Examining the Features, Policies, and Resources of Citizen Journalism: Citizen News Sites and Blogs

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Introduction|Background|Method|Results|Conclusion

Abstract

This study used content analysis to explore the policies, citizen participation features, and means of financial support for sixty-four citizen journalism sites�both news sites and blogs�in 15 randomly selected U.S. cities. Community size was related to number of sites in a market, and nearly half of all sites�but three-fourths of news sites�featured home-page advertising, while six of ten news sites actively sought the time and service of citizen volunteers. However, neither type of site took advantage of the interactivity possible with the Internet, and opportunities for citizen participation (via polls and forums, and uploading of content) were limited.

Introduction

No phrase better captures the envisioned promise of �citizen� or �participatory� online journalism than the title of Dan Gillmor�s 2004 book, We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People.1 Thanks to inexpensive, accessible communication technologies, citizen journalism proponents proclaim, the gathering and sharing of news can be democratized and made available without filtering by commercial media. The "citizen journalist 'is not a trained professional but a contributor nonetheless to the 'marketplace of ideas'."

By late 2006, Tom Grubisich2 would ask if there truly are "thriving communities" to justify the hype about hyperlocal "citizen journalism." Grubisich wondered if community Web sites practicing "grassroots journalism" really were "fulfilling the exuberant PR of the phenomenon's hucksters."

Revisiting ten early citizen journalism sites, he reported that most sites "were the Internet equivalent of Potemkin Village,3 many URLs away from being vibrant town squares."

Still, interest in citizen journalism remains among scholars and journalists. Gillmor may have envisioned citizen journalism cutting commercial media out of the picture, but many working in those media have taken a strong interest in the successes and failures of hyperlocal4 online efforts.

Interest in online news sites also stems from the technological opportunities they present. Digital media allow opportunities unavailable or limited in traditional media. Web sites can provide video, text, audio, photographs and multimedia journalism. Perhaps more importantly, they allow interactivity and participation: visitors can react to site content and, if allowed, post material using the entire range of forms on the site.

Online journalism sites are diverse. Some are non-profit, which is consistent with the spirit of citizen journalism, although others pursue revenue merely to sustain the site and still others seek profit. Some blogs aim primarily to persuade and influence. Others fit more traditional definitions of news operations, reporting about events and issues. Because of the journalistic tradition of separate opinion from news, this analysis will use this distinction to divide citizen journalism sites into citizen blog sites, which are sites that are predominantly the opinion of one person or a small group of people (e.g., Bellingham, Washington�s www.megaawesome.com),5 and citizen news sites, which are sites that aim primarily to produce independent news reporting with minimal opinion content (e.g., Chicago's North Lawndale Community News at nlcn.org, or Richmond, Virginia's Carver & Jackson Ward News at cjwn.net/news). Citizen blog sites resemble the editorial/op-ed pages found in traditional newspapers and citizen news sites resemble the articles found in the news sections of traditional newspapers.6

Despite growing interest in the potential of online journalism sites, little research has systematically examined current local citizen journalism sites�those that address issues and events at the city or neighborhood level. How prevalent are these sites and how do they prosper and survive? How are they supporting themselves? What types of interactivity and citizen participation do they allow?

To address these questions, this study randomly sampled 15 U.S. cities to explore 64 online citizen journalism sites in those markets. The research examined whether and how these sites deviate from traditional journalistic norms of strong gatekeeping and instead approach a horizontal, participatory model.7 In addition, the study examined financial support for the sites.

Research into the still-young phenomenon of online journalism will permit historical perspective as it continues to develop.

Background

Rutigliano8 identified blogging as the beginning of citizen-generated online news. Blogs are Web sites created by individuals or small groups that contain personal commentary, descriptions of events, and photos, videos, and whatever else their owners choose. Blogs focus on what might be termed community news, with community defined by topic and/or geography, and many of them react or respond to news stories in traditional or legacy news media.

Blog numbers have grown exponentially since the late 1990s.9 Technorati listed 113 million different blogs in 2007, without including, for example, 72 million Chinese blogs.10

Rutigliano's11 sample of blogs from specific geographic areas typically featured significant interactivity and a decentralized work process. His taxonomy of "news blogs" included three basic types: 1) Controlled sites led by one writer, usually the founder/manager of the site; 2) Hybrid sites having small part-time or volunteer staffs that generate and moderate content provided by citizens; and 3) Open sites having an administrator and sometimes an advisory board, but without much visible owner presence. His small qualitative study found that the controlled and hybrid models were doing the most "journalism," while the open models were mostly posting announcements, features on hobbies and pets, and family photos.

Nonetheless, Rutigliano linked news blogs conceptually to "activist civic journalism" consistent with the Habermas12 formulation of a "public sphere" that requires many participatory citizen voices and, according to McQuail, "provides a more or less autonomous and open arena for public debate."13 Curran envisioned a public sphere "where access to relevant information affecting the public good is widely available, where discussion is free of domination and where all those participating in public debate do so on an equal basis. The media facilitate this by providing an arena of public debate, and by reconstituting private citizens as a public body in the form of public opinion."14 Indeed, Blood15 has observed that blogging has "given millions of people the equivalent of a printing press on their desks." Glaser16 viewed citizen journalism as a move away from the journalism of the "strong gatekeeper," with citizen journalism site creators instead serving as "shepherds" encouraging people to report information or express their opinions. Gillmor17 called this "grassroots journalism" but it has also been called "participatory journalism" and "open source journalism."18 Deuze19 concluded that citizen journalism brings three kinds of content together: news from mainstream sources, commentary, and opportunities for sharing and discussion.

Online Technological features, citizen participation, and linking to other citizen sites

The recent growth in citizen journalism flows obviously from the low startup costs for Web sites and,

perhaps more importantly, from the flexibility of digital media in presenting and delivering information. In their study of people's use of the Internet for specialized and depth information sources, Riffe, Lacy, and Varouhakis 20summarized four characteristics of the Web that "make it stand out compared to traditional media": it provides large amounts of low-cost, in-depth information; it provides nearly instantaneous delivery; it provides interactivity; and it features multimedia capability (p.9).

Though that typology aptly describes many current online news sites, the earliest online sites involved content being loaded from the print product directly onto a site, with little attention to the richness Web technology provides. Subsequent studies of online news catalogued evolving levels of technological sophistication. Tankard and Ban21 reported that few online news sites took advantage of interactivity, multimedia, and hyperlinks to the degree possible. Massey22 looked at a convenience sample of 38 online newspapers and found little use of multimedia content to create rich context for stories.

More recently, Rosenberry23 sampled 47 online newspaper sites, measuring their performance on Entman's 24 core functions of news: examination of public policy issues and those with political power, and comparison of political ideologies. Rosenberry25 defined 13 features that would indicate use of the Web's potential (e.g., citizen blogs, online letters, online polls, forums/message boards, off-site links, etc.). More than half the sites offered only three of these features, and as many as six of the 13 features were offered by fewer than a third of sites. Most frequently offered were online letters (89% of sites used them), forums/message boards, online polls, offsite links, and hyperstory presentations. But there was actually little input from citizens, despite the offered technologies.

Greer and Mensing26 looked at online newspapers from 1997 to 2003 and reported growth in multimedia, interactivity, and revenue-generating components over time. Tremayne, Weiss, and Alves27 found growth in multimedia use, particularly video, in a sample of 42 U.S. online newspapers. Most of the growth came in coverage of weather, sports, crime, and accidents.

Consumers seem to prefer having the most up-to-date technological features. Last year's Pew Research Center biennial news use study28 showed, for example, that 22% of Americans have a customizable Web page that includes news, and 44% of those who most use online news had a customizable Web page that included news. Video, audio, interactivity, and sharing are also important. A third of respondents watch news programs or video clips on the Web, and 24% listen to newscasts online. Twenty percent read comments from readers about news stories and 7% posted comments on news stories. Finally, 27% of Internet users shared an emailed story in the past week, including 12% "today or yesterday."

Although legacy media online news sites are using more Web features, it is unclear whether the same level of sophistication is present in the citizen sites. Open-source tools are easily available,29 but some citizen-generated sites might be so challenged by getting content that they may not have the time or expertise to use the technology.

In terms of enriching stories with background information, original materials, and so on,30 it would also appear crucial to have as many links as possible on the site. These could access archived content, databases, and other materials on the site, or they could carry viewers to external sites (ranging from legacy media sites to blogs, libraries, government sites, other citizen journalism sites, archives, databases, etc.).

Financial Support for Citizen Journalism Sites

Although the cost of starting and maintaining a Web site is low, such activities are not free. Citizen journalism requires a computer and Internet access, but more importantly, it requires the commitment of people's time. So how would citizen news sites support themselves given these market realities? Unless the news sites are hobbies, or run by the independently wealthy, time and revenue are necessary.

Mensing31 argued that there are four basic financial models for online profits: subscriptions, advertising, transactional, and the "bundled model." Transactions involve small charges for connecting people to services or products and earning a small percentage of the resulting income to the link. Bundled sites often use a variety of strategies for financial support including memberships, advertising, grants, and donors.32

Although a few newspapers began with a subscription model for their online offerings (e.g., Wall Street Journal and the New York Times), few people were willing to pay even partially for a subscription, and the approach had a deadening effect on traffic, which in turn reduced advertising rates. Today, almost no online newspapers have paid content. MinnPost's Joel Kramer said, "The market has spoken: People do not want to pay for news."33

Research Questions

This study used content analysis to explore research questions derived from existing research. First, because citizen journalism sites typically have small staffs, the ability of citizen journalism sites to provide public affairs news and information likely reflects the size of a given community. It is expected that the number of sites will be correlated with size of the city. If one assumes a certain percentage of people in a population have an interest in becoming citizen journalists, the absolute number of sites will be higher in larger communities. Thus, RQ1: How many and what forms of citizen journalism sites existed in the 15 cities selected for the study and did that number vary with city size?

In order to provide useful community information and news, journalists need to develop an

understanding of the community. Such an understanding develops across time and is not likely to develop if citizen journalism sites fail to exist for very long. However, because citizen journalists do something else for a living, they might not be able to maintain a commitment to the Web sites.

RQ2: How many of the sites initially identified continued to exist six months after they were initially analyzed?

Digital media allow sites to use such features as RSS feeds, capabilities for readers to post video, comments, photographs, and other participatory opportunities. Citizen journalism sites may or may not be using these technologies.

RQ3: To what degree do citizen journalism sites use digital technology to offer visitors the options of uploading and downloading content, of expressing their views, and of contacting those who maintain the citizen journalism site?

However, while citizen journalism in principle encourages citizens' participation in "deciding what news is sent out into the general flow of information,"34 with site creator/"shepherds"35 encouraging free expression of ideas, the question remains as to whether participation in the citizen journalism marketplace truly is unfettered. Thus,

RQ4: What kind of guidelines and policies are involved with citizen participation on these citizen journalism sites?

An important element of online communication is the ability to link a visitor to a large number and wide range of material on other sites. These hyperlinks found on Web sites lead visitors to other sites and to stories. They allow those who maintain a site to suggest additional sites for a variety of reasons. The linked-to site could be similar to or different from the site providing the link. These links extend the information available on a site and help to define the nature of the site itself and the context it provides for news.

RQ5: How many and what types of site links were employed by these sites?

Finally, even though citizen journalism sites are generally not for-profit sites, they do have expenses, such as computers, servers, software, and supplies. These sites might need to generate money to help offset the costs of operations.

RQ6: What types of financial support did citizen journalism sites have?

Method

The primary goal of this study was to explore the nature of citizen journalism in a more rigorous and systematic way than had been done before. To accomplish this goal, the study examined citizen journalism in U.S. metropolitan areas. This involved three steps: random selection of 15 metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) for study; identification of as many online citizen journalism sites in those areas as possible; and use of a content analysis protocol to study site options, linkages, financial support, and citizen participation.

Metropolitan areas were selected because this seemed more efficient than randomly selecting cities. Any citizen journalism site within the selected metropolitan areas would qualify for inclusion. However, the nature of citizen journalism is such that the sites concentrate on cities or neighborhoods within a city.

Market Sample

The 15 markets were randomly collected from three sizes of the 277 Census-defined Metropolitan Statistical Areas that exceeded 50,000 households. The MSAs were stratified to insure that the sampled areas would vary in population size, which is required to address the first research question. The three largest metropolitan areas (New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles) were excluded because of the complexity of those media markets and the high concentration of blog sites in each. Five "large" metro areas (including 507,000 to 2.2 million households) were selected from the 37 that fit this category, five "medium" metro areas (100,000 to 506,000 households) were selected from the 129 in this category, and five "small" metro areas (50,000 to 99,000 households) were selected from the 111 in this category.

For inclusion, each market had to have at least one site meeting the definition of "citizen journalism." Because of the possibility that some markets would not have any citizen journalism sites, 30 markets were initially selected at random from the three size strata and randomly ordered from 1 to 30. Starting with the first, each metro area on each list was examined for citizen journalism sites. If one or more sites were found, that metro area was included in the sample, with the process continuing until five markets were selected for each market size.

Determination of whether a market was qualified for inclusion began with three existing lists of citizen journalism sites: Placeblogger (http://www.placeblogger.com/), Knight Citizen News Network (http://www.kcnn.org/), and Cyberjournalism.net (http://www.cyberjournalist.net). In addition, Web

searches were conducted to check for additional Web sites in the sample markets. During the summer of 2007, a graduate student ran searches that used the name of the central city of the MSA plus terms such as "citizen journalism," "blog," "citizen Web sites," and "citizen blog." In addition, links to other blogs were followed and these sites were examined. Sites were included that fit the definition of citizen journalism sites. It is likely that some sites were missed, but it is impossible to estimate how many were missed or what types of bias would be created by missing these sites.

Next, operationally defining sites for inclusion involved several determinations. First, the site had to serve a specific geographic region identified through examination of the mission, the "about," or "FAQ" sections, or through other self-identification on the site. Second, the site had to have a significant portion of content provided by community members who were not professional journalists.36This information was found primarily in site sections that provide details about the geographic area served. Third, the site had to have news and opinion focused on the local geographic area rather than broader national or world areas.

Content Variables

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, 33 nominal content variables (most coded as absent or present), grouped into eight categories, were coded (for definitions and details on reliability checks, see Appendix A). These categories and variables were designed to address site policies about visitors' participation, presence of technological features to facilitate participation and interaction, and the means by which sites are sustained:

* Site Information – Presence or absence of statements on purpose/mission of site, legal information about the site, information about behavior of people who post, and/or privacy policy.

* Site Contact – Presence of Email contact information, site phone number, or site street address.

* Distribution or Download Capabilities – Presence of RSS or MP3/iPod feeds, capability of delivering content to cell phone, and ability to email individual stories to a third party.

* Polls/Surveys/Forums – Presence of poll or survey capabilities and availability of forums for citizens.

* Citizen Uploading Capability – The site allows visitors to upload information about community activities, news/feature stories, "letters to the editor," and/or opinion pieces. Also, ability to upload

audio, photographs, and/or video.

* Web site links – Total number and type of external links, including to traditional news organizations, citizen news sites, citizen blog sites, commercial news sites, and commercial blog sites.

* Support – Presence of information about organization support, support by individuals, individuals volunteering time, and any connections with national networks.

* Resources – Presence of information about non-advertising resources, which include volunteer time, financial donations from individuals, and products sold on the site.

* Ad Support – Number of commercial ads on home page and presence of classified ads.

Reliability

Two coders coded site content, with reliability assessed using simple percentage of agreement and Scott's Pi (see the Appendix).37 For simple agreement, the total number of agreements between the two coders was divided by the total number of category decisions. Scott's Pi measured possible impact of chance agreement on coding, by comparing the level of simple agreement with expected frequency of coder agreement.

Some difficulty occurred with calculations of Pi. Because the study applied normative standards to the sites, some variables were included that were relatively rare or scarce (e.g., 3% presence of cell phone downloading capability). The Scott's Pi formula for calculating expected frequency takes into account the equality of the distribution among a variable's options. When classification of content units varies from an "even" distribution (to approach, for example, 97% "absent" and 3% "present" for a particular feature), the value of Pi declines because some of this skew in the distribution is assumed to represent coding error.38 However, the skewness may actually reflect the population and not represent error.39 Potter and Levine-Donnerstein argue that in such situations, expected reliability should be based on the "normal approximation of the binomial distribution"40 rather than Scott's formula for expected agreement. In other words, the expected agreement by chance with two subcategories should be 50%, with three categories 33.3%, and with four categories 25%.

This study followed these rules: for dichotomous variables (present or absent), expected agreement was assumed to be 50%. For variables with three or more subcategories, the regular Scott's Pi formula was

used unless one subcategory held two-thirds or more of the coding decisions, when the normal approximation of the binomial distribution was used to calculate expected agreement (e.g., 33%).

Twenty-three sites were used for establishing reliability for all variables except the variables measuring external links. For those, 10 sites were used.41 Simple agreement for all variables reached 78% or higher. Five equaled 78%, six were between 80% and 85%, nine were between 85% and 89%, and 13 were greater than 90%.

With Pi, four variables reached only .56, which means they should be interpreted with caution: 1. presence of privacy policy, 2. Email contact provided, 3. RSS feed on the site, and 4. ability to upload news/feature stories. Inspection of the sites indicated that the problems reflected the inconsistent placement of these features on the sites and difficulty in finding them.

Pi for the other 29 variables was as follows: two between .65 and .69, 11 between .70 and .79, 10 between .8 and .89, and six equaled 1.0. Given the exploratory nature of the study, these levels were acceptable, though higher coefficients provide greater confidence in the results.

Results

RQ1 asked how many and what forms of citizen journalism sites existed in the 15 cities selected for the study, and how that number varied by city size. Table 1 provides data on the citizen journalism and blog sites located in each sampled city. Recall that Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York were excluded from the sample, and that to be included, a randomly chosen market had to have at least one site doing "citizen journalism."

Table 1:

Markets and Types of Citizen Journalism Sites in the Sample	Blogs	News	Total
Large markets			
Dallas-Fort Worth, TX	2	3	5
St. Louis, MO	6	2	8
Cleveland, OH	5	1	6
Miami, FL, OH	4	2	6
Portland, OR	2	3	5
Total	20	10	30
Medium markets			
Tulsa, OK	4	0	4

Asheville, NC	1	0	1
Peoria, IL	1	1	2
Peoria, IL	1	1	2
Richmond, VA	6	10	16
Ann Arbor, MI	3	2	5
Total	5	13	28
Small markets			
Dover, DE	1	0	1
Champaign-Urbana, IL	0	1	1
Charlottesville, VA	2	0	2
Fargo, ND	0	1	1
Bellingham, WA	1	0	1
Total	4	2	6

Note: The blog sites include 27 sites run by individuals or groups of citizens, 10 commercial blog sites, and two non-commercial blog aggregation sites. The news sites include 21 citizen news sites and four commercial blog sites not associated with traditional news media.

The majority of sites (61%) located in the 15 cities were blogs, which outnumbered citizen news sites in all three market sizes. Not surprisingly, presence of both types of sites was associated with markets with more than 100,000 households. By contrast, four of the five randomly chosen small markets barely met the inclusion requirement of at least one qualifying site.

However, in subsamples as small as five markets, a single unusual case can distort the results. In the "medium" market group, Richmond, Virginia, had a highly developed, linked network of neighborhood citizen journalism sites dating to 2007, so Richmond citizen news sites actually outnumbered citizen blogs.

RQ2 asked how many of the sites in this study continued to exist six months after they were initially identified.

Within six months of the data collection for this study, 9 of the 64 sites studied had ceased operation, meaning 86% were still functioning. More (7) of the study's blogs had ceased, meaning 82% of them were still active. Two news sites, or 8% of the sampled news sites, had become inactive.

Proponents of citizen journalism have argued that the technological capabilities of the Web and Internet are central to the appeal and success of citizen journalism efforts. RQ3 asked about how these citizen journalism sites capitalized on technological features inherent to the Internet, ranging from contacting

the sites to contributing material, to downloading material (see Table 2).

Table 2:

Comparison of Web Site Characteristics for News Sites versus Blog Sites (Percentage of Sites with Characteristic)

Participatory Features:	Blog Sites	News Sites	Total
Site contact			
Email contact provided	74%	96%	83%
Phone number provided	10%	24%	16%
Address provided	10%	32%	19%
Polls/surveys			
Polls or surveys present	5%	20%	11%
Forums present	8%	20%	12%
Upload capability			
Ability to upload information about community activities	8%	28%	16%
Ability to upload news/feature stories	10%	40%	22%
Ability to upload "letters to the editor"	8%	20%	13%
Ability to upload audio	0%	16%	6%
Ability to upload photographs	5%	20%	11%
Ability to upload video	5%	12%	8%
Upload capability			
Has RSS feed	90%	96%	92%
MP3/iPod feed available	8%	4%	6%
Content delivered to cell phone	3%	4%	3%
Able to email individual stories to a third party	13%	8%	11%
Number of sites	39	25	64

Presence of three types of site-contact information was coded: email addresses, telephone numbers, and street address. Based on the data, any interaction with the sites' managers or staff was more likely to occur through the Internet than phone or "snail mail." Many of these sites do not, of course, have a physical "newsroom" to be reached, whether by phone or postal service. While eight of ten (83%) of the sites provided email contact information, that proportion dropped to 74% for blog sites. "Traditional" contact information, however, was even rarer: only 10% of blog sites provided phone numbers or mailing addresses. Among news sites, only 24% provided a phone number.

Two categories of "participatory features" of citizen sites were also coded. First, some sites feature or solicit citizen opinions by providing interactive discussion forums or permitting citizens to weigh in via online surveys or polls about issues and events of the day. Second, some sites permit citizen uploading

or input of content into the flow of information via a number of different upload technologies.

Based on these data, many sites are, as Grubisich 42 noted, far from being "vibrant town squares." Opportunities for citizen opinions were somewhat limited, particularly on blogs (that often feature prominently the blogger's own opinions). Reader/viewer forums were available on one in five news sites, but only 8% of blog sites. Opinion polls or surveys were available on one in five citizen news sites, but only two of the blogs in the entire sample invited this form of participation.

Uploading capability was somewhat more common among sampled sites and, again, news sites were more likely to offer the means for citizens to upload information (28%), stories (40%), and letters to the editor (20%), as well as audio (16%) and visuals (12% to 20%).

But for those anticipating relatively easy and unfettered citizen participation in deciding what's news in the community, these percentages are problematic, raising the question of whether the "democratizing" potential of Web technology is truly being realized. Consider, for example, that 60% of citizen news sites do not have the potential for citizen uploading of news/feature stories, and 80% do not have the capability needed for that community journalism staple: the letter to the editor.

However, if opportunities for citizen uploading are limited, easy downloading of blog and news site content is widespread, at least in terms of RSS feeds. Once a site's RSS feed is linked to a user's computer, downloading becomes easy and, relatively speaking, passive.

Downloading capability among this sample of sites was primarily through such RSS feeds. Nearly all the news sites and nine of ten blogs offered RSS feeds. Other downloading options-via MP3/ipod files or direct-to-cell phone delivery-were scarce. Citizens were slightly more likely (13%) to find blog sites permitting email forwarding of posts to third parties than among news sites (8%).

Despite the limited opportunities for citizen participation shown in these data, recall that uploading, downloading, and participation capabilities have been trumpeted as key aspects of the citizen journalism movement. One could envision a virtual "free-for-all" of unfettered exchanges in the "vibrant town square" that is the cybermarketplace of ideas. Of course, truly unfettered speech and participation can lead to incivility or worse, which is one reason newspapers reserve the right to edit letters to the editor and require identification of writers.

Thus, RQ4 asked what kind of guidelines and policies are involved with citizen participation on citizen journalism sites. Coders looked for explicit guidelines and policies addressing the site's purpose or mission, legal restrictions on use of material on the site, rules about what kind of language is

permissible, and which�if any�information about contributors is kept private (see Table 3).

Table 3:

Comparison of Guidelines and Policies for News Sites versus Blog Sites
(Percentage of Sites with Characteristic)

Guidelines and Policies:	Blog Sites	News Sites	Total
Provides purpose/mission of site	64%	88%	73%
Provides legal information about site	56%	72%	63%
Provides information about behavior of people who post	49%	44%	47%
Statement of privacy policy	39%	68%	50%
Number of sites	39	25	64

Two-thirds of the sampled citizen blogs and 88% of the news sites provided information about the purpose and mission of the sites (typically via "about" or "about us" links from the home page). This information identifies who or what organization may be responsible for the site; sources of funding; staffing information; affiliation with national, regional, or local groups or sites; and founding date. Some sites go further, providing guidance for citizens on how to gather and report news or other content for the site. Of course, even if this information is available, the question remains whether site visitors pursue or find it.

Three-fourths of news sites but half the blogs provided legal information, including copyright information and explanation of legal responsibility for expressed opinions. The privacy of those who post or upload material was discussed on 68% of news sites but only 39% of blogs. Finally, explicit guidelines or restrictions on language or behavior were present on fewer than half the sites, with slightly more (49%) on blogs than on news sites (44%).

RQ5 explored the sites� use of links to external sites from the home page. External sites might include government office sites, special interest group sites, and other commercial or non-commercial Web sites, as well as other blogs or blog aggregators, and other citizen journalism or traditional news media sites. "Internal" links to on-site archives, related stories on the home site, etc., were not coded. These internal links move visitors around within a site (URL address), while external links take the visitor to other sites.

First, the numbers of links on the home pages were tallied, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4:

Number and Type of External Links from Home Pages

Number
Percentage of Sites with:	Blog Sites	News Sites	Total Sites
Zero External Links	18%	20%	19%
1to 5 External Links	8%	12%	9%
6 to 10 External Links	10%	12%	11%
11 to 30 External Links	26%	44%	33%
31 to 50 External Links	20%	4%	14%
51 to 100 External Links	8%	0%	5%
101 or more External Links	10%	8%	9%

Type
Percentage of Sites with at least One Link to:	Blog Sites	News Sites	Total Sites
Link with traditional news organizations (newspaper, TV, etc.)	20%	24%	34%
Link to citizen news sites	28%	48%	34%
Link to citizen blog sites	60%	56%	58%
Links to non-legacy commercial news sites	20%	4%	14%
Links to commercial blog sites	28%	4%	19%
Number of sites	39	25	64

The data demonstrate convincingly the extent of connectedness of citizen journalism sites to other sites. Whether the "connected-to" (linked) site is a willing or unknowing host, few sites in this sample were isolated. Only about a fifth of the sites' home pages were link-free: 20% of the news sites and 18% of blog sites had no links on the home page. A plurality (44%) of citizen news sites had from 11 to 30 external links indicated on the home page and only 12% of news sites offered more than 30 external links. By contrast, a third (38%) of citizen blog sites offered more than 30 links, with nearly 30% offering 31-100 links and several linking to more than a hundred external sites!

Blog home pages offered more numerous links and were also more varied in their offerings. More than a fifth of blog site home pages linked to each of the five types of link destinations in Table 4-traditional news organizations, citizen news sites, citizen blog sites, non-legacy commercial news sites, and commercial blog sites-while few news site home pages linked to the latter two commercial sites.

Blog sites were nearly twice as likely to link to traditional news organizations as were citizen news sites. Some citizen journalism news sites, in fact, dismiss traditional profit-driven news media and present themselves as alternatives. Forty-eight percent of citizen news sites linked to other citizen news sites, and 56% linked to citizen blogs. Only 28% of the blogs linked to citizen news sites.

Finally, RQ6 asked about financial support for citizen journalism efforts. That broad question was answered through exploration of several resource and support measures, including sales of display or classified ads; sales of site-related material or content; connection with a national network; and explicit

mention of individuals' support via donations or subscriptions and volunteer time. Table 5 provides the data.

Table 5:
Number and Type of Financial Resources and Support for Citizen Sites

	Blog sites	News sites	Total
Advertising			
One or more ads on home pages	43%	72%	55%
Zero ads on home pages	58%	28%	46%
One ad	2%	4%	3%
Two ads	10%	4%	8%
Three or more ads	30%	64%	33%
Classified ads present	3%	44%	19%
Classified ads present	3%	44%	19%
Other resources and support			
Organization support	3%	8%	5%
Financial support by individuals	10%	16%	13%
Individuals volunteer time	10%	60%	30%
Products sold on the site	8%	0%	5%
Connected with national network	41%	16%	41%
Number of Types of Non-ad Support			
No Support Mentioned	74%	36%	59%
One Type of Support Mentioned	21%	48%	31%
Two Types of Support Mentioned	5%	12%	8%
Three Types of Support Mentioned	0%	4%	2%
Four Types of Support Mentioned	0%	0%	0%
Number of Sites	39%	25%	64%

While selling advertising is only one component of a business model, citizen news sites in this sample were clearly more oriented toward ad revenue than citizen blog sites. And in general, such news sites rely on more different types of support than citizen blogs.

More than half the sampled sites had one or more ads on the home page, with three-fourths of the news sites (72%) displaying them, compared to 42% of the citizen blog sites. But while only 30% of blog sites had as many as three ads on the home page, two-thirds (64%) of citizen news sites had that many ads.

Blog sites ran virtually no classified advertising while 44% of the news sites did.

Sales of promotional materials related to the sites were rare, as was explicit identification of any particular organization's support. More common were individually-targeted requests for support via subscriptions or donations, but those were present on only one of ten sites. The largest category of support, however, was the 60% of the news sites which explicitly invited, acknowledged, and encouraged individuals' work as unpaid volunteers to help maintain the site or contribute content. Two-thirds of news sites mentioned one or more types of non-advertising support, compared to 26% of the sample�s blog sites.

With the growth of national blog networks such as Blogger (Blogspot.com), it is not surprising that 41% of the citizen news blogs in this study were affiliated with national networks. These networks allow individuals to create blogs easily. These individual blogs are maintained by the network and remain a subdomain of the network. Although these types of blogs have some flexibility in appearance, they tend to be fairly simple in structure because the bloggers usually are not technologically sophisticated. This simple structure works well with sites that simply express an individual�s opinions and interpretations. Conversely, only one in six citizen news sites had any such affiliation. Citizen news sites involve a wider range of media and types of content.

Conclusion

Evaluating the state of online citizen journalism is difficult. On the one hand the seemingly unlimited potential for democratizing the news is evoked by phrases such as "we the media."43 More skeptical observers view the "cybermarketplace of ideas" as "the Internet equivalent of Potemkin Village, many URLs away from being vibrant town squares."44 These competing visions lack specification of operational definitions for easy quantitative comparison. Therefore, any evaluation should start with the descriptions that emerge from the data.

The first observation is that the number of citizen journalism sites was limited. This sample of 15 cities had 64 such Web sites, mostly blogs. As with traditional news media, the size of the community seems to determine how many sites there will be. With the notable exception of Richmond, Virginia, medium and small markets could expect to have somewhere between one and three citizen journalism sites. The average for large markets was only 6 sites. The difference between large and other cities mostly likely reflects the greater financial and human resources available with larger communities.

The limited number of sites also reflects the easy entrance and exit of Web sites. Six months after the sites were analyzed, 14% of the sites no longer existed. This likely results from the limited resources for starting and maintaining such sites. The impact of these sites' closing would vary with community size. A site closing in a small community could have a large impact on the flow of information but much less of an impact in larger communities, which have a higher chance of another site replacing the one that closes.

The dynamics of support and continuation of citizen journalism sites need additional investigation. The fact that profit45 is not the driving force behind citizen journalism sites suggests that their existence and survival may be more difficult to predict than the life cycle of commercial news sites. For example, the presence of 16 citizen journalism sites in Richmond appears to reflect a high level of citizen interest and activity in the community, as well as the leadership of a particular individual that is acknowledged on many of the sites.

Most of these sites examined here were not taking advantage of the potential interactivity inherent in the Internet. The vast majority did not have forums, polls, or the capability of uploading content by citizens. Twenty-six percent of the blogs did not even have their email address posted.

An equally notable result is that blogs and news sites differ in many ways. Although neither type of site was particularly amenable to citizen participation, the news sites were far more likely to encourage participation than were the blogs. Both types of sites tended to take the same strong gatekeeper approach found at commercial news outlets, but more exceptions were found among the news sites than the blogs. On the other hand, blogs were less likely to seek multiple types of financial support than were news sites. The differences probably reflect the tendency of blogs to be written by one person, while news sites have staffs, even if small in number. In effect, blogs contain individual expressions and news site contain results from group interaction, which is much closer to the news construction process found in traditional news organizations.46

But what do these data tell us about the state of online citizen journalism? As is usually the case when reality is compared to expectations, these data show that online journalism is neither the utopia sought by the advocates of online citizen journalism, nor is it a barren intellectual field where few ideas grow. However, sites that aim to provide independent news coverage are scarcer than blogs. After removing Richmond from the sample, the mean news sites per market is about one, with five of the communities having no such site at all. All but two markets had one or more blogs. So, the state of online citizen journalism depends heavily on how one defines journalism.

The majority of sites in this study did not offer features to encourage citizen participation. The strong gatekeeper model�that has all information flowing through the journalists at the site�dominated. However, this is not inherently a negative thing. Having additional news and opinion outlets in any community adds more information to the local marketplace of ideas. An important question for future exploration is why these sites embrace a strong gatekeeper approach. Does it reflect concern about what citizens might put on the Web sites (recall that fewer than half the sites provided explicit policy statements on language and behavior)? Do these journalists find it easier and quicker just to generate the news and opinion themselves rather than editing and evaluating citizen submitted content? In other words, did the limited resources associated with citizen journalism sites affect the type of gatekeeping approach found on the sites?

The generalizability of these results is limited. The study included only 15 markets. Even thought the markets were randomly selected, these communities might well be the exceptions to conditions in most communities. In addition, this study examined the features found on citizen journalism sites and not the content itself. However, these data provide a snapshot of the nature of these sites at an early point in the development of citizen journalism Web sites, and as such, they provide a point of departure for future studies. They also suggest the need to understand the motivations behind and the variance among people who create and support citizen journalism sites.

APPENDIX A

Content Variables

Resources & Support (Five variables)

Sponsor of site (simple agreement = 78%; Pi = .71)* � The nature of the organization that produces the Web site. These could be: 1. *Citizen news sites*��These sites solicit contributions from citizens other than letters and calendar postings. These sites can have blogs, but they must also include news items that do not contain opinion; 2. Citizen blog sites � These sites are primarily maintained by individuals or groups and concentrate primarily on blogs. They have original blogs on them and are not just aggregations of other blogs.

Financial support by individuals (simple agreement = 89% Pi = .69)* � Explicit reference is made to financial support from individuals to support the site. The support can take the form of donations or subscriptions (three categories; subscriptions, donations, none).

Individuals volunteer time (simple agreement = 94%, Pi = .88) � Explicit reference is made to the donation of time to maintain the site by individuals as members of a staff. These are unpaid workers who contribute on a regular basis (present, absent).

Products sold on the site (simple agreement = 89%, Pi = .78) � Does the site sell products (stories, photos, t-shirts, etc.)? (present, absent)

Connected with national network (simple agreement = 94%, Pi = .88) � Is the site connected with a national network, such as Topix, Blogspot.com, and independent media, that help maintain Web sites (yes, no).

Site Information (Four variables)

Provides purpose/mission of site (simple agreement = 89%, Pi = .78) � This variable concerns the explicit information posted on the site about the nature of the site, such as the mission/purpose statement. (present, absent)

Provides legal information about site (simple agreement = 89%, Pi = .78) � This variable includes technical information about legal responsibility for material and copyright information. An explicit statement must be present about legal responsibility. (present, absent)

Provides information about behavior of people who post (simple agreement = 100%, Pi = 1.0) � This variable concerns whether the site has an explicit statement of behavior policy for people participating (posting or uploading any type of content) in the site. This includes explicit statements about language in postings and other behaviors. (present, absent)

Statement of privacy policy (Simple agreement = 78%, Pi = .56) � This variable concerns whether the site has an explicit statement about how it treats the privacy of people who post information on the site. (present, absent)

Site Contact (Three variables)

Email contact provided (simple agreement = 78%, Pi = .56) � This can be a template or simply an email address that explicitly explains the purpose is to contact the site administrators. (present, absent)

Phone number provided (simple agreement = 100%, Pi = 1.0) � Is a telephone number for contacting the site administrators posted on the site? (present, absent)

Address provided (Simple agreement = 100%, Pi = 1.0) � Is an address for contacting the site administrators posted on the site? (present, absent)

Site Contact (Distribution Systems (Four variables))

RSS feed on the site (simple agreement = 78%, Pi = .56) ◆ This concerns whether individuals can set up RSS feeds from the sites. These feeds send summaries of articles or entire articles to individuals who subscribe. (present, absent)

MP3/iPod feed available (simple agreement = 100%, Pi = 1.0) ◆ This concerns whether the site allows visitors to download material to iPods and MP3 players (podcasts). (present, absent)

Content delivered to cell phone (simple agreement = 94%, Pi = .88) ◆ Does the site deliver material to cell phones?

Able to email individual stories to a third party (simple agreement = 89%, Pi = .78) ◆ This can be done through a second party, such as Yahoo. This process sends a copy of the story to the recipient by either email or instant messaging.

Social Interaction (Two variables)

Polls or surveys present (simple agreement = 100%, Pi = 1.0) ◆ Does the site have polls or surveys in which visitors can participate? (present, absent)

Forums present (simple agreement= 89%, Pi = .85)*◆ Does the site have forums that allow individual visitors to communicate directly with each other on a range of topics by posting their opinions and observations. (Four subcategories◆no forum and three types of forums.)

Ad Support (Two variables)

Number of ads on home page (simple agreement = 89%, Pi = .82)* ◆ Count the number of discrete advertisements that appear on the home page of the site. These are separate units that promote the acquisition of products or services produced by commercial enterprises other than the organization that maintains the site. This does not include house ads. (no ads, one ad, two ads, three or more ads)

Classified ads present (simple agreement = 94%, Pi = .88) ◆ Does the site have ads posted by individuals that aim to sell a product? These must be explicitly identified as being posted by individuals (present, absent).

Citizen Uploading ability (six variables)

Ability to upload information about community activities (simple agreement = 94%, Pi = .88) ◆ The site allow visitors to post content about community activities such as announcements (weddings, anniversaries), obituaries, event calendars, and any content not about a news event. (present, absent)

Ability to upload news/feature stories (simple agreement = 78%, Pi = .56) ◆ The site allows visitors to upload a story about a news event or a feature story about a person, organization or event. (present, absent)

Ability to upload "letters to the editor" or opinion pieces (simple agreement = 83%, Pi = .66) ◆ The site allows visitors to upload opinions material in any matter as long as the process starts with a link or form on the Web page. This includes a link that opens the visitors email system. (present, absent)

Ability to upload audio (simple agreement = 100%, Pi = 1.0) ◆ The site allows visitors to upload audio files directly to the site. (present, absent)

Ability to upload photographs (simple agreement = 88%, Pi = .76) ◆ The site allows visitors to upload photographs directly to the Web site. (present, absent)

Ability to upload video (simple agreement = 92%, Pi = .84) ◆ The site allows visitors to upload video directly to the Web site. (present, absent)

Web site links (Seven variables)

Total number of external links (simple agreement = 80%, Pi = .74)* ◆ Count the number of external linkages located on the home page or on a separate page titled links that connects with the home page. This does not apply to internal links, which have URLs that include the site◆s home URL (six categories: zero, 1 to 5, 6 to 10, 11 to 30, 31 to 50, 51 to 100, 101 or more).

Total numbers of local external links (simple agreement = 90%, Pi = .84)* ◆ The number of links that connect to some organization that is primarily and explicitly related to events, issues and trends within the town or city that the Web site serves (three categories: zero, 1 to 10, 11 or more).

Number of links to traditional news organizations (newspaper, TV, etc.) (simple agreement = 90%, Pi = .78)* ◆ The link is to a site run by a daily newspaper, weekly newspaper, monthly newspaper or magazine, radio station, or TV station (three categories: zero, 1 to 10, 11 or more).

Number of links to citizen news sites (simple agreement = 80%, Pi = .70) ◆ The link is to another citizen news site (three categories: zero, 1 to 10, 11 or more).

Number of links to citizen blog sites (simple agreement = 90%, Pi = .85)* ◆ The link is to another citizen blog site (three categories: zero, 1 to 10, 11 or more).

Links to non-legacy commercial news sites (simple agreement = 80%, Pi = .71) ◆ The link is to a site run by a commercial enterprises that are not associated with any type of legacy media. The news content will resemble that found on legacy news sites, but these news organizations distribute exclusively online (three categories: zero, 1 to 10, 11 or more).

Links to commercial blogs sites (simple agreement = 80%, Pi = .71) ◆ The link is to an opinion site with a blog or series of blogs. It will not be run by a legacy news organization. These sites are commercial enterprises that are just blog and not news (three categories: zero, 1 to 10, 11 or more).

* These Pi figures were calculated using Scott◆s original formula for expected agreement. The ones without the asterisk were calculated by using the binomial distribution to calculate expected agreement rather than Scott◆s formula. The binomial distribution was used for all dichotomous variables and for variables with more than dichotomous choice when one value contained two-thirds or more of the choices made by the coders.