

Working the Story: news curation in social media as a second wave of citizen journalism

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The first wave of citizen journalism

The story of citizen journalism as a social and cultural practice is in many ways tightly intertwined with the story of the technologies that are used to *do* citizen journalism. One of the founding myths of citizen journalism (see for example Meikle 2002 and 2004; Platon and Deuze 2003; Bruns 2005) is the introduction of the first *Indymedia* publishing platform, just in time for the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization summit and the ‘alternative globalization’ activities and demonstrations which accompanied it. Supported by the then brand-new ‘Web 2.0’ publishing technologies that enabled the rapid publication of updates in text, audio and video from the summit, the Seattle Independent Media Center became a first highly visible example of citizen journalism, and inspired a substantial number of follow-on projects (not least the global Indymedia movement itself): “In the ten months following Seattle, a network of more than 30 such IMCs had been set up, each using the same freely circulated software, and each relying on individual participants or visitors to submit content” (Meikle 2002: 90).

This chapter traces the development and transformations of citizen journalism from these early beginnings through the hey-day of stand-alone citizen journalism sites and news blogs to the present-day revival of collective news curation practices in social media environments, paying special attention to the online platforms which underpin such activities. To highlight this connection between the practice of citizen journalism and its technological frameworks is

by no means to fall into the trap of technological determinism: in a variety of forms, and without using the term itself, citizen journalism had been practiced – often less visibly so – for decades, even centuries; the pamphleteers of the American struggle for independence may be considered to have practiced a form of proto-citizen journalism (and some of them, indeed, later founded the United States’ first newspapers), using another then brand-new publishing technology: the commercial printing presses which had recently become available in many of the colonies. Citizen journalism as a social practice always draws on the publishing tools at hand; the emerging Web 2.0 simply became the latest and particularly powerful set of tools with which to engage in an alternative form of newswriting and commentary – tools so versatile that the term ‘citizen journalism’ itself was born.

The *Indymedia* publishing platform did not remain the only major support technology for citizen journalism, of course – other user-controlled publishing platforms, and especially Weblogs, became important for the further development and mainstreaming of citizen journalism. Contrary to the work done by the Seattle Independent Media Center in 1999, such efforts often shifted from first-hand reporting towards news commentary, however (Bruns 2006; Singer 2006). Outside of major local events, most citizen journalists and news bloggers remained dependent on the material published in conventional news outlets, and were able only to provide alternative interpretations and analyses of such news reports. As a direct consequence, contrary to the gatekeeping of traditional news outlets, forms of ‘gatewatching’ emerged (Bruns 2005): citizen journalists followed and observed the material published by mainstream news organizations, government and NGO bodies, industry, research centers and civil society groups –compiling, collating, and curating the material from these information sources in their own publications. Leading citizen journalists also conducted their own background research – such fact-checking at times became crucial for debunking the spin put

on stories by political players and some partisan journalists. This posed a substantial, critical challenge to journalism-as-usual, as Walsh points out: “once the ‘news,’ which journalism traditionally presents as the objective truth, was revealed to be a manufactured product – a product manufactured, moreover, by methods that seemed cynical and manipulative to many outsiders – the knowledge hegemony of journalism began to show cracks” (2003: 369).

If the majority of such user-led engagement with the news might better be described as ‘citizen commentary’ than citizen journalism, it nonetheless had a significant impact on the established journalism industry, and on society as such. Key episodes in the story of citizen journalism include the resignation of US Republican leader Trent Lott over apparently pro-segregationist comments, and the retirement of veteran US news anchor Dan Rather following CBS’s bungled handling of dubious documents about George W. Bush’s service record in the National Guard; in both cases, citizen journalists drove the news commentary and analysis when mainstream media failed to fully engage with these stories.

News bloggers and citizen journalists also provided an important alternative perspective in the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq war, at a time when a mistaken sense of ‘patriotism’ led to a “spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann 1974) that effectively silenced voices critical of US government policy in the mainstream US media. By that time, even some professional journalists had begun to see blogs as alternative outlets “through which they could share their more candid responses to the bigger questions of the war. Journalists’ personal entries provided a much broader range of opinions ... than were available, particularly to Americans, on broadcast and cable television” (Rushkoff 2003: 17). Disenchanted with the state of the contemporary news industry, in other words, professional journalists were turning to citizen

journalism – one even raised some US\$10,000 through crowdfunding to finance his travel to northern Iraq as an independent war journalist (Allbritton 2003).

Elsewhere, too, citizen journalists with specific expertise filled the gaps which mainstream news organizations could or would not address: in the 2007 Australian federal election, the electoral predictions made on their blogs by independent opinion poll analysts came much closer to the mark than those by influential mainstream journalists and commentators, in spite of the latter's thunderous indignation at being thus outdone by amateurs who "wouldn't get a job at a real newspaper" (*The Australian*, 2007) – amateurs who were in fact experts in their own fields (cf. Bruns, 2012). This foreshadowed the role that analyst Nate Silver should come to play in the 2008 and 2012 US elections.

But while such examples serve to demonstrate the truth in early blogger-journalist Dan Gillmor's widely cited statement that "my readers know more than I do" (2003: vi), they also show that such superior knowledge tends to be the result of a para-professional dedication to specific themes and topics which is far from universal amongst citizen journalists and news bloggers in general, or indeed amongst the broader readership base for journalism in both its 'professional' and 'citizen' forms. A more precise variation on Gillmor's statement would be that '*some* of my readers know more than I do', and that some of these knowledgeable readers in turn may write for citizen journalism sites and news blogs.

To the extent that the term 'citizen journalism' evokes hopes of a widespread, democratic participation in the journalistic process, such hopes have tended to remain unfulfilled: citizen journalists *are* citizens, of course (as indeed are professional journalists), but they are far from representative of the overall population. The demographics of citizen journalism are

often hardly different from those of professional (political) journalism: for the most part, citizen journalists are likely to be news enthusiasts and what Stephen Coleman has described as “political junkies” (2006), much like their opposite numbers in the news industry. Contrary to the ‘armchair journalist’ accusations, many citizen journalists probably *would* get a job at a real newspaper, if they could be bothered to earn the formal professional qualifications required (and if real newspapers were still hiring new staff).

From sites to networks: the decline of the imprint

The publishing logic behind citizen journalism sites of the post-*Indymedia* generation, including news blogs, is in many aspects not particularly different from that of newspapers (and newspaper Websites). Although citizen journalism sites tend to introduce a greater openness to participation by a wider range of contributors, and although the scope and style of news coverage and commentary in these sites may differ from conventional industry practice, one fundamental characteristic that unites the two is that they remain *sites*: distinct publications. Even if citizen journalism sites and news blogs do not seek to replace newspapers and other news publications altogether, as the latter have at times suspected, many of them have certainly sought to establish themselves as viable and recognized sources of news and commentary alongside the imprints of the mainstream news media.

The speed with which several key sites with roots in the citizen journalism movement – the *Huffington Post* in the US, *Crikey* in Australia, *OhmyNews* in South Korea – were able to establish themselves as accepted journalistic or quasi-journalistic imprints in their respective mediaspheres demonstrates this point. Each may look different in content and style from its more venerable news industry colleagues and competitors, but they match them, crucially, in the fact that each serves as a recognizable masthead to signal a unified editorial philosophy

and style. The impact of this incarnation of citizen journalism is comparable perhaps with that of the pirate radio stations in the 1960s and 1970s, which thoroughly revitalized the stale content formats at the time, but which over the years gradually transmogrified into accepted, legalized members of the industry establishment.

One key explanation for why these sites, many of which ostensibly started out to address what they perceived as shortcomings in the mainstream media industry, ended up replicating so many of mainstream news' features lies in the technological foundations available at the time. To operate a citizen journalism site, or even to run a one-person news blog, initially tended to mean setting up a stand-alone content management system – or coding the system from scratch. Later entrants were able to bypass the most onerous aspects of this process by opting for a ready-made hosting solution (such as *Blogger*, for blogs, or one of the many providers offering pre-installed *Wordpress* or *Drupal* sites ready for customization), but the end result in each case was a stand-alone site, ready to be filled with content and to be promoted to readers.

This is largely because the early heyday of citizen journalism, in the afterglow of Seattle, coincided with a period of heightened individualism in participatory online media environments (Bruns 2013). Earlier social and networked spaces for user-generated content, such as AOL and *GeoCities*, had begun to lose favour with users, while the blogs and other content management systems which gained popularity in the early 2000s were based inherently around individual users. The operators of sites based on this latest generation of 'Web 2.0' tools sought to overcome such fragmentation by linking to each other in posts and blogrolls, but fundamentally remained micro-proprietors – each operating independent sites which were at best loosely confederated.

Over the course of the past ten years, however, this loosely networked individualism has given way in turn to a new, much more strongly connected and networked online environment, driven chiefly by the advent of what we now refer to as social media, from early platforms such as *MySpace* to the current international market leaders *Facebook* and *Twitter*. *Twitter*, which due to its flat and open network structure has lent itself especially well to the rapid distribution of breaking news across a wide population of participants, has emerged as a key new space for professional as well as citizen journalists; the vast majority of local and global news organizations as well as many individual journalists now operate *Twitter* accounts.

The adoption of social media such as *Twitter* fundamentally alters the logic of the institutional imprint, however: in sharp contrast to the previous phase, where mainstream and alternative news organizations were able to carve out their own online spaces in the form of their independently operated Websites, they are now all participating within a third space which offers only limited opportunities for customization and is ultimately subject to the rules set by a third-party proprietor. Functionally, the *Twitter* account of a @nytimes or @abcnews is no different from the accounts of individual journalists, news enthusiasts, or everyday users.

Furthermore, the social networking logic upon which such sites are built means that individual posts from any of these accounts are effectively detached from their imprints as they are disseminated through the network. Most social media users no longer encounter a news story because they follow the news imprint it originates from, but encounter the imprint because they follow an unfolding story by tracking relevant posts as they circulate through

social media channels. Whether local, national, or global, any story on social media is now built, tweet by tweet, from the incremental news and updates and running commentary originating from a diverse coalition of news organizations, individual professional and citizen journalists, domain experts and stakeholders, and more or less knowledgeable other users. Who these contributors are still matters, to be sure, but the track record of individual accounts in covering a story becomes more important than the news brand with which these accounts may be affiliated.

This shift marks the gradual closure of what Thomas Pettitt has described as the “Gutenberg Parenthesis” (2013). The primacy of print on paper as the leading news medium since Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press also meant the primacy of the newspaper format as the least worst compromise between speed of dissemination and financial viability. To package news stories in the form of a daily newspaper was necessary because a greater frequency of publication would have been organizationally and economically unsustainable (although for major news events, such as the outbreak and conclusion of wars, special issues would at times be printed to reduce the time lag between daily editions), and a lower frequency would have failed to address the needs of the audience for timely news.

With the shift from print to online, however, and the corresponding gains in the possible speed and reach of news dissemination, the packaging of news in daily editions is no longer necessary, and even becomes counterproductive. Most newspaper sites now publish stories as they come to hand rather than coordinating their release with the publication of their print counterparts. But the closure of the Gutenberg Parenthesis not only transforms the provision of news from a product (the physical newspaper, in a daily edition) to a service (the newspaper site, constantly updated), but results in even more far-reaching changes: it enables

audiences to pick and choose individual items from a variety of competing news services, rather than subscribe to one service amongst many.

The increasing use of social media as alerting services through which brief pointers to newly published news articles are disseminated only serves to further boost this global, instant, real-time attention market: in their network activity feeds, social media users are now almost immediately faced with a choice of news coverage for any one story that ranges from the ABC to *Die Zeit*, and from venerable institutions to upstart citizen journalists. A number of legacy news providers have sought to prevent such per-story customer choices by instituting online ‘paywall’ systems that require users to commit to the imprint by paying a monthly or yearly access fee – often only with the result that audiences now bypass such paywalled sites altogether. Behind the withdrawing of their content from open circulation and comparison against competing news coverage may be a belief that enough readers still value the unified and consistent editorial agenda which a specific imprint can provide, but the very limited success of paywall systems to date suggests that contemporary news audiences, at least on social media, relish the opportunity to compare coverage across diverse news outlets.

The atomization of the news

In the post-Gutenberg, online environment news imprints – of conventional news organizations, or of their citizen journalist counterparts – have not disappeared, but they have begun to matter a great deal less because audiences are able to choose from a much greater range of reports on the same story. As Katharine Viner, editor-in-chief of *The Guardian*’s Australian edition, puts it, information has become “something liquid and free-flowing”. She suggests that the newspaper in its conventional form “is complete. It is finished, sure of itself, certain. By contrast, digital news is constantly updated, improved upon, changed, moved,

developed, an ongoing conversation and collaboration. It is living, evolving, limitless, relentless” (2013: n.p.). In this state, the news is atomized: news topics are broken down into their constituent stories, and those stories themselves are dissembled into continuous streams of updates and additions, in 140 characters or less.

Such updates, in turn, may originate from a variety of possible and sometimes competing and contradicting sources: from the diverse professional and citizen journalists and news organizations covering the story, from the news actors (politicians, businesses, celebrities, organizations) featured in the story, or from a diverse group of commentators, analysts, and experts able to provide further background information – and increasingly, these news updates are created in or at least disseminated widely through social media, with news coverage in other media (radio, television, print) breathlessly attempting to keep up with the real-time flow of information across *Twitter* and *Facebook*. This process can be observed especially clearly in the context of acute breaking news, associated on *Twitter* often with the emergence of topical hashtags associated with the unfolding story. Hashtags enable the rapid formation of *ad hoc* publics (Bruns and Burgess, 2011b) which enable their contributors and followers to come together to jointly “work the story” (cf. Bruns and Highfield, 2012) by sharing and compiling all relevant information as it comes to hand.

In such communities we encounter a reformulation of the original citizen journalism practice of gatewatching, conducted now as a collective exercise rather than as the core activity of a handful of news enthusiasts only. Contrary to the individualized spaces of citizen journalism sites and news blogs with their considerable barriers to participation, to become a gatewatcher in a social media space like *Twitter* requires no more than the use of the appropriate hashtag to tweet a link to a new piece of information about an unfolding story, or

the use of retweet or share buttons to pass on another user's recent update to one's own group of followers or friends, perhaps with added commentary. This puts participation in citizen journalism-related activities within reach of a considerably larger group of users, and finally approaches the ideal of a myriad "random acts of journalism" that combine into an unprecedentedly detailed and multifaceted coverage of the news, as JD Lasica envisaged it in 2003. Indeed, where a criticism of earlier forms of citizen journalism was that they failed to broaden the demographics of journalistic activity beyond the already active "usual suspects", the problem with the coverage of major breaking news events on *Twitter* is that, at times, so many users actively contribute that the sheer volume of hashtagged tweets becomes overwhelming. Yet even when the speed of updates increases to a point where not every tweet can be read, not every link can be clicked on, such hashtags usually still provide a valuable source of real-time updates on the story as it unfolds.

Outside of acute events and hashtags, collective gatwatching plays an important role in social media, too. Communities of interest are supported by networks of mutual connection within social media spaces (through friend or follower relationship mechanisms), enabling the messages posted by any one community member to reach the entire group; the reposting of relevant messages affords them even greater visibility. Such collective practices further serve to undermine the dominance of any one organizational or individual participant or of any one news imprint or journalist, as the community collectively compiles news and information from a broad range of sources.

What emerges is a new practice of communal news curation, building on individual participants' gatwatching efforts. Social media provide the space for a much broader range of practices than those related to news and journalism only (much in the same way that news

blogging is only one possible use of blogs: cf. Bruns and Jacobs 2006; Walker Rettberg 2008), but such news curation nonetheless constitutes one key use of social media at present. As a form of (citizen) journalism, news curation foregrounds the input rather than output aspects of the journalistic process: it is at its core more an exercise of research and compilation than one of interpretation and publication. This enables it to retain strong communal aspects, since the finding and sharing of information can more easily be conducted communally than the development of an interpretive perspective built on such information.

In spite of such strong communal aspects, however, leading drivers of the news curation process emerge, frequently due to the speed, volume, or quality of their information sharing activities. These lead users are the present-day equivalents of the prominent citizen journalists of the previous decade, and are at times indeed recruited from similar backgrounds – however, a number of particularly social media-savvy professional journalists have also begun to reposition themselves by serving in such news curation functions: US-based National Public Radio journalist Andy Carvin, for example, came to prominence through his *ad hoc* news curation work on *Twitter* during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 and 2012, when he took to *Twitter* (cf. Hermida *et al.*, forthcoming).

News curation in social media spaces is also being formally recognized and supported as a distinct role for professional journalists. News organizations are beginning to position some of their staff as news curators (if not always using that title) by devoting part of their workload to such curation activities, even if they take place away from the formal online spaces (chiefly, the Website) established by the news organization itself, and even if they are conducted by the journalist through their personal social media account rather than an organizational presence. One prominent example for this trend is Australian journalist Latika

Bourke, who was employed by the leading public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, in 2010 to be its first “social media reporter” (*ABC TV Blog* 2010) – that is, as a professional journalist whose primary medium for covering the news was not the radio, television, or online channels operated by the ABC, but a third-party social media space (in this case, chiefly *Twitter*).

A crucial step in the move towards news curation is the acceptance that it is necessary to link to external sources, even if to do so appears to weaken one’s own imprint. Although citizen journalists have long practiced this inclusive approach to information dissemination (indeed, with the rise of gatewatching the idea of citizen journalism was largely built on this practice), *Guardian Australia*’s Viner describes the long struggle which established news organizations have had to undergo before they could accept this approach:

If you look at the idea of linking out to external sources with an old media, newspaper perspective, of course you'd never do it. They're a competitor, why on earth would you give them traffic? It's only when you adjust to the logic of new media that you see that linking out to a source is essential. (2013: n.p.)

Taking this approach – as *The Guardian* has done especially when running its popular “live blogs” that accompany major unfolding events – means valuing leadership in news curation over the ownership of a news agenda. At the same time, by positioning its live blogs as curated, real-time, inclusive spaces of news coverage which resemble a more carefully filtered and moderated social media feed *The Guardian* can reimpose its imprint onto that “liquid and free-flowing” space of online news: the imprint is reborn as a nexus of news coverage because it has proven to be especially adept at collating and curating coverage from

all over the Web, all over the world, in a single stream of updates which offers a valuable service to readers.

Conclusion: news curation as core practice

Notably, public broadcasters like BBC and ABC, and other organizations with more limited exposure to market forces, like the Scott Trust-funded *Guardian*, have been amongst the earlier movers towards such Internet-age practices: it takes a great deal less rethinking for these organizations to acknowledge the good work done by their competition. By contrast, as they seek to protect legacy business models inherited from the age of print, purely commercial news organizations have tended to make their own content even harder to link to by erecting more or less impenetrable paywalls around their sites. It is therefore not without considerable irony that the perennially underfunded Australian Broadcasting Corporation can now introduce its out-linking trial as an initiative designed to support the country's imperiled commercial news industry: "by providing these links, given the great trust the public places in the ABC, I hope we'll provide a real boost to local news media. The ABC may not be able to halt the disruption that comes with the digital age but it can help deliver the dividends" (Scott 2013: n.p.).

It seems, then, that the gatewatching and news curation practices which emerged with citizen journalism in the late 1990s and which were turbo-charged with the decentralization of information sharing and the consequent atomization of news stories through social media since the mid-2000s have now become core practices of journalistic activity at both 'professional' and 'citizen' levels – and that news curation, even where it recognizes and links to the coverage published by competitors in the market, can become the basis of new business models.

What is taking shape is a media ecology – or more precisely, a news ecology – which features a number of news imprints that are reborn not as monolithic, stand-alone organizations with the pretension to provide “all the news that’s fit to print” from in-house resources, but as smarter, networked organizations which in equal measure compete and collaborate with their peers as they engage both in news coverage and in news curation. In this new form, the imprint is no longer homologous with the publication (the newspaper, the news Website), but extends also to the activities of journalistic staff that take place in third-party social media spaces, where journalists such as Carvin or Bourke provide both first-hand reporting and news curation services that are backed up by institutional as well as personal authority.

It is in these third-party spaces which act as a neutral ground between the various news organizations, journalists, and other stakeholders that the core of the communal, collective gatewatching and news curation activity now takes place. It may have taken the best part of two decades, but the network logic of citizen journalism, allied with technological frameworks of social media as drivers of its second wave, has begun to substantially alter news practices as we knew them.

Further Reading

Hermida *et al.* (2014) offer an excellent in-depth account of news curation in a social media space, using the example of Andy Carvin's work during the Arab Spring. Bruns's *Gatewatching* (2005) defines and explores the concept of gatewatching, as an alternative to conventional gatekeeping. Readers interested in online news and citizen journalism are well served by a number of recent collections, such as *News Online: Transformations & Continuities* (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan 2011) and *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang 2009).

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