Is Online Citizen News Really Alternative? A Multiplatform Analysis of BP Oil Spill Coverage

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Abstract

Citizen journalism is more accessible than ever, through a range of both independent and commercial online platforms. But is it just an echo of traditional news? This content analysis investigated whether such news fits alternative journalism's characteristics, comparing BP oil spill coverage from blogs, Indymedia, and CNN's user-driven iReport. Indymedia was most alternative in hyperlinking, mobilizing information, contesting mainstream versions, and tone. iReport coverage mirrored most mainstream ideals, but not in author-audience interaction or sourcing habits. Blogs' reporting styles differed sharply from one another. In evaluating publishing platforms side by side, this study locates each along the continuum of merging practices.

Introduction

Technological advances have contributed to systemic changes within journalism. One of the most noteworthy is that amateurs now commonly create and distribute content through a range of publishing options. The breadth of this content has complicated notions of "alternative" journalism. Today, media operate not in clear-cut paradigms of traditional and alternative, but along a continuum, incorporating a blend of practices.[1]

Despite their lack of professional training, amateur reporters may enhance their writing with local knowledge[2], and may be amateurs in journalism only, lending subject-area expertise to their coverage. They may be more or less biased than traditional journalists, produce more or less ac-curate reports[3],

and provide more or less relevant context. As a further conceptual complication, many former professional journalists contribute to citizen journalism websites, leading to content that does not differ significantly from traditional outlets', and "the persistence of a public sphere dominated by elite actors." [4] In short, amateur or citizen journalism cannot be given a blanket normative assessment. We can, however, begin to distinguish the complex mix of values exhibit-ed in journalism as practiced across online platforms, by using explicit measures.

Some studies have looked at the degree to which one particular online format is alternative[5], but none have quantitatively compared amateur news venues. Moreover, few studies of alternative media have focused on environmental disasters, which may present a unique motivation for affected citizens. This study looks at coverage of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010. Three months of uncapped gushing sent 210 million gallons into the Gulf of Mexico[6], and far-reaching damages were incurred to local environments, industries and resident health.[7] BP, its operator Transocean, and contractor Halliburton have been found at fault for business practices that left the accident a possibility. This negligence was accompanied by an aggressive spin campaign.[8]

Through a review of the literature, this study finds alternative journalism to be set apart by its sources, hyperlinks, tone, mobilizing information, author-reader interaction, and explicit contestation of mainstream information. By comparing these in spill coverage across commercially backed iReport, activist Indymedia, and autonomous blogs, this study gives some idea of when, and in what ways, online citizen news ought to be thought of as alternative.

Literature Review

What is Alternative Journalism?

Even for those familiar with alternative journalism, it can be an "infuriatingly vague" concept.[9] Atton and Hamilton argue it may be boiled down to a rejection of the usual ways of doing journalism, a "dissatisfaction […] with the epistemology of news." [10] Therefore, identifying the traditional conventions of journalism might be the most useful way of defining what is alternative. Institutional journalism operates within an implicit paradigm, which both ensures a level of quality control and narrows its range of inquiry. [11] Alternative journalism attempts to supplement those limitations. [12]This section explores the properties of traditional news and the corresponding alternatives, locating divergence in adherence to objectivity, sourcing routines and the "subordinate role of audience as receiver."[13]

Objectivity and its obverse

Those in the media must report "events in ways that are not pregiven in the events themselves." [14] Therefore, some have referred to journalistic objectivity as more a "strategic ritual" [15] meant to preempt charges of prejudice. [16] Out of this, industry-wide aversions to sides-taking [17] and mobilizing information [18] have developed. Acceptance or rejection of objectivity can be seen in two related ways: first, in writing style and topic selection, and second, in a journalist's distance from the story they report.

The writing of average citizens is more likely to host the emotional process. [19] The threat of libel charges also pushes mainstream journalists to use more standard language, while citizens may probe grey areas and stimulate debate. [20] With less to lose, they may be more likely to make dubious claims.

In the name of objectivity, institutional journalists distance themselves from their reporting. Alternative journalists, meanwhile, question both the possibility and wisdom of "separate[ing] facts from values." [21] Alternative journalism is said to both hold clear biases and admit them freely, contributing to an "explicitly partisan character." [22] The personal and value-based style of alterna-tive journalism also means the inclusion of explicit mobilizing information is a hallmark of alternative media. [23]

The fact that alternative journalists are more likely to be inextricable from the stories they cover leads to the prominence of "active [or first-person] witnessing." [24] This fact could be either boon or bane for news consumers: First-person stories may replace the "view from nowhere" with community-centered perspectives [25], or introduce further bias and conflict of interest under guise of corporate independence. Overall, though, the altered position of the journalist is part of a broader inversion of the "hierarchy of access" that determines the sourcing practices of the main-stream. [26]

Sourcing practices

At journalism's core, the daily process of news is built from the reporter-source relationship. [27] Characterized by mutual dependence, this symbiotic relationship "opens up journalism's institutional ideology to be so fundamentally shaped by a group outside of the institution (official sources, typically within government and business) that individuals cannot fully share in the ideology while rejecting a relationship with this outside group." [28]

Free of this, alternative journalism can offer a broader array of voices and therefore more diverse content. [29] "Ordinary" people, local, and activists are more represented under this convention, and so stories emanate from a unique group of experts. While it does not eliminate bias from news, this practice can boost credibility and so may lead to more author-reader interaction.

Reich's study of citizen newsmakers, however, argues they are hindered by inferior contacts; the hierarchy of access is not so much inverted as it is stunted.[30] With lesser resources, then, amateurs come to rely on single-source stories. Because they are freer from commercial pressures and legal worries, but also because of their slighter resources, alternative journalists are less connected to elite sources. This is part of a political economy of alternative journalism that renders both strengths and weaknesses. Drawing on less represented communities for stories, though, can build intimacy with audiences uncommon in mainstream journalism.

Audience interaction

Although online delivery has brought a "dialogic turn" to traditional news,[31] journalists appear mostly aligned with older paradigms of interaction.[32] Dailey, Demo and Spillman found tradi-tional newspapers' forays into blogging failed to facilitate interaction, generating few comments and fewer journalist responses; 80% never replied to readers.[33] This conduct may occur because "interactivity in the online newsroom becomes a hassle of sorts for most journalists and editors, who need to deal with it on an everyday basis."[34]

Regardless, the forms of interaction in the mainstream remain a far cry from alternative journalism's focus on "horizontal rather than vertical communication, and on active participation in meaning-making."[35] Most scholars see alternative media as functioning as a public sphere, in which issues can be deliberated in absence of other civic options.[36] In alternative public spheres, subordinate groups can formulate "counterdiscourses"[37] and solidify action strategies.[38]

Relationships with audiences underpin alternative journalists' commitment to representational diversity and disregard for objectivity discussed so far, but find their most direct proxy in inter-action. The audience's input may actually be influential over future production.[39]

Alternative or Not?

Does citizen news meet theorists' expectations for alternative journalism? Because the enterprise of "amateur" news-making is even more heterogeneous than the range of practices that comprise the mainstream, a one-size-fits-all answer cannot apply. The answer varies both between and within publishing platforms. The next sections look at where past scholarship has told us three platform-types fit within the traditions of mainstream and alternative journalism. This tells us what we can expect of their coverage in terms of sourcing (sources, hyperlinks), objectivity (tone, mobilizing information, contestation of mainstream information) and audience interaction practices.

Blogs

The blog format is conceptually problematic, partly because scholars have failed to come to a consensus definition.[40] Further muddying the waters, mainstream entities have taken up the form.[41] This study looks at blogs with a single focus (spill coverage), run by individuals unconnected to other outlets.

Kenix and others point out that mainstream and alternative media ought not to be conceptualized binarily—rather, their practices and output are better understood on a continuum.[42] Noting the tendencies of each side, however, studies point to blogs' preservation of some traditional norms,[43]particularly reliance on official sources and mainstream links.[44]

Regardless, many argue that blogs represent a clear departure from the type of discourse in mainstream media.[45] Freed up from formulas of professional news, blogs can steer mass media conversations.[46] Blogs are noted for critique paired with original mainstream source material,[47] a practice described as "recoding."[48] While some have moved toward mainstream ideals of objectivity, most blogs remain personalized; even blogs maintained by professionals tend to take a more subjective approach.[49] Blogs are also set apart by their likelihood of inviting readers into the conversation.[50] Atton and Hamilton argue the form puts less focus on content originality and more on how authors and audiences collaborate to make sense of it.[51]

CNN iReport

Kperogi argues mass media are co-opting citizen media; the distinction may become blurrier.[52] Intentions aside, many news organizations situate user content in long-standing routines, essentially as means to old ends.[53] Though there has been no in-depth analysis of iReport, CNN's user news forum, it is plausible that its approved content would lean toward mainstream values and execution. CNN describes vetting as iReport's core.[54]About eight percent of user content is vetted for on-air or main site inclusion in an act of gatekeeping.

Thus, iReport pointedly differentiates between coverage of professionals and of the masses, with audience contributions solicited but "ghettoized."[55]Although publishing through CNN gives citizens a chance at accessing a wider audience, those opportunities are dictated by organizational standards of newsworthiness. Just like other commercial media organizations, CNN tends to protect against legal liability and coverage that could mar their public image.[56] This might exclude stories containing controversial claims, mobilizing information or especially strident criticism.

CNN might be hesitant to promote stories with links taking their readers off-site, let alone to alternative outlets. According to the analysis of Chang, Himelboim and Dong, online journalism operates within more of a "closed media code" than an open one: news flows situated in out-going hyperlinks are mostly stopped up.[57]

Indymedia

Indymedia, an open-publishing platform and activist network, was founded in 1999 to contest the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle. Although at times Indymedia has deflected ideological characterizations with posed neutrality,[58] it is committed to activist values.[59] Platon and Dueze find that in comparison to employees in traditional news, Indymedia members employ fundamentally different ideologies of journalism.[60]This guiding philosophy has been shown to manifest quantifiably.

Noting increased traffic to its servers during the months leading to and immediately following the U.S invasion of Iraq in early 2003, Opel and Templin suggest a link between Indymedia and protest mobilization.[61] Meanwhile, Saunders found in an audience survey that the site's visitors considered their opinions valued and accepted.[62] This dynamic might prefigure interaction be-tween authors and audience.

These principles also manifest in Indymedia journalists' use of sources, although Atton documents how these behaviors have shifted over time.[63]Indymedia is known for its first-person accounts, quite distant from the sourcing and tone of traditional hard news. However, Indymedia coverage has "evolved" from a simply open model to one in which long-time members select stories from various sources for inclusion in the site's package. Atton notes a preponderance of elites among these.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

From the above review, it may be concluded that blogs lean mainstream in sources and links, and alternative in tone and perhaps also in their inclusion of mobilizing information and explicit contestation. It has also long been established that blogs are in part defined by interaction. iReport, as part of CNN's media portfolio, can be hypothesized to rarely link to alternative sites, and to present milder coverage in terms of tone, mobilizing and contestation. Not enough is known to speculate on iReporters' sourcing routines or interaction with readers. Indymedia has been described as translating its activist mission into social critique, willingness to openly counter main-stream versions and prevalent mobilizing information. The relationship between its authors and audience appears promising for stimulating interaction. Once noted for alternative reporting styles and sourcing routines, though, Indymedia now may mix mainstream approaches with more populist ones.

However, the kind of coverage featured by each of these publishing options is unclear in some way. The blog is a broad concept more than a specific platform, where idiosyncrasy is the rule. iReport lacks scholarly analyses. Indymedia has become an elder statesman of online citizen media, and its characteristics may have changed since studies conducted in its earlier years. Based on this, this study poses the following questions and hypotheses:

- **RQ1.** Which of the three platforms' coverage employs the highest proportion of alternative sources?
- **H1.** CNN iReport's coverage contains the lowest proportion of alternative links.
- **RQ2.** Between Indymedia and blogs, which platform's coverage includes the higher proportion of alternative links?
- **H2.** CNN iReport's coverage contains the least negative tone toward BP and government offi-cials or services.
- **RQ3.** Between Indymedia and blogs, which platform's coverage includes the more negative tone toward BP and government officials or services?
- **RQ4.** Which of the three platforms' coverage includes the highest incidence of author-audience interaction?
- **H3.** Indymedia's coverage includes the highest incidence of explicit contestations of mainstream information, followed by blogs', with iReport's including the lowest incidence.
- **H4.** Indymedia's coverage includes the highest incidence of mobilizing information, followed by blogs', with iReport's including the lowest incidence.

Method

This study used quantitative content analysis to investigate the characteristics of the news pro-duced by citizens on CNN iReport, Indymedia and the two most prominent event-centered blogs.[64] It determines which platform most typically carries journalism that is alternative. This is resolved by analyzing news stories' sources, links, tone, mobilizing information, truth claims and author-audience interactivity.

All relevant stories published by each outlet were examined. For the two blogs, every entry was analyzed. For iReport, all vetted stories, organized under 'assignment: track the oil disaster' were included, while Indymedia stories were delimited by the search terms 'Deepwater Horizon' and 'BP Oil.' The range extended from April 20, 2010, to March 9, 2013. This resulted in 1,566 news stories among BPOilSlick.blogspot (n = 457), GulfOilSpill.blogspot (n = 781), CNN iReport (n = 250), and Indymedia (n = 78). Content was analyzed by two coders. Intercoder reliability was calculated with a sub-sample of 120 posts using Cohen's kappa (κ), which is reported for each of the following variables.*Source*

Sources were coded as mainstream (government, corporate, established media or other tradition-al organizations; κ = .68) and alternative (local residents, eyewitnesses, social movement organizations, and other non-authoritative sources, κ = .71). The study also accounted for expert (κ = 1.0) and

counter-expert sources (κ = 1.0), since the spill spurred scientific debate. An expert was defined as someone cited as especially knowledgeable, with authority bestowed by advanced degree or specialized employment. A counter-expert was defined as someone cited in contestation of an authority's claim, but also given expert status.*Links*

In digital media, linking can be thought of as an extension of sourcing. The sites a story links to reveal much about its association with, reliance on, mainstream and alternative news. In this study, the presence of alternative links (to non-mainstream media, independent blogs and websites, and advocacy groups, κ = .54) was contextualized against institutional media links (e.g., all television networks, national and regional newspapers, and national news magazines, κ = .83). Non-news links (e.g., scientific institutes, universities, commercial websites, government organizations, κ = 1.0) were also coded. Finally, the context of links to mainstream sites was noted as informational or critical (κ = 1.0).

Interaction

This study determined which platform encourages the most robust author-reader relationship, and is most likely to serve as a vigorous forum for readers, through two variables. The first was the total number of comments per story per platform (κ = 1.0). The second counted authors' explicit connections to readers in feedback (κ = 1.0).

Mobilizing information

Mobilizing information (MI) is crucial in disaster coverage. Lemert defines three types of mobilizing information: locational, giving specifics on time and place of proceedings such as a pro-test, vote, or media event (κ = 1.0); *identificational*, providing contact information and names for individuals and organizations (κ = 1.0); and *tactical*, which offers instructions for actual behaviors such as those used during a strike (κ = 1.0).[65] Articles were dichotomously coded for contents of each of the three types.*Tone*

This study adapted Pfau, Haigh, Gettle, Donnelly, Scott, Warr and Witenberg in the use of seven-interval semantic differential scales.[66] The first scale was intended to measure the valence of assessments of ability to address the disaster, in terms of technical, social, and environmental problems (κ = .65). Posts warranting a 1 included high praise or optimism. A 7 was reserved for strong criticism declaring success impossible. The second scale measured the valence of journalists' takes on BP or government officials' *intentions* (κ = .82). A 1 was coded for benevolent intent, making every effort to restore the Gulf and make residents whole. The most negative assessment, 7 was reserved for those that accused malicious, conspiratorial or deceptive intent. For both scales, neutral articles were scored as 4s.

Contestation

This dichotomous variable measured explicit claims that challenged mainstream narratives (κ = .63). Contestation was made evident by the presence of two things: first, the outsider knowledge itself, and second, a claim of falseness for the information it confronted. Any article with truth claims made in conjunction with allegations of mainstream ignorance, suppression, or complicity, was coded for its presence.

Results

RQ1 asked about the sources used in news coverage. First, means for source-types were obtained. Indymedia included the most alternative sources per post (2.37), as well as the most mainstream sources (2.4). The Gulf Oil Spill blog included the fewest alternative sources (.38) and iReport the fewest mainstream (.22). Means are illustrated in Figure 1.

To obtain proportional measures, a one-way analysis of covariance was conducted with coverage platform as the independent variable, alternative sources per article as the dependent variable, and total sources per article as the covariate. Platforms differed significantly, $F(3, 1561) = 27.93$, $p < .001$. With total sources held constant at 1.91, the estimated marginal means for alternative sources were iReport, 1.20, Indymedia, 1.13, BP Oil Slick, .99, and Gulf Oil Spill, .67. Sidak post hoc comparisons showed iReport's adjusted mean to be significantly greater than BP Oil Slick's ($p < .001$) and Gulf Oil Spill's ($p < .001$). Indymedia and BP Oil Slick were also both greater than Gulf Oil Spill (both $ps < .001$).

Similar sourcing patterns continued with experts and counter-experts. A Tukey's HSD test showed expert sources were cited significantly more often in Indymedia ($M = .44$, $SD = 1.09$) and BP Oil Slick ($M = .30$, $SD = 1.02$), than in Gulf Oil Spill ($M = .08$, $SD = .35$) and iReport ($M = .04$, $SD = .20$). Counter-expert were also employed most by Indymedia ($M = 1.14$, $SD = 2.07$), significantly more often than by BP Oil Slick ($M = .26$, $SD = .82$), whose usage was significantly greater than iReport's ($M = .04$, $SD = .23$) and Gulf Oil Spill's ($M = .03$, $SD = .25$). All Tukey means-differences were significant at the $p < .001$ level.
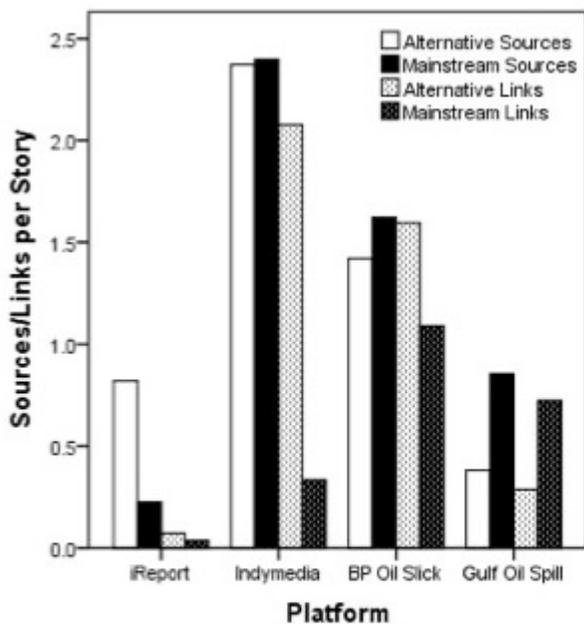
FIGURE 1. Sources and links by platform

H1 stated iReport would have the lowest proportion of alternative links, and **RQ2** asked which of the remaining platforms would have the highest. First, means for link-types were calculated. Indymedia linked to alternative sites at the highest rate (2.08 per article) while BP Oil Slick linked to mainstream sites at the highest rate (1.09). iReport had the lowest rate for both categories (.07; .04). Means are presented in Figure 1. To determine the proportional rates, a one-way ANCOVA was conducted with news platform as the independent variable, alternative links per article as the dependent variable, and total links per article as the covariate, showing significant difference among platforms ($F(3, 1561) =$ 20.34, $p < .001$).

With total links held constant at 1.42, the estimated marginal means for alternative links were iReport, .91, Indymedia, 1.45, BP Oil Slick, .80, and Gulf Oil Spill, .55. Sidak post hoc compari-sons showed Indymedia's adjusted mean was significantly greater than the other three platforms' ($ps < .001$). iReport's and BP Oil Slick's means were also significantly greater than Gulf Oil's ($p < .001$; $p < .01$). **H1** was rejected, as iReport had the second-highest proportion. It was determined whether mainstream links were included informatively or critically. Surprisingly, the practice of critical linking was rare, especially among blogs, where the activity was noted in the literature.[67] Twenty-nine percent of Indymedia links to mainstream sites were given in a critical context, while 20% of iReport's, 3% of BP Oil Slick's, and none of Gulf Oil Spill's links were.
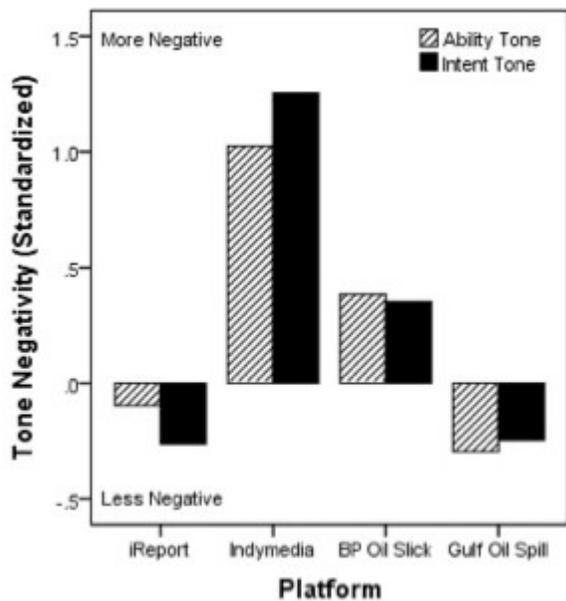
FIGURE 2. Tone negativity by platform

H2 stated iReport stories would have the least negative tone, while **RQ3** asked which of the remaining platforms would have the most negative. Tone was measured on 7-point scales, with higher ratings for more negativity. A one-way ANOVA indicated the platforms differed on both the *Ability and Intent* scales ($F(3, 1562) = 88.50$, $p < .001$; $F(3, 1562) = 87.02$, $p < .001$). A post hoc Tukey's HSD test revealed Indymedia coverage employed tone significantly more negative than that of other outlets, for both *Ability* ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 1.33$) and *Intent* ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 1.23$). BP Oil Slick (MAbility = 5.07, $SD = 1.28$; MIntent = 4.81, $SD = 1.23$), the second harshest, was significantly more so than iReport (MAbility = 4.54, $SD = 1.07$, MIntent = 4.18, $SD = 1$) and Gulf Oil Spill (MAbility = 4.32, $SD = .76$, MIntent = 4.19, $SD = .67$). All Tukey means-differences were significant at $p < .001$. The tone results are presented in Figure 2 in standardized form.

RQ4 asked which coverage was accompanied by the highest rates of author-audience interaction. One-way ANOVAs for comments ($F(3, 1562) = 42.03$, p < .001) and author interaction ($F(3, 1562) = 23.22$, p < .001) showed the outlets differed significantly. Tukey's HSD tests revealed iReport ($M = 8.33$) to support significantly more comments per article than the subset of the oth-er three publishing options (BP Oil $M = 2.37$; Indymedia $M = .06$; Gulf Oil $M = .05$). iReport coverage also included more instances of author feedback per article ($M = .44$) than the subset of BP Oil Slick ($M = .13$), Indymedia ($M = .04$), and Gulf Oil Spill ($M = .01$).
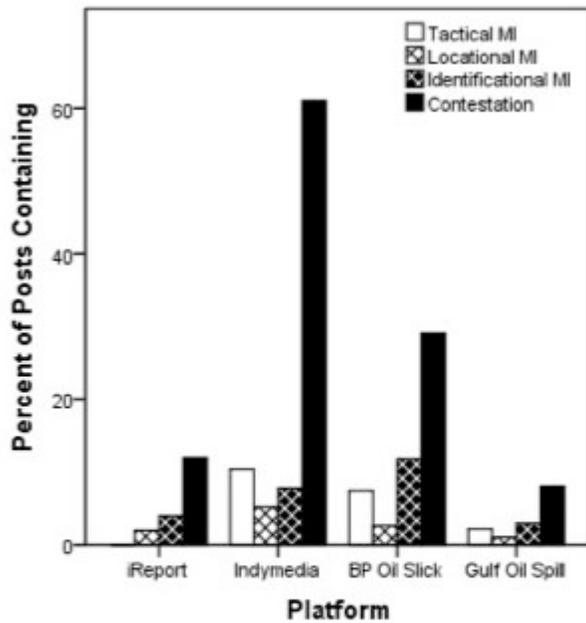
FIGURE 3. Percent of posts contain mobilizing information and contestation of mainstream information, by platform.

H3 stated Indymedia coverage would include the highest rate of explicit contestations, followed by blogs, with iReport last. A one-way ANOVA showed significant difference among sites (F(3, 1562) = 9.49, $p < .001$). Tukey's HSD test showed Indymedia ($M = .61$, $SD = .49$) was the most likely outlet to include contestation. Since this variable was coded dichotomously, 61% of all Indymedia stories directly challenged mainstream information. This was significantly more often than BP Oil Slick ($M = .29$, $SD = .46$), which was significantly more likely to include such dis-pute than either iReport ($M = .12$, $SD = .32$) or Gulf Oil Spill ($M = .08$, $SD = .27$). All Tukey means-differences were significant at $p < .001$. These findings mostly support the hypothesis, apart from the blogs' divergent reporting styles. Results are presented in Figure 3.

H4 hypothesized that Indymedia would include mobilizing information at the highest rate, fol-lowed by blogs and iReport. A one-way ANOVA was conducted for each type, showing statisti-cally significant differences for each: *identificational*, F(3, 1562) = 14.81, $p < .001$; *locational*, F(3, 1562) = 3.04, $p < .05$; and *tactical* F(3, 1562) = 14.10, $p < .001$.

Tukey's HSD tests showed that the BP Oil Slick blog ($M = .12$, $SD = .32$) included significantly more identificational MI than iReport ($M = .04$, $SD = .01$) and Gulf Oil Spill ($M = .03$, $SD = .17$), $p < .001$, with Indymedia ($M = .09$, $SD = .29$) not varying significantly from either group. MI variables were also dichotomous (i.e., BP Oil Slick included identificational MI in 12% of posts). The means-differences for locational MI were not found to be significant. Indymedia ($M = .05$, $SD = .22$) included more locational MI than Gulf Oil Spill ($M = .01$, $SD = .10$), while BP Oil Slick ($M = .03$, $SD = .16$) and iReport ($M =$

.02, *SD* = .14) did not vary substantially from either. For tactical MI, Indymedia (*M* = .10, *SD* = .31) and BP Oil Slick (*M* =.07, *SD* = .26) included significantly more of such instructions than did the subset of Gulf Oil Spill (*M* =.02, *SD* = .15) and iReport (*M* = .00), *p* < .001. Overall, Indymedia and BP Oil Slick were more reliable in including mobilizing information than were iReport or Gulf Oil Spill. This mostly supports **H4**. Rates of mobilizing information inclusion are presented in Figure 3.

Discussion

The content analysis indicates Indymedia had many qualities of alternative journalism, such as scrutiny of public figures' ability and intent, promotion of alternative networks and skepticism of official information. Blog readers were likely to find both alternative- and institutional-leaning journalism published through that format, and coverage may have varied greatly between any two venues. iReport supported conversations surrounding the disaster, and news based on a single source, for better or worse. But what do these findings tell us? One approach is to look at-what "alternative" means for each platform. What about them is alternative, and how might they offer new wrinkles to our conceptualizations of the alternative?

iReport as alternative

iReport featured non-traditional reporting styles. This platform displayed independence from the entrenched expert-driven model—citizens were making the news, often through amateur investigations. iReport fit Reich's description of citizen journalism, with a greater reliance on single-source stories based around first-person witnessing.[68] These iReporters were likely to take a more neutral approach. On the one hand, they failed to present news beyond "mere information,"[69] and were less likely to take relevant moral stands called for by public-civic journalism proponents.[70] Conversely, slant is not categorically desirable in itself. Still, in the tenor of its business and government reporting, iReport more closely followed a mainstream style.

Indymedia as alternative

Indymedia was found to be a source of mobilization, and was alternative in tone and frequency of contestation. In covering news with this open subjectivity, though, Indymedia writers nevertheless used traditional standbys like expert and counter-expert sources as a foundation upon which to stand. Its writers embraced one of the "rituals" of journalism to legitimize their work, à la Tuchman's assessment of institutional objectivity.[71] Further, with negative assessments of spill handlers' ability and their supposed nefarious intent, these citizens ditched moderatism and instead adopted extreme tone as a news value unto itself. Explicit claims of suppression, deception, or cover-up were standard for stories on their newswire. While making such allegations can fulfill a watchdog function, unverified claims are

also surely not a clear-cut good, as misinfor-mation may be rampant.

Still, proof of cover-ups surrounding the spill continues to surface. As late as July, 2013, Halliburton agreed to plead guilty to charges of destroying test results in the disaster's wake.[72] In light of this delayed revelation, skepticism was warranted, and Indymedia provided that. In densely linked stories, Indymedia writers often nodded to mainstream counterparts. However, those visiting Indymedia were likely to encounter diversity of opinions, outlets, and information.

Blogs as alternative

The two blogs did often act as extension of the mainstream in links[73] and in their largely uncritical handling of these, did not appear to attempt the "recoding" that others have attributed to bloggers.[74] BP Oil Slick's coverage resembled Indymedia's. Alternative sources and links were common, although mainstream ones were also. Like Indymedia, the blog was not objective in tone and contestation. However, with a personal blog, the outcome is representative not of a collective reporting practice or philosophy, but of an individual's. So for some blogs, alternative-ness may mean purity or individuality, a unity to the product seen by readers.

Relative to other outlets, Gulf Oil Spill was not alternative. Alternativeness for such blogs may fall under what Bruns calls gatewatching.[75] Rather than a new form of journalism, this is a shift in delivery. Gatewatching allows an empowered audience to select the news, merging the traditional gatekeeping process with aggregation. The public may transmit available information as "active readers"—assessing the quality or bias of what they pass on. Gulf Oil Spill did not give much of this kind of evaluation. Still, reading the news delivered by this site is a fairly different experience than encountered with a single source.

The results also are a reminder that trying to fit blogs into a single construct may be ill advised. Despite similar mission statements, the two examined here deviated sharply for most measures, confounding some hypotheses. This is relevant to research going forward, though, in emphasizing the importance of function over format: informational goals of producers and audiences are more useful typologically than is publishing technology or delivery system.

Limitations and future research

The study was focused on one disaster, the BP oil spill. This restricts the generalizability of the findings, as do the choices of journalism platforms under examination. A broader range of topics and news outlets should be analyzed. Cross-national comparison may provide more information about the

converging spectrum as it plays out in areas with different histories and traditions of journalism. Also, directly comparing citizen news with mainstream outlets' would be instructive.

This study made no inquiry into the quality of contestations; results determined only the willingness to put forth such challenges. Future studies could determine the worth of these claims. If claims were followed up in subsequent stories in either the alternative or mainstream media, they could be seen as functionally validated, at least in terms of entering a broader discussion. Lastly, the goals of citizen journalists should be determined. What guided writers in choosing a publishing platform? It is possible the structure of iReport, for instance, directly influences its content. Some may want to include themselves in a national news story. CNN's prominence could attract different kinds of citizens than do blogs or Indymedia. Investigating self-selection processes can help us make sense of some content differences.

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