profile; the reputation of those friends; the number of people who have the user on their watchlist; how well the user's previous contributions have been rated; how many articles the user has submitted; the number of 'popular' comments the user has received; similarity and relevance of stories to others already submitted under the chosen category; the reputation of the external site carrying the story; how long users are spending on the story's page; and how new the article is. The factors which relate to reputation of the user are highlighted, albeit vaguely, on the site. Other factors are not. Whyte also alludes to the likelihood of some manual intervention in the process ('hand-jobs' in SEO-speak). This is not an exhaustive list of criteria, nor are we in a position to comment on the reliability or thoroughness of this particular SMO consultant's 'advice'. Rather, the point here is that whilst it is not reasonable to demand that new media researchers master the 'science' of algorithms, critical research into citizen journalism and social news can benefit from engaging with and becoming familiar with the ideas and findings of SEO and SMO in order to develop an understanding of the potential patterns and gatekeeping processes that can emerge via the software code underpinning these sites.

## CONCLUSION: MAPPING A RESEARCH AGENDA

It is possible to distil from the discussion above three broad themes that could usefully frame a more sustained research agenda into social news, power and the public sphere. It is important to note that these themes emphasize form and structure above content. This should not be seen as devaluing content-based investigation: exploring the discourses, news values and ideological patterns of citizen journalism and social news content remains a critical enterprise. Nor should it obscure social analysis of the user-base: it is necessary to research and seriously debate the extent to which a culture of – or demand for – 'reflexive conversation' matches up to the *potential* evident in the online news sphere. However, some of the formal and structural aspects of online news that need investigating are not so well defined at this point in time and the process of mapping these is still at an early stage.



### **(1) Status and social capital**

Research on virtual communities has, for a number of years now (Rheingold, 1993), been concerned with the complex ways in which ostensibly flat social structures (when participants enter a relatively level playing field) in the online world take on various asymmetrical characteristics in ways which are sometimes analogous to and sometimes distinct from those of offline communities. Such hierarchies expose the naïve utopianism of early cyberspace discourse which promised that the inequities and prejudices of the offline world could be set aside in this new, anonymous space. The phenomenon of individual bloggers acquiring quasi-celebrity or opinion-leader status is already a familiar one and there is value in looking more closely at the processes by which this occurs. But questions of status also emerge in the field of metajournalism. As shown, the Guerilla News Network, for example, operates a system in which members of the community can accumulate approval ratings from other users for news that they post. Editorial power (the ability to rank stories) is then weighted according to approval points of members. This highlights the need to weigh the surface appearances of meritocracy against underlying dynamics that shape this system and allow certain members of such online networks to accrue social capital. It is worth noting as an aside that social capital can also be linked to economic capital as high status members can earn revenue either as part of a site's business model (advertising revenue can be earned by popular Newsvine contributors and syndication revenue can be earned from the onsale of images by the citizen journalism agency Scoopt, for example) or even illicitly as suggested in the story of an agency that buys votes on Digg on behalf of third parties seeking to raise the profile of a story they have submitted (Newitz, 2007). But the point here is that critical research into the power dynamics and gatekeeping processes associated with citizen journalism will need to engage seriously with the complex and multifaceted issue of status. A key question for future research, then, will be: 'What kinds of status differentials emerge within citizen journalism and metajournalism networks and how do these impact on processes of newsmaking and agenda-setting?'

### **(2) Online editors and moderators**

In addition to the informal, 'organic' and potentially fluid 'status' differentials at stake within citizen journalism communities, critical research needs also to engage with the various formalized or 'hardwired' hierarchies that emerge. This includes moderators whose role is to police the margins and ensure that certain boundaries are not breached (a post-publication process), but it can also include professional editorial staff whose role is actually to select, filter or edit citizen-generated material before it is published online: examples include Yahoo's user-generated news, Current TV and OhMyNews.

It also includes editorial staff employed within 'traditional' news outlets that incorporate citizen journalism elements into their news services. We cannot assume that these are simply 'traditional' gatekeepers transposed into the digital realm, because the norms and processes by which professional editors select and edit user-generated content do not necessarily match those which inform their practices in relation to content generated by professional journalists, and so it is necessary to investigate the differences. What is needed is further investigation into the manner in which those formally vested with gatekeeping powers in citizen journalism sites exercise that power, and the codes, values and routines that inform their practices.

### (3) Code

The term 'code' is used here as a generic shorthand – one that will undoubtedly require unpacking in future research. Ostensibly, this is where news and journalism studies must engage with new media studies in order to develop a critical understanding of the new media forms in which news and journalism now increasingly circulate. The term 'code' is used here to refer to the digital substrate underpinning these developments in part precisely because the term carries a superficial and misleading connotation of neutrality in need of challenge (Johnson, 1999; Manovich, 2001). The fallacy of neutrality is perhaps most potent when citizen journalism sites are conceived as mere 'containers' in which software code, in contrast to the subjective, even arbitrary, interventions of human agency (editors, censors, press barons, etc.) associated with 'traditional' journalism, deploys objective procedures (such as the popularity rating of a story) to determine the structure of the news. It may be easy, then, to slide into a discourse of 'democracy' or 'meritocracy' in newsmaking without critically interrogating what might be termed the 'politics of code'. The formal properties of any medium embody 'codes' which carry political consequences: film scholars commonly debate the role cinematography and editing techniques play in shaping the messages of films, for example, just as communications scholars are familiar with the ways in which the separation of 'news' and 'op-ed' in print journalism contributes to an ideology of objectivity. So, too, it is important to explore the role that software code plays in shaping meanings, messages and world-views. This requires researchers to engage with both the characteristics of the web as a medium and the specific sites that host citizen journalism and metajournalism initiatives. As demonstrated by the brief examples highlighted above, this means engaging, for example, with sites' aesthetics, information architecture, interface and algorithms.

Together, these themes point to a potentially rich field of research and debate which can help us to better understand the underlying dynamics and nuances of new journalistic practices as news undergoes some striking

transformations as a cultural product in the digital age. The increasingly complex relationships between news production and consumption, between the amateur citizen and the professional journalist, and between 'news' and 'comment' all require consideration in the context of the new media forms which frame these reconfigurations.

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