

7. Deconstructing the discourse of citizen journalism: Who says what and why it matters

ABSTRACT

Since it emerged early this century, 'citizen journalist' and its related terms have been increasingly contested among groups including professional journalists, academics, and citizens themselves. This article creates a typology of five key participant groups in this contest and uses it to analyse the discursive constructs each group uses to advance their position. We argue that the terms citizen and journalist are multivalent discursive constructs, and that recognising the various contexts in which they are deployed is essential to understanding the ways in which changes to relationships between media participants are occurring and being resisted.

Keywords: alternative media; citizen journalist; gatekeeping; media plurality; media professionalism

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For a while, we felt almost embarrassed to be calling ourselves citizen journalists—we felt illegitimate. Having met and talked to a number of professional media types in the last few months, we understand now that we are illegitimate, at least in their eyes. It seems that mainstream journalists resent our use of the privileged term 'journalist'. But ... if, by calling ourselves journalists, we can bug mainstream journalists into some much-needed self-examination of their own profession, that can only be a good thing. (Grotke & LePage, in Grubisich, 2006, para. 7)

THE TERMS 'citizen journalist' and 'citizen journalism' are now familiar—if contested—among journalists, academics and citizens themselves, especially internet users. The terms arose when individuals or groups who were not aligned with publishers as 'professional

journalists' began to collect, edit and provide publishers with (or publish directly) news material that was out of publishers' reach. Typically, this material reported sudden events such as fires, crashes, floods and other 'disasters', which desk-bound reporters could not attend due to time constraints, or odd on-the-spot items such as a celebrity scratching his nose (M. Bromley, 14 June 2007, personal communication). Such contributions now often outnumber inputs by 'traditional' journalists:

On a quiet day, the BBC will receive more than 10,000 pics, tips and clips. A major news event will often generate more than 100,000. And they get used: when the *Cutty Sark* caught fire recently, the BBC ran for 30 minutes with someone's mobile-phone video—the only pictures available. (Brown, 2007a, para. 14)

Simultaneously with the advent of 'citizen' sources supplying material to and through mainstream publishers, alternative citizen sources of news, information, and entertainment have emerged as competition for mainstream media. Blogs are growing at the rate of 120,000 new sites per day (data from the Technorati *State of the Blogosphere* reports, see Sifry, 2007) and websites publishing (and often paying for) citizen posts are proliferating. Korea's 'OhMyNews' is perhaps the best known—see <http://english.ohmynews.com>—while the Indymedia network, staffed by 'volunteer journalists', had established 142 sites in 54 countries by 2004 (Matheson, forthcoming). Social networking sites such as Facebook now claim to have 'millions of' member profiles online (and Facebook material is also used by mainstream news media—see Lasica 2008b); and 'citizen news' sites such as Associated Content rank among the top-performing private technology companies in the global marketplace (as assessed by the investment community, see *Always-On 100*, 2007). Some mainstream publishers have paid large sums to absorb these kinds of sites, turning alternative citizen sources into highly-valued commodities: MySpace, the largest social networking site according to hit statistics, is now owned by News Corporation as part of a 2005 \$US580 million deal, and Microsoft's \$240 million part-purchase of Facebook in October 2007 effectively valued that company at \$15 billion, 'a dizzying 500 times its revenue' (Brown, 2007b, para. 6). Some citizen sites are winning 'traditional' journalism awards, for example blogger Josh Marshall's receipt of the prestigious George Polk Award in 2008 for 'tenacious investigative reporting' (Lasica, 2008a, para. 3).

Clearly, these kinds of sites, and the value audiences and publishers have begun to attach to both (1) the artifacts 'citizen-sourced news and information' or 'citizen journalism' and (2) the agents 'citizen journalists', together form a colossal phenomenon. Its growth has been so rapid that the language used to describe the whole phenomenon has not always kept pace. There are numerous terms circulating, with different meanings for different users. We have chosen 'citizen journalism' as the catch-all descriptor for this investigation but there are many related terms: 'citizen journalist', 'citizen reporter', 'participatory journalism' and 'people's journalism' to name just a few. 'Citizen Journalist' (the agent) is of particular interest to the current researchers because, as agents who have long identified ourselves as 'journalists', we each had a deep-rooted understanding of that term. Reaching a consensus definition, however, was problematic: we discovered a disparity between our understandings that foregrounded the assumptions informing our individual discursive positions.

The words 'citizen', 'journalist' and 'journalism' are unarguably loaded for the current authors and this is likely to be the case among other researchers, journalism practitioners, and the journalism-consuming public. For that reason this article sets out to reduce some of the naturalisation of the terms and make some of that 'loading' more visible and explicit. From the interplay between our qualitative analysis of our combined 10 years' wide-ranging reading and annotation of available public sources *about* citizen journalism (gathered through library, offline media, and online research, as well as a thorough scholarly database search in June and July 2007 to identify the—limited number of—academic sources), plus our several decades' work in the journalism establishment which also grounds our interpretive perspective, we provide a summary 'snapshot' of public voices and viewpoints on the topic. Our deconstruction of this material suggests to us that there are patterns in the ongoing hegemonic struggle between those who once considered themselves among the privileged 'owners' of the title 'journalist', publishers of 'journalism', and those who now consider themselves 'journalists' and producers of 'journalism' but who live and work outside the traditional corporate structures of media production. The purpose of this article is to bring into the public discussion some consideration of the key discursive themes in this debate, and ask what might be the effects of such a struggle upon those media consumers who do not themselves enter the debate. As is

usual in reporting qualitative discourse analysis (Silverman, 2004), this article does not attempt to list every source we have read, nor claim objectivity, but gives an overall map, as it were, of the key features we have identified in the terrain of public debate from our particular interpretive position as, ourselves, journalists, journalism educators, journalism researchers, and sometimes also online 'citizens'.

Background

In 1996, following long-anticipated changes to the US *Telecommunications Act* which deregulated the information market—and which the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) described as 'the first major overhaul of [US] telecommunications law in 62 years' (FCC 2004, p. 1)—news media publishers began to own and earn revenue from journalists' work in different ways from existing forms. Until that time, journalists saw themselves as owners of journalistic work, licensing publishers for particular uses. In 1996, some publishers (such as News Corporation) offered (mostly successfully) to buy out ownership rights from journalists for a fixed one-time fee of \$A500; in other more general and more recent instances, publishers announced to third-party (or all) content providers that an upload condition is that the publisher automatically acquires all rights to the content in perpetuity. Journalists themselves started to break free from publishers and create and distribute material without reference to them. As these events were happening, audience members started to author content themselves and distribute it without reference to journalists or publishers. These changes have challenged the journalists' self-appointed role as authors and arbiters of news and other media content, and have continued to challenge publishers' ability to manage and purvey journalists' content for financial return.

The 'news media' now comprise at least three separate groups of participants: 1. remaining so-called professional (i.e. employed) journalists; 2. news publishers, and; 3. 'citizen' audience groups who read, watch, listen to and—importantly—create news content in the form of conventional news and feature articles (or programs), email newsletters, blogs, social networking sites and channels, and a range of other products such as SMS, MMS, and now television. (In September 2007, Dutch television producer Endermol, creator of reality television phenomenon *Big Brother*, began producing a citizen journalism television news programme; West, 2006, n.p.)

Two more media participant groups are evident in most societies: 4. academics who observe, research and critique the media, and; 5. free-speech advocates, who adopt the formal role of speaking out about news media operations as well as other aspects of society.

It is certainly possible to imagine other participant groups, such as politicians or public relations professionals. However, we suggest that, in the discourse surrounding this issue, politicians and public relations people are part of the group of audience members who, in their political and marketing roles, are informed and advised by active members of participant groups 1–5, and participate in their turn (e.g., New Zealand politicians blogged extensively in the last election, see Hopkins & Matheson, 2005, and public relations associations are now conducting seminars for members on how to contribute ‘citizen’ material to news sites – these practices require examination elsewhere).

In summary, we identify the above five principal groups as key participants in the communicative and discursive processes operating in the public debate, which construct competing understandings of ‘citizen journalist’.

Constructs and investments

The ontology of ‘citizen journalist’ includes positive and negative terms. Positive terms include the views that citizen journalism tends to: 1. *democratise* journalism, so that the gatekeeping and agenda-setting tasks of deciding ‘what’s news’ are spread wider than those complicit in selling audiences to advertisers; 2. *pluralise* voices in the public sphere by providing more ways for dissenting voices and views to be heard; and 3. *enable* deployment of new *in situ* technologies to drive change among pre-existing ‘traditional’ media.

Negative terms include the views that citizen journalism tends to: 1. *devalue* the ethical and commercial worth of the term ‘journalist’ and with it the specialised information processing skills—‘coping and crafting’ (Duffield & Cokley, 2006, p. i)—that are part of journalistic practice (over time possibly accelerating the loss of those skills); 2. *erode* the overall quality of available information by promoting a ‘mirror ball effect’ (Duffield & Cokley, 2006, p. 15) in which a dazzling cacophony of competing raw sources overwhelms less colourful output from skilled information gatherers and disseminators; and 3. *undermine* society by enabling unchallenged and unchecked access by false ‘citizen’ voices such as malignant commercial interests or criminals

who use fraud and ‘spin’ (in the form of fake grassroots campaigns known as ‘astroturfing’ and fake blogging known as ‘flogging’) to manufacture false consent by posing as ‘citizens’.

In public discussion of ‘citizen journalist’ these notions—that the concept has the potential to democratise, pluralise and enable, as well as to devalue, erode and undermine—tend to cluster in the discourse of particular participant groups.

The five participant groups: who, what, and possible whys

1. Employed ‘professional’ journalists

Who they are: Some define journalists by how they perform: ‘A bundle of facts and ideas, if expertly got together, judged expressly in terms of what might be crafted out of them, and used to make a product accessible to its audience, is different from ordinary information, handled ordinarily’ (Duffield & Cokley, 2006, p. 6). Others define the right to be called ‘journalist’ by a qualification, by employment within a recognised news organisation, or by membership of a professional organisation. One editor suggests it is editorial intervention (any newsroom processes when the ‘editor comes between the author and reader’) that makes storytelling into journalism (Connell, in Lasica 2003, para. 1). (By that definition, citizen posts to Korea’s OhMyNews are journalism, because all posts are edited before publication, but blogging often is not, and posts to CNN’s *IReport.com*, which specifically promotes content as unedited, are not either.) Other definitions draw an implicit distinction between ‘citizen journalism’ and ‘journalism’. For example, in the wake of an incident in New Zealand in which a citizen-supplied photo of a tornado used by two major TV networks was found to be fake, New Zealand Journalists’ Training Organisation executive director Jim Tucker’s reported comment was: ‘Mr Tucker said the advantages of citizen journalism were obvious, such as the on-the-spot images and reporting from eyewitnesses. ‘But it isn’t journalism.’ (NZPA, 2007, para. 24). The exact criteria for such a distinction, however, are usually unclear.

The rise of the term ‘citizen journalist’ reflects and constructs a changing understanding of the role of the journalist. While journalists have been characterised as story seekers—typically ‘professional busybodies, driven by curiosity’ (Pearson & Johnston, 1998, p. 3) and ‘both crusading heroes and ruthless villains in their quest for a story’ (Pearson & Johnston,

1998, p. 4)—the idea of citizen journalism now constructs journalists as storytellers (Harcup, 2005) and indeed as just one kind of storyteller among many. If a blogger (someone who writes a weblog, i.e., an online diary) is automatically also a citizen journalist, then the popular definition of journalist is already no longer someone who seeks to find, analyse, check, clarify, and skillfully present a story that is as evenhanded, thorough, and compelling as possible, but someone with a compelling need to tell their story, and the technology to do so.

Elements of their discourse: Professional journalists are concerned about ‘quality’: for example ‘it is often said that our democracy cannot survive without a free press. But when the only information the new economy’s free press provides is ill- or uninformed opinion, what kind of democracy will we have?’ (Goozner, 2007, para. 9). Sometimes, however, citizen journalism actually leads to greater focus on issues of quality and procedures for maintaining standards. In the wake of the fake tornado picture in New Zealand, the two television stations who had used it without checking its authenticity said they would tighten screening procedures for citizen-supplied material (NZPA, 2007, para. 23).

Journalists are also concerned about competition from citizen voices decreasing their opportunities for paid employment, and evidence exists (Beaubien, 2007, p. 17) that the use by some ‘mainstream’ media outlets of citizen contributions has cost employed journalists their jobs: ‘most of the news gathering staff’ at a small Californian television station have been dismissed; a channel executive says there will be less local coverage and what there is will increasingly be supplied by citizen journalists; there are more than 700 ‘citizen journalist outfits’ working, usually without pay, across America, and TV stations are increasingly exploring ways to integrate viewer-generated pictures and video, with easy upload features on their websites, and instructions for producing better quality pictures. Stewart (2007, p. 17) notes that ‘homemade video is particularly appealing to stations that are cutting their news staff’ and Potter notes initiatives by CNN, MSNBC and Reuters to encourage viewers to share their stories, photos and video online, with suitable images also potentially to be used on television, and argues that ‘CNN’s *I-Report*,’ MSNBC’s *FirstPerson*’ and Reuters’ partnership with Yahoo! on *You Witness News* differ somewhat, but they have one thing in common: They don’t pay contributors a dime’ (p. 66).

This opportunity to reduce expenditure to compensate for falling revenue has not been missed by media corporations. American newspaper corporates’ financial data (Goozner, 2007, para. 3) show that both profits and advertising revenue are falling overall and that online revenue is not compensating for falls in offline sectors: at the Tribune Co., ‘for every \$8 decline in print revenue, the company picked up \$1 in internet revenue’. Goozner argues that ‘companies like Google and Yahoo are rolling in cash. But they hire very few journalists (if any). And those they do hire have very few standards’ (2007, paras 4–5). More locally (in New Zealand) journalists’ pay and conditions—and therefore experience and skill levels, especially the skill to perform in-depth investigative work—have declined, as has union membership, meaning employed journalists have less collective power to resist publishers’ pressures (Hollings, Lealand, Samson & Tilley 2007).

Problematising the constructs: Quality is a powerful term but tends to be equivocal. In most cases quality is deployed as a driver for ‘trust’ which drives ‘influence’ and subsequently revenue (Meyer, 2004). Publishers stand to lose revenue and reputation if their traditional media products lose credibility so they routinely define and control what *they mean* by quality. Some citizen journalism sites are also starting to define what they mean by quality, with for example codes of conduct (Marty, 2006). However, no sanctions apply (such as expulsion from a professional association or enforced publication of an apology) to citizen journalists. Of course quality issues are not exclusive to ‘citizen’ journalist pieces. The discourse on quality suggests audiences, media practitioners and publications are still developing shared understanding of the field.

2. *The news publishers*

Who they are: News and related products are published transnationally largely by at least six global corporations: News Corporation, Disney, AOL-Time Warner, Viacom, Bertelsmann AG, and Vivendi–Universal (Law et al., 2002). Major state-owned publishers include Britain’s BBC, Germany’s DW, and Canada’s CBC.

Elements of their discourse: Many publishers are emphasising citizen journalism as a way to enable audiences to ‘Have your say’ (BBC, 2007). The BBC calls for contributions in the following terms: ‘News can happen anywhere at any time and we want you to be our eyes. ... It was you who

captured some of the most powerful images from major events such as the attack on the London transport network in July 2005, the storms that swept the UK in January 2007 and the Asian tsunami of December 2004' (BBC, 2007, paras 1&3). A similar direct address and focus on personal empowerment occur in the text introducing CNN's *IReport.com* site, a site that accepts uploaded citizen videos and then uses some of them on CNN broadcasts. The site promotes itself as 'uncensored, user-powered news' and suggests site users set the agenda: 'Whether—something is newsworthy mostly depends on who it affects—and who's making the decision. On *IReport.com*, that is you!' (CNN 2008, para. 2). These are just two samples of very similar publisher discourse on a range of sites. In general, publisher discourse tends to address potential contributors directly, focus on rhetoric of empowerment and user control, and valorise enhanced interactivity, but is silent about the limits on such 'empowerment', the ownership and future control of uploaded material, and the end outcomes for other media participants such as journalists and non-contributing audiences. Most calls for audience participation stress timeliness (instant delivery) of news rather than analysis, context, investigation, or a 'watchdog' function. CNN's logo for *IReport.com*, for example, is 'Unedited. Unfiltered. News' and supporting text reiterates that 'All the stories here are user-generated and instant: CNN does not vet or verify their authenticity or accuracy before they post. The ones with the 'On CNN' stamp have been vetted and used in CNN news coverage.'

Problematising the constructs: *Timeliness* is a major point of contest in this area. Many employed New Zealand journalists have indicated (e.g. in Hollings, Lealand, Samson & Tilley, 2007) that they feel pressured to produce a fast and furious flow of instant news ('churnalism') with little time for complex treatments, multiple face-to-face interviews, source cross-checking, or processing Freedom of Information requests. A product differentiation rationale suggests that in order to provide alternatives in the marketplace, publishers of traditional media (on or offline) should aim to be as distinct from their new 'citizen' online competition as possible. Few traditional publishers (whether embracing citizen journalism or not) appear to be actively developing a market for complex, well-researched, balanced analysis of issues, that provides context and history, and carefully tabulates, assesses, and summarises multiple viewpoints,

choosing none for valorisation or demonisation, yet comparing and contrasting as many as possible in one place. If, in the rush to embrace online forms and 'citizen journalism' genres within the existing publishers' stables, the competition for audiences occurs on points of timeliness rather than analysis and credibility, all participants in the contest over 'journalism' will be arguably the poorer.

3. *Citizen journalists*

Who they are: The advent of personalised digital creation and delivery technologies has challenged and disrupted the monopolies enjoyed by publishers and their employed journalists—and indeed by other media professionals. This has happened not only in the field of journalism, but also in public relations and advertising, music and filmmaking. Direct-delivery technologies have opened up the numbers of voices able to reach audiences, including citizens now able to post direct to citizen news sites. Measuring their nature purely by effectiveness, it would be hard to deny these individuals the nomenclature of 'journalist'. Gillmor argues that, while in 'the 20th century, making the news was almost entirely the province of journalists; the people we covered, or 'newsmakers'; and the legions of public relations and marketing people who manipulated everyone ... Tomorrow's news reporting and production will be more of a conversation, or a seminar' (Gillmor, 2006, p. xiii). Any person who participates in such a conversation in a way that Gillmor deems helpful—and who is not patently a 'fake' citizen, that is, someone representing a corporate interest—is termed by him a 'citizen reporter' (Gillmor, p. xii).

Elements of their discourse: The discourse from citizen journalists about citizen journalism suggests it provides greater truthfulness, less bias, more open access to information, more 'freedom' to report what is seen, and greater plurality of perspectives, especially counter-hegemonic perspectives. Certainly, there are examples of citizen journalism's 'conversations' providing a greater degree of transparency, a higher level of information, and therefore what might be deemed more truthfulness, than mainstream media coverage of the same issues. The US blog *Powerline*, for example, was named Blog of the Year by *Time* magazine in 2004 after its readers supplied information that challenged a *60 Minutes* story about George W. Bush's military service. One of *Powerline*'s founders said 'The world is full of

smart people who have information about every imaginable topic, and until the internet came along, there wasn't any practical way to put it together' (Time names, 2004, para. 3).

Problematising the constructs: While ambiguity remains about who qualifies as and who will act in the name of a 'citizen', the term is being used in very specific ways. Gillmor (2004), for example, asserts that 'public relations and marketing people' do not qualify, by virtue of their commercial alignment—but this is a simplistic differentiation to make in a world where it is no longer possible to assert that any one individual can be a value-free news source, or that journalists can be objective, or indeed that interested parties will refrain from posing as disinterested parties. According to Wilson (1993, p. 68), citizen has three current standard meanings: '1. someone born in a particular place or nation; 2. a voting member of a republican city, nation, or state, who has various rights and responsibilities because of that status; and 3. a civilian, as contrasted with a soldier or other official'. None of these translates directly to the application of the term to 'citizen journalist': a citizen journalist may be a 'netizen' rather than identifying with a particular nation-state; a citizen journalist may not be a voter; and a military official can also be posting to news sites as a citizen journalist. Plus, the term citizen, in Gillmor's and many others' discourse on citizen journalism, clearly has a connotative loading that goes beyond any of Wilson's three uses. In the discourse of citizen journalist, 'citizen' implies both 'civilised' and 'civic-minded'. These reflect the etymological history of the term 'citizen', which has included at least two binary oppositions: a feudal dichotomy privileging city-dwellers as sophisticated, educated intellectuals (citizenry) in opposition to rural-dwellers stereotyped as unsophisticated labourers (peasantry) (Ruskin, cited in *OED*, 1989); and citizenship as implying a commitment to certain moral values such as honesty and the collective good, with the status of citizen able to be lost if these values are not upheld (MacAuley, cited in *OED*, 1989). Both these connotations surface in many contemporary uses of 'citizen journalist', where there is an implication that citizen journalists are 'smart' or well-informed and will, by definition, obey an implicit moral duty to provide information frankly and objectively (begging the question of 'objectivity', not to mention 'truth') in ways that contribute to communal good.

The term 'journalist' also has its complexities and attendant discursive assumptions. There is no trademark or other legal protection on the use of the word or job description 'journalist'. The lack of any legislative backing—such as that for medical doctors, engineers, pharmacists and lawyers—effectively allows any of the 'new journalists' to name themselves without reference to the 'old journalists' (who have often named themselves 'working journalists', defining themselves by their employment, not by any special body of knowledge). Ambiguity also remains in any distinction made between 'new journalist' and 'old journalist'. Part of this ambiguity can be sourced to legal and industrial political-economy concerns, about who can be held responsible for publishing damaging and incorrect information, and who can earn a living from practising in this field. Part also can be sourced to the contemporary academic discussion of multiple 'journalisms', in which journalism practised by employed wage-staff is no longer regarded as the 'only' kind of journalism—others are allowed into the 'mainstream' (Duffield & Cokley, 2006).

4. Academics

Who are they: A Web of Science search for articles specifically looking at citizen journalism (conducted on June 26, 2007) found only two relevant articles, while an Ebsco search limited to refereed sources found just four relevant articles. Compared with several hundred thousand general web search hits for online discussion of citizen journalism on the same day, this suggests limited scholarly research to date in this field. Citizen journalism is coming on to the academic radar but it is still seen as a relatively 'fresh' topic, despite its long use by other participant groups, and we could find no specific scholarly examination of 'citizen journalist' as a term.

Elements of their discourse: The existing scholarly materials are often descriptive. Lasica (2003) provides a typology of citizen journalism that includes: audience participation (for example, reader responses to online news stories, blogs, amateur videos submitted to mainstream news outlets); independent news and information websites (such as the Drudge Report, credited with breaking the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal); citizen news sites (such as OhMyNews); collaborative sites (such as Slashdot or Kuro5hin); other participatory media such as mailing lists or email newsletters where readers can respond or annotate; and personal broadcasting sites (such as

KenRadio). Of those who have taken positions on citizen journalism, the best known are: Habermas, who argues that online information proliferation might undermine not only the position of the journalist, but also the position of the academic: 'The price we pay for the growth in egalitarianism offered by the internet is the decentralised access to unedited stories. In this medium, contributions by intellectuals lose their power to create a focus' (qtd in Scholz, 2006); and Braman, who argues that 'the use of digital technologies may actually decrease, rather than increase, the possibilities of meaningful participatory democracy.... [because] we have not yet developed either the educational systems, or the modes and venues of appropriate public discourse, for political participation that must start with design of the structures of technological systems' (2007, para. 7).

Problematising the constructs: All academics might lose, as Habermas predicts, but journalism academics in particular stand both to lose and gain, from a widespread adoption of citizen journalism. If journalism ceases to be a specialist skillset, who needs university training to become one? On the other hand, if everyone can be a journalist, the pool of potential entrants into journalism courses at universities may be greatly expanded beyond just those who could reasonably be expected to gain employment as a professional journalist. Questions about 'what is a journalist?' also connect integrally, then, with debates about the role of the university (Sligo, 2004). If the university's role is 'to prepare people for professional jobs', then journalism educators might see protecting the term 'journalist' from wider adoption as advisable for maintenance of their disciplinary boundaries: but if the answer is 'to be the critic and conscience of society', then it affects that critical role little who is doing 'journalism'. The academic field that might stand to gain most if citizen journalism comes to outstrip 'traditional' journalism as audiences' preferred source of information, is media studies. A greater range of sources, often in less 'processed' or accountable form, may mean audiences more than ever need the skills of critical thinking, information assessment, and 'common knowledge' problematisation that characterise that discipline.

5. *Advocates of free speech*

Who are they: Media critics and social commentators who might also be academics (although many are not) and who enter the public discourse as independent voices calling for freedom of speech.

Elements of their discourse: Some of the constructs that tend to appear in discourse from this participant group include moral oppositions between 'big' media and 'little' citizens. Jarvis (2005, para. 2) suggests that 'the war is over and the army that wasn't even fighting—the army of all of us, the ones who weren't in charge, the ones without the arms—won. The big guys who owned the big guns still don't know it. But they lost'. Such commentary sometimes brands elitist any call for journalism boundaries or standards, or restriction of the term journalist. Responding to former dotcom entrepreneur David Keen's book *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing our Culture*, Jarvis (2005) called Keen a snob, attacking him personally. In New Zealand, free speech advocate David Slack suggests that critics of citizen journalism are inherently elitist, wanting 'democracy in small doses' (Peacock, 2007).

Problematising the constructs: Young (1990) uses Levinas' opposition between freedom and justice to problematise the Western concept of 'freedom' and the simplistic ways it has been misused as a propaganda term (for example, to legitimise US aggression abroad; Young, 1990). Applying Young's insights to debates about citizen journalism, online information that took a 'just' approach would respect the validity of dissenting viewpoints, including those expressed in and by commercial media. Of course this observation is not counter to the position of 'free speech' advocates, but made to emphasise that the context-specific meanings and uses of so powerful a term as 'freedom' cannot be taken for granted. There are also access issues here: freedom for *whom*? And freedom *from what*? Citizens who do journalism are those with access to technology, time and resources. That is of itself, on a global scale, an extremely exclusive group. The professional journalist can (although whether they do is another question) seek out disenfranchised voices, and the onus is on the journalist to ensure that balance and plurality occur: in citizen journalism, participation is voluntary; meaning a particular *kind* of voice (one comfortable with entering the public sphere directly) is selecting itself to appear.

Summary

Our analysis of the public discourse on 'citizen journalism' identified five main participant groups and, in their discourse, a series of constructs circulating

around the terminology of ‘citizen journalist’. Some of these constructs, if read using their dominant constructions of meaning, might tend to reduce audience members’ critical ability to assess the credibility of ‘news’ found on- or offline. We summarise the constructs that reoccur across the various participant groups as contributing to three main mythological meta-narratives—using ‘myth’ in the semiotic sense (e.g., Barthes) of a naturalised image or narrative that glosses complexities and provides a cognitive heuristic that prompts quick value judgments rather than a critical assessment of the issues.

The Myth of the Robinson Crusoe Citizen

The first problematic myth construct is the idea that the citizen journalist is independent, a Crusoe-like ‘Lone Ranger’, free from commercial pressures and organisational loyalties and offering an independent ‘voice of the people’. This provokes the question of whether the ‘citizen’ is by definition more neutral or independent than the employed journalist, given that almost everybody works somewhere and cultural, political, religious and other values and affiliations permeate every corner of life. A diligent reporter or editor verifies sources’ identities but in the world of citizen journalism, it is often incumbent on audiences to seek answers to questions of ‘who are you?’ and ‘why do you care?’. Are audiences aware of their different and new level of responsibility? Do audiences ‘read’ differently when material is attributed to a citizen? This is a topic for further research.

The Myth of the Noble Citizen

As social historians of news have shown, the idea of professional journalists as objective is relatively recent, arising concomitantly with both scientific positivism and increased commercialisation (Mindich, 1998). Since the advent of postmodernism, academics have largely agreed that objectivity is impossible for journalism—degrees of truthfulness, yes, ‘the truth’, no (see, e.g., Bagdikian, 1997; Deuze, 2005, etc.).¹ In promoting the postmodern viewpoint, academics may have contributed to declining levels of trust placed in journalists by audiences. In the late twentieth century, publishers too have tended to re-blur the recently introduced historical distinction between news and opinion, and journalists have complied despite years of textbook prescription as to the importance of genre boundaries (Conley & Lamb, 2005; Granato, 1991, in Australia; Harcup, 2004, in the UK; and Rich, 2003,

in the United States). In the public debate on ‘citizen journalism’, however, we often see a resurgence of modernist terms and concepts such as ‘reality’ and ‘truth’. Often these terms are naturalised within a false dichotomy in which citizens speak the truth, while commercial media do not. One example is Powerline co-founder Scott Johnson’s view that ‘the mainstream media has acted as a means to obscure, as a kind of filter, a lens that makes it impossible to understand what’s going on in reality. We try to provide something that brings people closer to reality’ (Time names, 2004, para. 2). Another is the claim by Wikinews, Wikipedia’s collaborative citizen journalism offshoot, that it implements a ‘neutral point of view’ policy to present ‘unbiased’ news (Wikipedia, n.d.). The distinctions between ‘big media’ (bad) and ‘citizens’ (good) seem to remain strong even when commercial media implement citizen news, as illustrated in this comment from a ‘grassroots’ journalism advocate: ‘Perhaps it’s time to differentiate ‘citizen journalism’ in a highly controlled, newspaper-sponsored environment (‘astro-turf journalism’ is a pretty good term) vs citizen journalism that is produced by citizens as community services. They do, indeed, function quite differently’ (Grier, 2006, para. 6). Again, some empirical research would perform a useful demythologizing function here—given the same information, do audiences or particular audience groups ascribe it different levels of credibility depending whether it is or is not sourced through a major publisher? Does it make a difference to the way items are read and interpreted if they are called ‘citizen journalism’ or ‘blogging’ or something else?

The Myth of Perfect Plurality

Even though the advent of citizen journalism means the inherent capitalistic bias of the commercial media (Herman & Chomsky) might be increasingly compensated by healthy competition between a much wider array of viewpoints than was previously possible, the idea that citizen journalism is *more* representative, or open to ‘everyone’s voices’ (Gillmor p. xiii), or telling ‘the whole story’ is as mythological as the idea that traditional journalism could ever have been objective. A.J. Liebling’s celebrated observation that ‘Freedom of the press is limited to those who own one’ (qtd in Gillmor, p. vii) can be reconfigured for the post-print age: Freedom of the blog is limited to those with a computer, highspeed broadband, and the time to learn how to use it all—and largely, although this may be changing, to

those who speak English, given its predominance to date as the language of the net. Citizen sources will give *different* perspectives from mainstream media, or additional information, but the implication that they are a *complete* reservoir of the possible positions on any issue is discursive—part of ‘the exuberant PR of the phenomenon’s hucksters’ (Grubisich, 2006, para. 3). Again, our identification of the circulating discourse provides an important research agenda for advancing future understanding of the field and testing the *impact* of this mythology in a practical sense: empirical research is needed to measure whether audiences are subscribing to the perfect plurality myth, and whether their level of acceptance of that construct affects their information processing behaviour. As the number of available sources increases, do audiences demonstrate concomitant increases in ability to collate, assess, and test the pluralism of multiple truths?

Implications

These myths have implications for one participant group in particular above all others: audiences. If they are not to embrace all citizen-sourced information uncritically as independent, well-intentioned and complete, nor dismiss it entirely as raw, variable and unreliable, audiences increasingly need to be cynics, investigators and analysts, and deploy all the processes of critique and assessment—what Duffield and Cokley call ‘coping and crafting’ (2006, p. i)—that good ‘professional journalists’ are supposed to deploy. It is unclear whether audience members (or citizen journalists on their behalf) have the time, attitude, training, means of access or even the desire, to deploy those skills. Investigative and analytical skill, and a need to seek truths, used to be understood precisely as the province of professional journalists: the ‘specialized collectors, processors, and disseminators of information’ (Merritt, 2005, p. 3) who do, ‘as Walter Lippmann put it, ‘what the conscientious citizen would do given the time and resources’ (in Merritt, p. 3). Traditionally, journalists have obtained answers from politicians, business leaders, and those in positions of power (in ways the average non-professional citizen journalist often cannot achieve) because of the perceived power of ‘the media’. Journalists, however, are themselves trusted less and less—not unreasonably sometimes—to deliver credible information, and are given fewer resources and less time to perform such analysis. That waning status leaves disillusioned information consumers with only their own resources for testing the veracity of the information they receive.

Our final question then, given the clash of discursive elements and interests around ‘citizen journalism’ generally, is whether employed journalists, audiences, publishers, academics, or free speech advocates should take issue with the term ‘citizen journalist’. Citizen journalists are not always ‘citizens’, if a citizen means one who acts for the collective rather than out of self-interest, and nor are they always ‘journalists’. All terms are subject to hegemonic struggle (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). As such struggle proceeds, however, the most successful hegemonic articulations of the meaning of a term become its ‘common sense’ understanding. We are not yet at the point where there is a single ‘common knowledge’ understanding of the term ‘citizen journalist’, but the hegemonic struggle is certainly advanced. Should some of the participant groups—given the interests at stake—take a more proactive stance in the debate?

Our view is that somewhere between an elitist position that says only trained journalists have value to offer and a free-for-all that says everything stated is worth listening to, is a midpoint at which both plurality of voices and the skills of specialised information gathering, analysis, checking, and presentation, can come together to offer usable, relevant, quality (if you will) yet diverse, information. We believe this should be the role of the media professional in the face of change—to find ways to continue to achieve that midpoint. It perhaps matters less who delivers that content—traditional or new publishers—than that the content itself is of maximum informative value to audiences. A shift to focus on informational outcomes for audiences, however, will necessitate a shift away from some of the current points of contest such as timeliness, and away from absolutism about ‘elitism’ or ‘reality’ or ‘truth’. Merritt observes that, in terms of the changing face of journalism, ‘There are no pure heroes and no pure villains in this story’ (p. 7). Rather, there are, as this article has shown, multiple participants, with multiple perspectives and investments, and with multiple responsibilities to be aware of their own and others’ discursive tools in the debate if it is to be moved to a new level.

Notes

1. Objectivity is an important construct in the discourse around citizen journalism, but one that we can only identify, rather than investigate in depth, in the context of this particular field-mapping article.

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