#ISOJ

The official research journal of the INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON ONLINE JOURNALISM

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Editors' Note

Welcome to Volume 2, Number 2 of the #ISOJ, the official research journal of the International Symposium on Online Journalism.

The journal was officially launched in April 2011 at the 12th International Symposium on Online Journalism in Austin, Texas, at the University of Texas at Austin.

This second volume, second issue features seven articles from the research papers that were peer-reviewed and selected for presentation at the April 2012 symposium.

This issue focuses on the role of Twitter in breaking news situations, the relationship between journalists and the communities they serve, the importance of privacy policies in social media channels and their implications for society in general, the challenge in creating ethical codes/frameworks in today's media climate, the entrepreneurial spirit in news startups, the unique tension between public journalism and news values, and investigating the news ecosystem one hub and node at a time.

We hope you enjoy this latest volume of work!

Amy Schmitz Weiss and Rosental Calmon Alves

Co-Editors

Journal Details

About the Journal

About Us

#ISOJ The Journal of the International Symposium on Online Journalism is an international journal devoted to advancing the scholarship in the area of journalism and innovative technologies. Articles included in the journal are based on original research, methodologies relevant to the study of journalism and innovative technologies (online, tablets, mobile platforms, etc.), critical syntheses of research and theoretical perspectives on journalism today. The journal maintains a social scientific and broad behavioral focus.

Disclaimer

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#Memstorm: Twitter as a Community-Driven Breaking News Reporting Tool

Carrie Brown-Smith

This study offers an in-depth exploration of how citizens and journalists in Memphis, Tennessee have come to utilize Twitter and the hashtag #Memstorm as a collaborative breaking news reporting tool when severe weather hits the region. Building on previous theory and research revealing how social media has made the news process increasingly participatory, this study looks at how Twitter is affecting local journalism. Using interviews, a survey, participant observation and content analysis of tweets with the #memstorm hashtag, this study shows how Memphians are building community online and playing a role in sharing information vital to public health and welfare.

In April 2011, a series of powerful storms pounded Memphis, Tennessee and the surrounding region, driving residents not only to their television sets but to their Twitter streams for the latest information on tornado sightings, flash flooding and power outages. Sirens blared and people huddled in basements and bathrooms off and on for two days, but when all was said and done Memphis was relatively lucky; the same system of storms caused much more extreme damage and loss of life in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and other areas.

While wild weather with torrential rain and tornados are not unusual in the Mid-South, the ability to both access and contribute to another real-time source of information in addition to the venerable local television meteorologists and other traditional news outlets is a relatively new phenomenon that exemplifies the participatory, two-way power of today's digital tools. Community members converged around the hashtag #memstorm to share information, photos, and video on the storm and interact with others; according to data collected by Aaron Prather, a local technology entrepreneur and CEO of startup StiQRd, at the height of the storm, #memstorm impressions reached 1.4 million, with over 200,000 Twitter accounts being reached; 0.01% of all tweets on Twitter were being tagged with #memstorm (Howell, 2011).

Using a combination of methodological approaches, including a content analysis of 1,608 tweets with the #memstorm hashtag, interviews, a survey, and participant observation, this study offers an in-depth exploration of a concept described by Hermida as "ambient journalism" or an "awareness system that offers diverse means to collect, communicate, share and display news and information, serving diverse purposes" (2010, p. 301). This always-on communication system carries significant implications for journalists' role in society and the larger question of how a community's information needs are met in a digital world, particularly during a fast-moving breaking news situation. Journalists hoping to harness new tools to continue to play a role as sensemakers and verifiers of information, in a landscape where the public has the ability bypass them, need to understand what this growing online community is doing and what its needs, norms and motivations are. For example, during the storm, Fox 13 asked people to use the hashtag #foxstorm "so we can better monitor affected areas." The reaction on Twitter was swift and fierce; the community was already using the #memstorm hashtag and many resented an attempt to "brand" the storm response to one particular station.

This study builds on existing theory and research revealing how social media has helped make the news process increasingly participatory, expanding traditional conceptions of news and challenging the role of journalists as gatekeepers who select information for presentation to the public (Singer, Hermida, Domingo, Heinonen, Paulussen, Quandt, Reich & Vujnovic, 2011). Jane Singer, Alfred Hermida and a host of other researchers have amassed substantial evidence showing that "people inside and outside the newsroom are engaged in communicating not only to, but also with, one another. In doing so, they all are participating in the ongoing processes of creating a news website and building a multifaceted community (2011, p. 2)." By looking at one specific case in detail, this study examines further how a community may play a role in covering itself.

This study also expands on existing research on uses and gratifications of Twitter by examining what kinds of needs motivate public use of new media in a breaking news situation. Previous research has found that Twitter may be especially useful in comparison to other social networks for news and information (Johnson & Yang, 2009), more so than Facebook, where people go primarily to connect with their friends made offline (Urista, Dong, & Day. 2009; Steinfeld & Lampe, 2007). In addition, this study examines the back-and-forth among community members using the hashtag and finds that Twitter serves the need to connect with others, one of four key communication need states particularly relevant in interactive new media contexts (Thorson & Duffy, 2006).

Literature Review

There a growing body of academic literature on Twitter, a social network that allows users to broadcast information to others using just 140 characters, interact with each other publicly or privately, and "follow" other users, although relatively few studies have examined its implications for journalism or looked at how hashtags are used in a breaking news event. Unlike the larger and older Facebook, reciprocity is not required on Twitter; users can follow others even if others do not follow them in return. Users can share photos, videos, and links to articles or blog posts; links are often shortened to provide more space for additional commentary. About 13% of online adults use Twitter, a figure that has grown rapidly, up from just 8% in 2010 (Smith, 2011). While many new users check the site infrequently or never, one-third check for new material posted by others on a daily basis or even multiple times per day (O'Dell, 2011). Twenty-one percent of Twitter users follow more than 100 people, and 16% have more than 100 followers

(Smith & Rainie, 2010). Edison Research also found awareness of Twitter has exploded. The percentage of Americans who say they are familiar with Twitter rose from 5% in 2008 to 87% in 2010 (Webster, 2010). Twitter users are highly mobile; 95% own a mobile phone and half use it to access Twitter (Smith, 2011).

Uses and gratifications theory has been the most common theoretical paradigm applied in the study of social networks thus far, as researchers exploring a still relatively-new phenomena seek to understand how audience members use social media sites like Twitter and the fulfillment they get from their media choices.

Uses and gratifications theory posits that the audience does not passively receive information, but instead actively interprets it and uses media to meet particular needs that can be identified (Katz, Gurevitch & Hass, 1973). Uses and gratifications theory is relevant for journalism-related research as a way to understand and target audience needs, ultimately ensuring the best return on investment with social media.

Twitter and Uses and Gratifications

Research on the uses and gratifications of Twitter has found that people are using this social network as an important source of news and information, although social needs remain important as well. One 2009 study by Johnson & Yang found people were using Twitter more for informational than social needs, a kind of “one-stop-shop” for obtaining information from a variety of sources, similar to an RSS feed. Their results indicated that “Twitter’s strengths in satisfying its users lie with its ability to help users connect and communicate with many other users, while also allowing users to share their thoughts in a public forum and keep track of what other users are talking about (Johnson & Yang, p.18).” Subjects reported that Twitter served as a filter, allowing them to easily access information recommended by friends or trusted contacts. Aberran et. al. (2010) found similar results in a study of Latino youth on Twitter. When young adult Latinos singled out uses of Twitter from Facebook and MySpace, Twitter emerged as the clear leader for accessing news and information.

Of special relevance to this study given its focus on using Twitter in the context of a local breaking news story, Naaman, Becker and Gravano (2011) found that Twitter serves as what they called a “social awareness stream.” They noted that although it enables the possibility of far-flung global connections, it is especially useful for offering local information, because most users tend to be connected to a significant number of people from their geographical area. They also found that in a breaking news event, users tended to, not surprisingly, focus more on information transmission than conversation with other users.

Hughes, Lee, and Palen (2009) also examined Twitter use during major news events or crises with a content analysis of tweets from the Republican and Democratic National Conventions as well as Hurricanes Gustav and Irene. Their findings matched the previous study in that during a crisis, Twitter users are focused on broadcasting information as opposed to interacting with others. Interestingly, Twitter users who joined during this kind of breaking news event are more likely than others to become long-term users, suggesting that these users found substantial utility in Twitter and may have formed meaningful connections that they could then build upon. They also found that general Twitter use over time has evolved to include more information sharing; in 2007, just 13% of tweets included a URL taking the user to additional information, while two years later in 2009, 24.7% of tweets contained a URL (Hughes, Lee, & Palen, 2009). During the two hurricanes, for example, fully 50% of all tweets contained a link. Indeed, social networks have become key drivers of traffic to Web sites through shared links. Pew Research Center reported 55% of Twitter users share links to news stories, and about one in 10 do so at least once a day (Smith & Rainie, 2010).

Similarly, search-based ad network Chitika conducted a study that found news is important to Twitter users (2010). They looked at all of the Web sites in the company's network that received traffic from Twitter and found 47% of those sites were news-related; technology and celebrity/entertainment sites accounted for 10%, movies 6% and how-to articles 4%. A study by Barracuda Networks, a Web security company, described Twitter as "more news feed than social network," finding the majority of Twitter users follow others but do not post messages themselves (Pepitone, 2010). However, uses may be shifting. More recent research indicates people are becoming more active in sharing information themselves on Twitter (Sysomos Inc., 2010).

In addition to serving as an important source of news and information, Twitter also satisfies needs for connection and can build a sense of community, studies show. Crawford (2009), boyd, Golder and Lotan (2010) and Chen (2011) found that Twitter users can develop a deep sense of connection to others, including those that don't post often themselves but instead primarily listen and consume information. Chen (2011) found that the more hours per week you spend on Twitter, the more camaraderie or connection you feel to other users, a finding that held true across gender, age and other demographic categories. Boyd, Golder and Lotan (2010) describe Twitter as a kind of "distributed conversation," writing, "whether participants are actively commenting or simply acknowledging that they're listening, they're placing themselves inside a conversation. Even when they are simply trying to spread a tweet to a broader audience, they are bringing people into a conversation" (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010, p.7). Crawford (2009) found that Twitter often provides a kind of steady background of messages that are scanned periodically throughout the day, and that "this process of background listening is critical to the sense of affinity generated in these spaces; access to the minutiae of a person's life is something normally reserved for family, close friends and lovers" (p. 531). When looking at why people retweet messages, the boyd, Golder and Lotan (2010) study found that in addition to the desire to share information, various social needs for connection were paramount. They found that the main reasons people retweet include: To spread information to a new audience, to entertain or curate the best information, to comment on somebody else's tweet and start a conversation, to make one's presence as a listener visible, to validate another person's thoughts, as an act of friendship or loyalty, to support less popular/less recognized people or topics, to gain followers and seek reciprocity, or to save tweets for later personal access.

A study that examined the use of Twitter to raise money for and awareness of problems in post-earthquake Haiti found that, more than self-expression, users are primarily interested in belonging or connecting with a community of like-minded supporters, as well as promoting involvement and personalizing issues in a way that allows them to declare their individual commitment in a public way (B. Smith, 2010). Retweets were more dominant in this study than personal messages, “enabling users to build off others’ commentary and network on relief efforts” (B. Smith, 2010, p. 332), therefore representing a kind of collaborative effort.

Twitter and Journalism

Hermida (2010) has described Twitter as a form of “ambient journalism.” News today is all around us, all the time, often held in our hands in the form of a mobile device, but we are also not simply receivers of this news but also contributors to it as we go about our day and share observations and information with the world. The growing volume of tweets creates a system that helps people maintain awareness of each other and what is going on, and while each individual tweet may not demand much attention or cognitive effort, taken as a whole, it can serve as an important early warning system. He argues that journalists still must play a role in helping the public filter these disparate bits of news and bring it meaning and context (Hermida, 2010).

Research has documented how social media and interactive websites have enabled the creation of “active recipients” of news who are now more likely to take advantage of the two-way nature of these technologies to participate in the news process (Singer et. al. 2012). However, while individual journalists and news organizations have embraced Twitter (Ahmad, 2010; Farhi, 2009), they have only just begun to take advantage of its capacity for interactivity, instead hewing to more of a broadcasting model (Messner & Eford, 2011). Shovelware, or news content taken from news organization’s websites with little customization, dominates, and few have embraced the community-building possibilities (Messner & Eford, 2011). For example, a content analysis of tweets from local television news accounts that stations are primarily using it to share news, especially breaking news, with relatively little interaction; interestingly, they found a positive relationship between the amount of interactivity and the number of followers, but noted that engaging did come at a cost of lower overall tweet output (Ferguson & Greer, “Using Twitter for Promotion and Branding,” 2011). A similar study of radio Twitter accounts also found that news stations were primarily offering followers a feed of news, although they noted that many of these accounts did have a lively and “human” feel to them (Ferguson & Greer, “Local radio and microblogging,” 2011). A study of Twitter use by business journalists also found that few were using it to find sources or story ideas (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009).

Few studies have looked at the credibility of information found on Twitter, but one that did bodes well for journalists, at least those who are well-established on the site with a complete bio and a history of consistent Twitter use (Morris, Counts, Roseway, Hoff & Schwarz, 2012). It found that users are poor judges of truthfulness based on content, instead relying on peripheral cues like user name, image or bio, as well as reputation, or whether it is somebody a user has heard of before. The importance of these kinds of cues make having an established news brand as part of your bio helpful to telegraph believability. Also rated high in credibility are people with influence, as measured by follower counts, or topical expertise, as established by a history of on-topic tweeting, advantageous for a consistent beat reporter. Rated lowest in credibility were tweets with non-standard grammar, another advantage for seasoned professional journalists (Morris et. al., 2012.)

Although little other academic research has yet explored the phenomena of using Twitter and/or hashtags as a community reporting tool, other communities and news organizations have embraced them as well, although unlike #memstorm, which was driven by members of the community, in other places it was the journalists that took a leading role in promoting the hashtag use. *The Portland Oregonian* may be the first; it used Twitter in late 2007, which Twitter was new and had barely 500,000 users nationwide, during major storms to post its own links and aggregate citizen tweets about flooding and road closures (Farhi, 2009). *The Herald* in Everett, Washington did something similar with the hashtag #waflood during flooding in its area (Farhi, 2009) and *The Oklahoman* newspaper uses #okstorm for weather alerts (Kulicke, 2011). Paul Farhi of the *Washington Post* said that Twitter works best in situations in which things are happening fast and the traditional media can't assemble all the facts at once, and noted that it works well as a kind of early warning system and as a way of helping to spot trends (2009). "Twitter attracts the sort of people that media people should love – those who are interested in, and engaged with, the news," he wrote (2009, p. 30).

In order to build on existing research on how Twitter and other online technologies are enabling community members to participate in the news-gathering and dissemination process, this study will examine the motivations for using the #memstorm hashtag and its implications for local journalism. More specifically, this study will seek to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How did the hashtag come into use in Memphis as a way of reporting on the storm?

RQ2: What are some of the uses and gratifications of Twitter use during a breaking news situation such as #memstorm? What motivates the public to participate?

RQ3: How is this new system of "ambient journalism" affecting local journalism? What kinds of ongoing role can journalists play in this increasingly participatory, always-on news environment?

Methodology

In order to investigate a relatively new phenomena that has not been extensively documented, this study employs multiple methodologies, thereby enhancing internal validity through data triangulation (Mathison, 1988). This study includes a content analysis of 1,608 tweets tagged with the #memstorm hashtag, interviews, a survey, and participant observation. Data from each of these sources were analyzed for corroboration as well as inconsistency or contradiction (Mathison, 1988). The inclusion of qualitative measures offers a more in-depth and open-ended exploration of ways in which this hashtag was utilized and the motivations of participants, and allows for the discovery of possibly unexpected themes.

First, a content analysis of 1,608 tweets tagged with the #memstorm hashtag during the height of the severe April 2011 storm was conducted. The Archivist is a Windows desktop application that archives tweets based on the search operator entered and exports them to an Excel file for systematic analysis. Once a search is begun for a specific search term such as #memstorm on Archivist, it will continuously monitor that search term over time, refreshing every 10 minutes. tweets were collected between 10:27 p.m. on April 26 through 5:24 p.m. on April 27, when the storms finally began to dissipate. All tweets were coded by the same person.

Tweets were initially coded as being from journalist or non-journalist accounts, based on Twitter bios and in many cases, Twitter usernames that include the name the news organization. Then they were sorted by regular tweets, retweets (users can share others' tweets with their own followers, designated by an "RT" in front of the Tweet), and replies to other users (designated by an @ sign in front of a Twitter user's username). The rest of the codebook was informed by research by Thorson and Duffy (2006) identifying the primary needs consumers seek to fulfill through digital media, including the information, entertainment, and connection with others; it was further modified through insights developed through participant observation and recorded in the research diary. The tweets were thus then categorized in the following manner: Witnessing, or tweets including direct observations of weather conditions in the user's area, often including photos or videos; general news or information related to the storm (this category was then subdivided by the source of the information: television/radio, newspapers, an independent weather source such as MemphisWeather.net or the National Weather Service, or an undermined source; the number of tweets containing a link to a website or article with additional information was also quantified in this category); making a joke/using humor; expressing fear or another emotion such as being fed up with the near-constant severe weather; asking a question of other users/crowdsourcing for information, and other. Additional unexpected categories that emerged during the analysis were tweets praising journalists and television meteorologists for their efforts to inform the public during the storm, and tweets related to the use of Twitter or the hashtag, which included a number of tweets discussing the controversy that ensued when the local Fox affiliate attempted to promote the #foxstorm hashtag, upsetting some users who felt that branding the storm to a specific station was in violation of Twitter's community spirit. The codebook can be found in Appendix A.

The second phase of the study involved eight in-depth interviews conducted primarily face to face, although one interview was conducted via email at the request of the interviewee, whose schedule did not permit a sit-down interview.

Interviewees were selected on the basis of their prolific use of the hashtag based on number of tweets, or by their role as local social media influencers who helped initially spread the concept of using the hashtag during severe weather. To identify prolific Tweeters, on April 26, 2011, the first night of what ended up being a two-day series of storms, a list of the top tweeters by number of tweets sent using the hashtag was compiled, also using the Archivist program. Interviews were requested from the top five; one of them was unavailable. Interviewees also included the person widely credited with initially coming up with the hashtag, a local entrepreneur who spoke about it at Ignite Memphis in February 2011, a few weeks before the major April storms. Ignite is an event held in over 100 cities featuring short, five-minute speeches. Interviewees also included some of the most prolific journalistic hashtag users, as determined by the number of tweets they sent during the storm, from both print and broadcast media, and an independent meteorologist who runs a local weather website. Interviewees were also asked for recommendations on people to interview who they felt were particularly active #memstorm tweeters in order to further diversify the sample. This included one person who runs a local marketing firm and was among the first to start using the hashtag, and another person who helped create a website curating storm information from Twitter for non-Twitter users. In summary, two interviewees were broadcast journalists/television meteorologists, one was a newspaper journalist, one was an independent local meterologist, four were prolific hashtag users as identified using the methods described above, Interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

The third element of the study was an online survey. The survey link was distributed on Twitter using the hashtag. This ensured that not only the researcher's followers would see the survey link, but also everyone who was following the hashtag. It is impossible to precisely calculate the survey universe since it is unknowable exactly how many people could have seen the Tweet about the survey but chosen not to click on the link. Hashtags do not have "followers" in a formal sense – anybody could do a search for them at any time. In addition, just because somebody is following someone else on Twitter, there is no guarantee that he or she will be exposed to every Tweet. The link was Tweeted during a storm to increase the likelihood that others would see it, although the survey period did not coincide with any extreme weather events such as a tornado or other life-threatening situation. *The Commercial Appeal*, the metropolitan daily newspaper in Memphis, also Tweeted a link to the survey, further increasing its reach, as did the independent local meteorologist, who has over 4,000 followers on Twitter, and a local Fox meteorologist. The researcher also sent a link to the survey directly several Twitter users who were, according to the Archivist online program, calculated to be the most frequent hashtag users, in order to further encourage their participation.

The survey included several open-ended, long-answer questions to better gauge a relatively new phenomenon, to encourage a richer, more in-depth response and avoid pre-imposing categories that may not accurately capture participants' experiences. Participants were asked to describe the ways in which they used the hashtag, how they initially found out about the hashtag, what the advantages and disadvantages of Twitter are for a breaking news event like a storm, what they feel the role of journalists should be in using the hashtag, and if and how they feel the hashtag may create or enhance a sense of community and connection among local residents. Basic demographic data including gender, race and age and educational attainment was also collected. A total of 34 surveys were completed and returned. Possible reasons for the low response rate are discussed in the limitations section of this paper. Because the survey technique involved a snowball sample, a response rate cannot be calculated. A snowball sample is the most effective technique for research of this nature because it would be difficult to recruit a population of hashtag users without utilizing the hashtag itself. Often information on Twitter spreads virally, as people choose to pass on the survey to their followers and other hashtag users, but, as previously noted, one cannot calculate precisely the number of people who may have been exposed to the survey but chose not to take it. The survey instrument can be found in Appendix C.

Finally, the study had a participant observation component that assisted in the development of the interview and survey questions as well as the codebook. The author took detailed field notes while actively participating in using the hashtag during the storm and curating some of the best information from Twitter and other social media sources such as Flickr or YouTube using the Storify tool. For many hours during the storm, the researcher continuously monitored the hashtag, occasionally contributed to it by sharing direct observations about neighborhood weather conditions, and selected some of the most valuable or interesting tweets for the Storify collection, a time-intensive and immersive process. As in all studies involving participant observation, being an active part of the phenomena of interest can induce bias, but having an “insider” status can also increase validity; Yin (2003) wrote that one of the skills of a good researcher involves being able to bring expert knowledge to bear on the case.

Results

Analysis of the data collected utilizing all four methodologies revealed the following answers to the research questions.

R1: How did the hashtag come into use in Memphis as a way of reporting on the storm?

The #memstorm hashtag was first suggested by local entrepreneur Aaron Prather, who urged Memphians to adopt it during a five-minute speech at the event Ignite Memphis in February 2011. Prather said that he got the idea while driving home during an unusually significant snowfall in Memphis. The radio wasn’t giving him enough localized information, and, increasingly frustrated, he said, “I was thinking man, if we had a hashtag on Twitter, I could find out where the wrecks were, which streets were open, which were closed, and it would be a lot easier for me to get home” (personal communication, February 24, 2012).

Prather told the Ignite audience that the hashtag would help to centralize storm-related information, allowing people to easily track unfolding events from a single source, and would enable more people to add to the story what they were observing.

The timing was impeccable, as just a day after the Ignite event, Memphis was hit with a storm, and the hashtag first came into public use, as both interview data and participant observation reveal. The owner of a local marketing firm with more than 29,000 Twitter followers as of this writing was in the audience at Ignite and started using the hashtag during this storm, and several interviewees noted that her substantial following helped spread the word quickly. Another early adopter was an independent local meteorologist who was trained at the National Weather Service and now operates a forecasting website. One interviewee said, “It really took off when he embraced it. He gave the #memstorm hashtag authority and legitimacy. If it was not for [him], I think there was a risk it could peter out. But having an expert come in and join the conversation gave it legs” (personal communication, February 24, 2012). Toward the end of this first storm, two local television stations, WREG-TV Channel 3 and WMC-TV Channel 5, were observed beginning to use the hashtag.

Thus by April 26 and 27 of 2011, when the region was hit by two days of near-constant tornado watches and warnings, the hashtag was already in use by a influential group of Memphis Twitter users, as measured by follower count, and was poised to explode in use.

The majority of survey respondents (16) said that they found out about the hashtag when they noticed others in their feed using it, showing how a hashtag can easily spread virally as more and more people begin using it; nine specifically mentioned the local independent meteorologist as one of the first places they had noticed it.

As noted earlier, on April 26, the meteorologist at the Fox affiliate, Joey Sulipeck, asked followers on Twitter to tag storm information with #foxstorm. Sulipeck later said on Twitter that it was not his decision and that it had actually been tweeted from his account while he was on air by another employee at the station. Brittany Fitzpatrick, then a graduate student at the University of Memphis, used the Storify social media curation tool to collect over 90 tweets, the majority of which criticized Fox for its to attempt to brand the storm when the community had already come together to establish a common hashtag (Fitzpatrick, 2011). For example, Twitter user “TheFireTracker2” wrote of #foxstorm: “when business branding collides with common sense.” User “BrennanSomers” wrote: “If u use #foxstorm you've clearly missed the point of community involvement in #memstorm.” A few, however, came to Sulipeck’s defense. Those supporting Sulipeck were less focused on the merits of either hashtag and more focused on chiding other users against being “mean” in their criticism of the local meteorologist, or said they did not care enough to make a fuss about it. Following the controversy, Fox stopped attempting to promote the branded hashtag.

Even though the collection of tweets for the content analysis began a few hours after this controversy erupted, it was still reverberating, and this continued even a day later. Fourteen tweets, 16 retweets, and 21 replies all mentioned the #foxstorm controversy. When the survey was conducted nearly a year later, four respondents still remembered and mentioned the #foxstorm controversy unprompted, describing it as contrary to the community spirit of #memstorm. For example, one survey respondent wrote, “As seen in the case of the #foxstorm hashtag, trying to branch off for personal gain contradicts the purpose of having the community in the first place."

R2: What are some of the uses and gratifications of Twitter use during a breaking news situation such as #memstorm? What motivates the public to participate?

Not surprisingly, the primary motivation for using Twitter during a severe weather situation is to get and share news, particularly real-time, neighborhood-specific information of the kind mainstream media may have difficulty providing at scale, particularly in a major metropolitan area spread over a large geographic area. Other popular uses of Twitter documented in other research, such as entertainment or passing time (Johnson & Yang, 2009), fade in importance when actionable information about what to expect and prepare for becomes of utmost importance in a threatening weather situation. Secondary motivations for using the #memstorm hashtag included connecting with others and building a sense of camaraderie or community online, which survey and interview respondents said helped to soothe fears during a dramatic event. To a lesser degree, using the hashtag did offer some entertainment for some folks who sought out Twitter to make, read or share jokes about the storm or its local television coverage. Fourth, some people used Twitter to ask questions and solicit specific kinds of information from others. Each of these uses and gratifications will now be explored in greater depth.

Sharing and receiving news: Direct observations and more general information

All four methodological approaches confirmed that the primary use of the hashtag, was, as expected during a breaking news event, sharing and receiving news and information. Content analysis of #memstorm tweets revealed the popularity of an activity once primarily reserved for journalists: Sharing direct observations about what is going on in a particular area. The majority of all tweets analyzed, 239, included information about what hashtag users were witnessing, including things like rain or hail conditions or fallen trees in specific neighborhoods or zip codes; many users included a photo or in some cases, a video. Forty-five retweets and nine replies to other users also contained direct observations; in a handful of cases, Twitter users cc'd journalists using their usernames when offering this kind of information, as though to alert them of potentially useful information for their news reports. In the survey, 13 respondents specifically mentioned the utility of geo-targeted information that is more specific than that generally available on weather broadcasts, such as a flooded street impeding travel in their area. For example, one wrote: "I use it to find out what's going on in my neighborhood, specifically. I share information about direct observations – how hard it's raining, whether sirens are going off, wind intensity, etc." Another survey participant wrote: "In the modern age when the media is not always there for an event, it is average citizens that often step in to do the fact-finding and reporting. Being there is the key, and if accurate, vetted and/or seemingly credible information can be shared in a form like Twitter, it could be a life-saving measure." Several interview participants also noted that since most storms move from west to east through the metropolitan area, getting word of conditions to the west is often a good predictor of what is likely to come to the also heavily-populated eastern suburbs. Another common theme was the ability to get specific information from local utility MLGW on power outages as one unique element of Twitter as opposed to other information sources, and they praised the power provider for embracing this new media form and often using it to answer specific questions.

Hashtag users also shared and received more general news and information, such as warnings and watches or broader reports of especially significant areas of damage in the city, such flooding at a nearby naval base in Millington. Much of this kind of general information originated from traditional media sources, often in the form of retweets. The majority of all retweets examined, 317, shared this kind of general news and information; 180 of those retweets were of local television meteorologists or reporters, which far outpaced newspapers, with just 21 retweets. It is clear that the local independent meteorologist running the site MemphisWeather.net has also garnered the trust of Twitter users, as he was retweeted 75 times in the sample. To a lesser degree, Twitter users also shared what they were viewing on television or reading on newspaper websites with their followers, with 46 tweets of this nature; just 10 of those included a link to an article or other content produced by traditional media sources. Interestingly, in a comparison of retweets, traditional media sources were substantially more likely than the direct observations of other Twitter users to be shared with others.

Survey and interview participants identified a number of specific reasons why Twitter was an excellent news and information source in a breaking news event. Primary among these was its real-time nature; one interviewee, a prolific #memstorm hashtag user, exemplified comments by others when she said she regularly noticed National Weather Service warnings being announced more quickly on her Twitter feed than on the television (personal communication, March 16, 2012). As one survey participant wrote, "the advantage of Twitter is the speed that one can obtain information. It's succinct and immediate that can be utilized by both media professionals and those in the community with the same purpose." Several survey and interview participants also noted that because it can be easily used on a mobile phone, Twitter can be a more convenient source of information than the television; it can be taken on the go or into the bathroom or closet in the event people are forced to seek shelter during a tornado warning. It is also often at least temporarily useful in the event of a power outage, assuming cell phone batteries have been charged, several people noted.

Connecting with others

The secondary motivation for using Twitter during the storm was connecting with others and building a sense of camaraderie. In interviews and in the survey, respondents said that contributing to the greater good by sharing and receiving information from others gave them a sense of being connected to others in Memphis, and several said they felt a sense of safety or relief when commiserating with others by discussing their fears or other emotions during severe weather on Twitter. When asked what the greatest advantage of using the hashtag is, one person wrote in the survey: "I feel like I have company, a community, and we are all going through something together." Another wrote: "It gives a sense of comfort to be able to talk to other people, because

I am so afraid of tornados." A third said: "Twitter has a huge advantage over traditional sources because it creates more of a community. Everyone is looking out for everyone else during these severe weather events." On Twitter itself, user "ilikedesign" wrote "#memstorm has allowed me to discover some new peeps on twitter."

After sharing direct observations of what is going on in their area, the second largest category of tweets were the 212 expressing some kind of emotion, such as fear or frustration, the latter becoming particularly prevalent after many hours of storms and sirens going off nearly continuously. Although these tweets could be characterized as simply self-expressive in nature, a close reading often suggested that users were also sharing their feelings as a way of commiserating with others. One user accompanied this kind of Tweet with links to songs mentioning rain or storms, which she began characterizing as a kind of #memstorm soundtrack. Tweets expressing emotion were also retweeted 67 times. Perhaps not surprisingly, this kind of Tweet was the largest category of all replies, with 38. People talking directly to other Twitter users thus were primarily using it for mutual reassurance. Many replies expressed concern for others or echoed concerns of others. For example, user "juliemango" wrote to user "bunnyrama:" "You stay safe. I know they are helpful, but hearing the sirens always makes me panic."

Twitter also is conducive to forming tight-knit sub-communities of people with similar interests. One interviewee, a prolific #memstorm hashtag user, described himself as a weather enthusiast and storm chaser who found Twitter useful for connecting with others with similar passions he might not otherwise have found (personal communication, February 22, 2012); the searchable nature of topical hashtags like #memstorm makes it easier to locate people previously unknown to you personally.

Having fun/telling jokes

The third most popular motivation for using Twitter during the storm stands in contrast to the others. While telling jokes was less important than sharing information or connecting with others, some hashtag users were nevertheless able to find humor in the situation to amuse themselves and their followers. As one person wrote in the survey: "I liked the humor involved with an otherwise stressful or occasionally, uneventful, situation." The third largest number of tweets analyzed were jokes, with 64 tweets; jokes were retweeted 52 times and were included in 16 replies. For example, one tweet by @ segmacG said "Dave Brown [local television meteorologist] just said this could last 15 hours. But I thought you had to contact a Doctor if it lasted longer than 4 hours;" this was retweeted by several others. Some joked about a storm-related drinking game; one Twitter user created a parody account with the username "memstorm" that humorously personified the storm and was often retweeted. Local meteorologists interviewed, however, were less amused; many felt that these joking tweets lacked relevance, represented the "wrong" way to use Twitter and overloaded the system, making it harder to find useful and informative tweets during a storm. In some ways, however, this use of Twitter also reflects the desire to connect with others and seemed to provide some sense of comfort to some.

Other: Asking questions, praising journalists, discussing Twitter

Finally, a few additional lesser motivations for using the hashtags were revealed in the data. Some users tagged tweets with #memstorm in order to ask for specific information from others, a form of crowdsourcing. For example, Twitter user "amphotostudio" wrote "anyone know about Sam Cooper [major local road] this morning?" Similarly, Twitter user "HueysRestaurant" [a local burger joint] wrote: "We have people concerned about Hernando. Anyone know is Hernando is going to be in any trouble at all?" When a local animal shelter flooded, several people posted or retweeted a request for temporary help for the pets. In all, 33 of all analyzed tweets asked a question or requested assistance, 20 were retweeted and just three replies asked a question of one specific user. In the survey, one person wrote: "I also asked for help via Twitter- our home was destroyed by a falling tree and we had no power. We needed a pet-friendly place to stay. I got answers via twitter on my phone."

Finally, several #memstorm hashtag users discussed Twitter and/or the use of the hashtag itself, noting its ubiquity or utility or observing that #memstorm or local meteorologist Dave Brown was trending; this comprised 25 tweets, 18 retweets and 4 replies. Nine tweets, three retweets and 12 replies offered praise for local meteorologists for their non-stop coverage.

R3: How is this new system of "ambient journalism" affecting local journalism? What kinds of ongoing roles can journalists play in this increasingly participatory, always-on news environment?

This study examined what both journalists and non-journalists see as the role of local media when it comes to a community-driven breaking news reporting tool like the hashtag #memstorm. Both seemed to agree that the key ongoing function of journalism in a socially networked world is to not only to engage in reporting but also to help verify, amplify, and curate by selecting some of the best information for wider dissemination. However, at least in April 2011, journalists were primarily using Twitter and the #memstorm hashtag as just another distribution channel like any other.

> ***Content analysis of tweets during the April 2011 storms seems to reveal that most journalists that had embraced the hashtag at that time were still primarily focused on a one-way, broadcast model.***

Journalists. Content analysis of tweets during the April 2011 storms seem to reveal that most journalists that had embraced the hashtag at that time were still primarily focused on a one-way, broadcast model. While this makes sense during a breaking news event when most journalists may be most focused on getting information relevant to safety out quickly, few news outlets appeared to have brought additional staffers to the task of engaging, helping to verifying others' posts or curating . The vast majority (92%) of all tweets sent from journalists – both individual and organizational accounts – broadcasted information about the storm to followers, primarily watches and warnings and other meteorological information, and occasionally direct, ground-level reports on what was going on in the area. There were 280 tweets from journalists or local meteorologists during the period analyzed that offered this kind of general information, and nearly 70 of those came from an independent local meteorologist running his own website. Just eight tweets from journalists or news organizations engaged in crowdsourcing or asking readers/viewers to contribute information. Journalists engaged in relatively little retweeting, with just 38 in the sample, and 31 of those were of other journalists, often those working at the same station. Broadcasters were overwhelmingly represented here, primarily television but also one local radio station, 600 WREC-AM. The Commercial Appeal newspaper and a local suburban paper tweeted as well but to a much lesser degree.

However, interviews with local broadcast meteorologists showed that thinking was beginning to evolve over time in the months following the storm, with a greater emphasis on engagement; they also mentioned the importance of building trust with followers, in part by having a friendly, positive and accessible online personality on sites like Twitter. One said, I know that by doing this, I am building believers and followers. They feel like I am a safe source of information, they are getting to know me. My first priority is safety, but I'm also building the brand. I think it is crucial to show part of your personality. It's all about who you feel comfortable with. Even when we have good weather, I can be myself, help people get to know me better (personal communication, March 7, 2012).

Another local television meteorologist interviewed said that more recently, people have begun tweeting him their address and he responds after looking at the radar, giving them targeted information on what to expect at their location (personal communication, February 27, 2012). However, most questions are usually asked specifically of him using a @reply message and do not utilize the hashtag. Indeed, this meteorologist said he did not find much use for the hashtag at all, arguing that most of his followers are either unaware of the hashtag or not interested in searching for it or using it, and instead are just looking at their regular feed of people they follow for information. He also noted that while he was on air, he had made arrangements with another staffer at the television station to keep up the flow of tweets using his account; these tweets were attributed by appending the other staffer's initials. "I can't correlate Twitter with ratings yet, but from my point of view, I can get information to people that want it. It has just opened up this dramatic dialogue. It's just remarkable. This is a new frontier." Another local television meteorologist said that answering viewer questions from Facebook or Twitter on air offered self-promotion and station-promotion opportunities.

It was the independent local meteorologist who runs his own website, however, who was the most focused on engagement of those interviewed; without a long-established news organization brand behind him, he said that he found it critical to utilize social media to build credibility and ultimately credited it with being a significant traffic driver to his website (personal communication, February 24, 2012). He said that during a storm, he probably spends approximately 80% of the time broadcasting information on Twitter, and about 20% interacting; when things slow down, he switches to a 60/40 ratio. In his view, building relationships through conversation and answering people's questions on Twitter is the best way to establish himself as an expert. "I realized there was a real possibility to take this information and make it two-way," he said.

Although journalists did not appear to be taking a lot of advantage of the crowdsourcing potential of the hashtag beyond some general calls to send them storm-related photos for use on the web or on air, local meteorologists did note the advantage of being able to connect with a community of other experts on Twitter. In many cases, having digital contact with other professionals to the west is valuable in an east-moving storm. One also noted that Twitter offers a rich additional layer of on-the-ground information that weather reporting stations cannot logistically provide.

Non-journalists. When asked about the role of journalists in utilizing a hashtag like #memstorm in a breaking local weather event, both interviewees and survey respondents suggested the primary role is twofold: helping to verify information in a fast-moving situation, and engaging the audience through two-way communication. However, a few people did also see Twitter as more of a traditional distribution channel to complement existing ones, such as one survey respondent, who wrote "journalists should just keep giving updates on [Twitter.]"

In a comment echoed by several others, one survey respondent suggested that journalists needed to do a better job of embracing the two-way nature of the medium to build a greater sense of community and credibility. The respondent wrote: "Journalists can participate by interacting. If they aren't interacting and just dishing out 140-character bites of news, the advantage is gone and the viewer might as well be reading a news app or watching the weatherman flip his wig. The talkback factor is invaluable."

One interviewee, a heavy Twitter user who runs a local marketing firm, said in a comment also echoed by others,

The TV stations in New York are now saying, Tweet us a question, and we will ask it on air. I've been telling media here, you know, just use Twitter to ask questions and use Twitter to get information you need. Clearly [journalists] are needed. Clearly their jobs are not going away. Clearly they have the responsibility to report non-biased, factual, checked-out, verified information, but that doesn't mean they have to break [news] all the time. Their job has to be, we may not be first all the time, but we have to be right. Somebody may break that Whitney Houston died, unconfirmed, because they may know it somehow, but that's okay, the media has to be okay with that, they have to be, we are trying to verify (personal communication, March 16, 2012).

Another interviewee, a prolific #memstorm hashtag user, remembered a time when an unusual, tornado-like cloud moved across the Mississippi River into downtown Memphis; Twitter exploded with people using the hashtag to post photos and comment on what looked like a potentially ominous situation (personal communication, February 24, 2012). The independent local meteorologist was able to quickly assess from the radar that the cloud was not, in fact, a tornado, and offer some reassurance and disconfirmation on

Twitter, highlighting the role established members of the local media ecosystem can play, even independent, non-traditional ones.

Indeed, when asked if there were any disadvantages of Twitter, the overwhelmingly majority of interview and survey respondents mentioned the possibility of misinformation, again suggesting that journalists have a role to play in verifying facts and pointing out possible inaccuracies. However, several people said they felt that most Twitter users were generally savvy about ferreting out rumors. One local television meteorologist said that while journalists play a key role in checking out information before spreading it, others do this as well:

> I'm the one that goes and searches it up, finds the answer, and then plugs the answer into the equation. But I think people on Twitter… they are going to investigate it first before [retweeting], because your name is on the line, if I retweet something, they are looking at you going, you moron, why did you retweet that if it has no merit to it? So I think the savvy Twitterati are able to justify things.

And indeed, in some cases non-journalists also have a role in debunking weather-related rumors. When Memphis experienced major flooding in May of 2011, a vague tweet by two nurses that suggested that Methodist Hospital was flooding spread rapidly on Twitter, one interviewee, a prolific #memstorm hashtag user, recounted (personal communication, February 24, 2012). In fact, the nearby Wolf River was overrunning its banks but the hospital itself was fine; the tweet was probably not intentionally misleading but simply imprecisely phrased, he said. The interviewee was contacted by somebody who works in public relations at Methodist who knew him as an avid Twitter user; he contacted another local Twitter user with a large number of followers and local influence and together, they were about to shut down the rumor by letting others know the hospital was fine, he said.

Discussion

Through a multi-faceted examination of how and why community members and journalists utilize the #memstorm hashtag as a breaking news reporting tool during severe weather, this study confirms the rising importance of Twitter as a real-time news and information source and, more broadly, sheds light on how people are motivated to use social networks to participate in the news process by contributing their own accounts of what is being observed on the ground. It also confirms previous research on uses and gratifications of Twitter that found that information and connecting with others are two of the primary motivations for using this social network; unlike other studies, entertainment uses were not prominent, but this is not surprising given the potentially life-threatening nature of the event.

This study also provides further grounding for a concept Hermida (2010) describes as "ambient journalism:" news today is all around us, but we are not merely passive recipients; through sites like Twitter, citizens are producing small amounts of content that, taken together, are a form of journalism that helps the community maintain awareness of important developments. Participants in this study were highly motivated to participate in activities once primarily reserved for reporters: Documenting and broadcasting newsworthy information. The majority of all tweets analyzed in the sample included direct observations, often accompanied by photos or occasionally videos, of everything from downed trees blocking roads to intense winds and other things that residents witnessed.

> ***This study also provides further grounding for a concept Hermida (2010) describes as "ambient journalism:" news today is all around us, but we are not merely passive recipients; through sites like Twitter, citizens are producing small amounts of content that, taken together, are a form of journalism that helps the community maintain awareness of important developments.***

In interviews and the survey, study participants also noted the utility of getting this immediate, geo-targeted information from fellow community members about what they could expect when the storms hit their neighborhoods, the kind of information television broadcasts cannot provide at scale in a large metropolitan area. Several participants said they felt they could trust their neighbors as much or more as journalists; for example, one interviewee said, "We are not trained meteorologists. But it had gotten to the point where the traditional media is driven to be sensational. If you have a neighbor or a friend somewhere upstorm who is level-headed, and you know them, if they say, we have quarter-inch hail, you know it really is" (personal communication, February 27, 2012). As Singer et. al. (2012) noted in their book about participatory journalism, the audience can now be characterized as "active recipients" (178) of news, engaged not only in consuming news but also in actively contributing to it and communicating with one another.

Results confirmed that Twitter users also use the hashtag as a source for immediate information from more traditional sources of news, particularly local meteorologists. The largest number of retweets in the sample were of information, such as watches and warnings, provided by local news organizations. Twitter also provides opportunities for new media players to establish themselves as subject-matter experts; a local meteorologist running an independent website was retweeted approximately 75 times, second only to local television journalists, and was frequently mentioned in interviews as being an authoritative source of information on Twitter; in an interview, the local meteorologist credited his active use Twitter as well as Facebook in establishing his credibility in the community and driving traffic back to his site (personal communication, February 24, 2012).

Intertwined with this desire to share one's observations for the good of the community was a feeling of connection #memstorm hashtag users said they felt during the storm. This study also reveals how Twitter and particularly the use of a common, searchable hashtag can fulfill not only the need for information but need for connection with others

(Thorson & Duffy, 2006), which the study showed is heightened during a potentially threatening situation in which people are seeking comfort and reassurance. As Boyd, Golder and Lotan (2010) found, Twitter users are engaged in a distributed conversation with each other; even the act of retweeting without comment invites others into the conversation. Survey and interview respondents said that while not everybody in Memphis was on Twitter, they felt a sense of community with other hashtag users and enjoyed commiserating with them during the storm. The second-highest category of tweets in the content analysis involved people expressing fear, exhaustion, or another emotion; in addition to the gratification of simply expressing themselves, respondents indicated that knowing others had similar feelings and frustrations offered a sense of camaraderie. As one survey respondent wrote in a comment echoed by others:

> #memstorm just like other Memphis hashtags brings the Memphis twitter community together. We have something in common, and it allows us to feel connected. We share stories, photos, happenings at the moment. I think it brings a continuity to the city we haven't had before. No matter what race, religion, economic status – if you're on twitter, it doesn't matter. All the users see is a name. It's hard to judge and dismiss someone based on that alone.

Another form of community documented in the study is a substantial number of tweets and retweets using the hashtag to tell or share jokes. Humor can help bring people together in an online community, although not all may appreciate it. In interviews, local meteorologists in particular said that often these tweets can clog the stream and prevent more important information from being seen; as a result, in March 2012 they suggested using a new hashtag, #mspotter, for weather enthusiasts and those engaged only in reporting key details and facts about the storm. This tag would prevent extraneous conversation and non-relevant information from getting in the way, they argued.

Intertwined with this desire to share one's observations for the good of the community was a feeling of connection #memstorm hashtag users said they felt during the storm.

Finally, this study sheds light on the ongoing role for journalists to not only distribute content on new platforms but also, more importantly, to verify information, facilitate community connections by engaging directly with readers, and tap into the wisdom of the crowd to enhance their reporting. Survey and interview respondents overwhelmingly identified misinformation as one of the greatest risks of Twitter during a breaking news event, and suggested the most important role for journalists to play would be to confirm or disconfirm rumors and help bring expert voices to bear on the situation.

This study confirmed earlier research (Messner, Linke & Eford, 2011; Greer & Ferguson, 2011) suggesting that most journalists use Twitter primarily for broadcasting instead of engaging and/or crowdsourcing. However, interviews with journalists showed that this may be beginning to change; for example, one local meteorologist now actively responds to viewers on Twitter, often answering their specific questions. The independent local meteorologist has also made engagement with others on Twitter a top priority and credits this with enhancing both credibility and web traffic.

The primary limitation of this study is a relatively low number of responses for the survey and the lack of a randomized sample; those willing to take the time to take this survey may be more motivated or dedicated hashtag users. Despite a wide distribution network and several attempts to solicit participants using the hashtag as well as the cooperation of local media in sharing the study, just 33 surveys were returned. However, because several of the survey questions asked respondents for open-ended responses, the data gathered were still remarkably rich in nuance, and, when combined with interviews, detailed, long-form responses were received from over 40 people. Further research with funding for incentives for participants is needed; additional studies could further explore the use of hashtags as community-driven reporting tools in non-crisis situations.

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Appendix A: Twitter codebook

Non-journalist

Is the Tweet…
Witnessing – direct observations of what is going on around them
Passing on news or information
- Includes link
- From television
- From newspaper
- Undetermined source
- From National Weather Service or independent weather source

Making a joke
Expressing fear or emotion/commiserating with others
Asking a question/crowdsourcing
Other
Is the Retweet…
Witnessing – direct observations of what is going on around them
Passing on news or information
- Includes link
- From television
- From newspaper
- Undetermined source
- From National Weather Service or independent weather source

Making a joke
Expressing fear or emotion/commiserating with others
Asking a question/crowdsourcing
Other
Is it a response to another person
Response to a journalist
Witnessing – direct observations of what is going on around them
Passing on news or information heard from another source, e.g. the television
Making a joke
Expressing fear or emotion/commiserating with others
Asking a question/crowdsourcing

Journalist

Is the Tweet…
News and information
Making a joke
Expressing fear or emotion/commiserating with others
Asking a question/crowdsourcing
Is the Retweet…
Witnessing – direct observations of what is going on around them
Passing on news or information heard from another source, e.g. the television
Making a joke
Expressing fear or emotion/commiserating with others
Asking a question/crowdsourcing
Is it a response to another person
Response to another journalist
Passing on news and infomtion
Making a joke
Expressing fear or emotion/commiserating with others
Asking a question/crowdsourcing

Appendix B: Interview Questions

To get started, tell me a little bit about how you used Twitter during the storm.

1. What kinds of information did you share with others using the hashtag?
2. What kinds of information did you get from others using the hashtag?
3. How much did you interact with others in the community using @replies or Direct Messages during the storm? What tends to prompt you to interact with somebody?
4. How did you initially find out about the #memstorm hashtag?
5. What do you find to be useful or valuable about Twitter during an event like a major storm?
6. What kinds of drawbacks or challenges do you see from using Twitter during an event like a major storm?
7. Do you think Twitter has any advantages/disadvantages over more traditional sources of news and information?
8. Did you also follow/interact with any journalists working for local media organizations on Twitter who were also using the hashtag during the storm?
9. If so, was their use of Twitter helpful to you?
10. What do you think is the role of journalists in situations like this?
11. What could journalists do that might add value to the community in situations like this?
12. Do you think Twitter has changed in any way how citizens of Memphis interact or how they think about their community?
13. Any other thoughts you would like to share?

Appendix C: Survey Questions

Please see:
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dDEzb0gyd0hvc3RaV19iSHp3Rmt6RlE6MQ

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WellCommons.com: Breaking Down the Barriers Between Journalists and the Community

Jonathan Groves

This exploratory case study examines WellCommons.com, a community news site launched in March 2010 by the Lawrence (Kan.) Journal-World, and its use of participatory journalism. Using a content analysis, this study explores contributions over the website's initial launch period. Community content is broken down by story type and contributor and then compared and contrasted with the work of professional journalists. Commenting and reposting behaviors are also explored to understand the workings of a standalone online community designed from the outset to blend the contributions of amateurs and professionals in a participatory context.

In April 2010, the World Company of Lawrence, Kansas. – a news organization acknowledged and studied for its efforts to combine newspaper and television reportage through convergence over the years (e.g. Lawson-Borders, 2006; Singer, 2004) – officially launched WellCommons.com, an online-only health website designed to combine the work of journalists and the community.

Within months, the site became popular in the town of almost 88,000, which is home to the University of Kansas (Census Bureau, 2011). Through December, it had attracted 78,000 unique visitors (Kealing, 2010d), and a year and a half later, monthly traffic had topped 30,000 unique visitors and 130,000 page views (Quantcast, 2011). The organization's director of media strategies, Jane Stevens, credited the site's success partly to the fact that the site had "bulldozed the barriers between community and journalists" (Stevens, 2011f); on the site, registered users using their real names could freely add content, without editing or moderation from journalists. In 2011, the site also received an EPPY award from *Editor & Publisher* for best community service on a media-affiliated website with under 250,000 monthly unique visitors (Editor & Publisher, 2011).

Recently, researchers have been investigating the concept of *participatory journalism*, as news organizations work to integrate user-generated content with the traditional news stories created by professional journalists (Singer et al., 2011). Often, journalists resist such encroachment on the profession by bloggers (Palser, 2007) or online comments on news stories from the public (Groves, 2011). Few news organizations have integrated professionally produced work with community contributions from the beginning as completely as WellCommons.com, making it an ideal site to study how this collaboration functions in its early stages. Though linked to and funded by a legacy news organization, the developers from the site's inception sought to build a new participatory community with an identity of its own.

Today, the front page of the online-only WellCommons.com features a mix of stories with a variety of bylines. The summaries do not distinguish between professional and amateur; it is not until clicking on the byline itself that the user learns more about the article's author. As community contributor Marilyn Hull, a member of the site's advisory board, told Stevens:

> I used to send news releases to the paper, and they seldom resulted in stories. Now, we don't have editors deciding what is newsworthy. We get to post our news, and then our community can decide if it is worth reading (Stevens, 2011d).

This exploratory case study seeks to add to the literature by examining who interacts with WellCommons and what type of journalistic content is generated in such a collaborative environment. Using a content analysis, this study analyzed three months' worth of post contributions during the formative weeks of the site, from April 2010 to June 2010. A list of all users and their interactions in five primary content groups from February 2010 to February 2012 was compiled and analyzed as well, to understand how users interact with the site.

Literature Review

The Growing Power of the Audience

As technology has improved, so, too, has the power of the audience. Several observers (e.g. Gillmor, 2006; Shirky 2008) have highlighted how former readers and viewers are becoming their own publishers through the ease and power of new-media tools. It continues an evolution begun more than 50 years ago, when the notion of an all-powerful media had become tempered by the idea that users were more active and selective in their media behaviors than previously thought (Klapper, 1960). This conception sparked the uses-and-gratification tradition of media research (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), which some see as a key effects framework for understanding media audiences in the age of the Internet, when individuals now have the potential to reach millions through a free blog or social network (Levinson, 2009; Rubin, 2009; Ruggiero, 2000). In a web context, users are often trying to satisfy communication needs, including information and connectivity (Thorson & Duffy, 2006), and will expend a range of effort to find multiple ways in the media environment to satisfy those needs. This user-driven exploration often leads consumers to niche corners of today's fragmented media environment.

Napoli (2011), in his in-depth review of audience evolution, sees connections between the rise of user-generated content and this fragmentation:

> In an environment that is even more fragmented (the Web), it is only natural – and inevitable – that the economics of content would evolve further, to the point that filling the available 'channel capacity' could only be achieved economically if the consumers themselves became a key source of content production and distribution … (p. 79).

Participatory Journalism and Credibility

Media fragmentation has been occurring for years, with the advent of multiple delivery formats (e.g. print, television, radio) and multiple channels within those formats (such as cable television and niche publications). In an effort to reconnect with their fragmenting communities, some journalists embraced the concept of civic journalism as a way to engage the public (Friedland & Nichols, 2002; Rosen, 1999). Fledgling civic-journalism efforts in the early 1990s at newspapers in Madison, Wisconsin; Wichita, Kansas.; and other communities sought to improve coverage of elections and used citizen focus groups and surveys to gauge community interests and concerns. Newspapers began initiating community conversations about race, diversity, and poverty, and journalists broke down the traditional barriers with the audience by inviting community members more deliberately into the journalistic process.

Friedland & Nichols (2002) tracked the evolution of civic journalism into "interactive journalism" (p. 11), which included web-based tools such as clickable maps and databases to allow citizens to learn more about the processes of government by interacting with information:

> …there is an unsurprisingly high and growing interest in how new web-based tools of reporting and data gathering can be integrated with new forms of citizen-interaction in both special projects and daily work (p.11).

As technology improved and the industry consolidated, Deuze (2007) raised the concern of a "distinct depersonalization of journalism" (p. 20), with the possibility that journalists could actually become more disconnected from their communities. But with improvements in technology and the democratization of online publishing platforms, the concept of journalism as a process emerged (Bruns, 2005; Robinson, 2011), and researchers identified an expanding evolution in journalistic storytelling. Rather than a specific article for the print edition or a package for the 5 p.m. newscast, journalists had begun producing information in a fluid process that was tested, corroborated, vetted, and expanded with the help and participation of the audience through user comments, on-the-scene reports, and user-generated content such as photos. Robinson (2011) found instances where that participation blossomed into civic engagement and proposed the idea that "through news *production* (as opposed to mere consumption and then re-distribution) citizens can perform professional, social and civic *work*" (p. 191). Despite these changes, some scholars continued to detect a "paternalistic vision" by journalism of its audience that affected how much some journalists would let the public participate in the news-production process (Anderson, 2011, p. 554; Boczkowski, 2004).

The idea of participatory journalism is a natural evolution of civic or public journalism. In today's environment, with powerful and often free social-media tools, the audience has the power to engage and become full participants in the journalistic process, beyond sources in stories. Singer et al. (2011) define participatory journalism as:

> People inside and outside the newsroom are engaged in communicating not only *to*, but also *with*, one another. In doing so, they are all participating in the ongoing processes of creating a news website and building a multifaceted community (p. 2).

Though research has shown that some journalists in the past have resisted online comments on their stories, follow-up studies have found that journalists support the idea of story comments in which users identify themselves (Nielsen, 2012).

This blending of professional and amateur, what some see as journalism as a conversation (Anderson, Dardenne, & Killenberg, 1996; Marchionni, 2008), can have implications for credibility online. Online users often use heuristic cues to connect with information from a site; although a *reputation heuristic* based on name recognition of a previously trusted source is important, users also rely on an *endorsement heuristic*, where members deem a site credible if others do as well (Flanagin, Metzger, & Medders, 2010). In this study, the interactions of the community – both identified and anonymous – are vital to understanding this intermember participation and the growth of the WellCommons online community. This study will examine commenting, posting, and reposting behaviors to determine the similarities and differences between community contributors and professional journalists.

Categorizing Stories

In *The Elements of Journalism*, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) identified that "journalists must make the significant interesting and relevant" (p. 187). To that end, they must go beyond the basic of who, what, when, where, why, and how, into the realm of more innovative storytelling to engage the community. As part of that discussion, the authors highlighted the paths to a story developed by Pulitzer Prize-winner Jacqui Banaszynski (p. 199):

- *Profile*: Profiling the characters behind an issue.
- *Explanatory piece*: Explaining *why* or *how* or some topic to a reader.
- *Issue/trend story*: Exploring the larger picture behind related events.
- *Investigative*: Examining wrongdoing, and uncovering issues in the community through documents and data analysis.
- *Narrative*: Producing a nonfiction story using the devices of fiction.
- *Day in the life*: Focusing on a single day of a person or process to explain its function.
- *Voices/perspective:* Telling a story from a nontraditional viewpoint, such as first person.
- *Visual*: Using primarily visual means, such as photographs or illustrations, to convey

the information.

For purposes of this analysis, this framework will be used to analyze the storytelling techniques of journalists and community members, with one alteration. In her influential typology of news stories, Tuchman (1978) identified timeliness as an important criterion for journalists deciding whether pursuing a story, and none of Banaszynski's list explicitly frames a story around this point. For this study, the category of *narrative* will be replaced with *an event story* to allow consideration of stories focused primarily on the *when* and *where* of traditional news and to distinguish from explanatory stories focusing on the *how* and *why* (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007).

> ***"to combine the power of social media with the importance of community news and information …" – Jonathan Kealing, the World Company's assistant director of media strategies***

Development of WellCommons

At WellCommons.com, the World Company created an experimental space for innovation, distinct from its *Lawrence Journal-World* newspaper and its LJWorld.com website. As Jonathan Kealing, the World Company's assistant director of media strategies, wrote during early beta testing in February 2010:

> WellCommons.com is new and at its core is an experiment to combine the power of social media with the importance of community news and information. … Not everything we do on this site is going to work. We know that, and we're excited to evolve this site with your feedback (Kealing, 2010a).

Although nods to the legacy organization were made in the journalists' profile pages, the connection was not showcased on the front of the site or in its branding.

In the summer of 2009, developers solicited an advisory board of about 40 community volunteers from the local community to help build and design the health-oriented site (Stevens, 2010b). Some came from health organizations such as Lawrence Memorial Hospital and the Douglas County Public Health Department. Others were citizens who were advocates for buying and growing food locally, or who did not have health insurance. The group helped form the preliminary structure for the site's five primary "super groups": Wellness, NoTrauma (accidental and nonaccidental injuries), Nosurance (the uninsured and underinsured), Locavores (local food), and Wise (older adults). Registered users were also allowed to create their own groups, and some businesses and organizations started groups under their names. Community members also initiated groups based on topics such as running, fitness, and smoking cessation.

The site began a soft launch in February 2010 with limited content and rolled out the full version to the public in April 2010. Health reporter Karrey Britt served as the site's primary journalist, with occasional contributions from *Lawrence Journal-World* writers and journalists from 6News, the local cable-television station then owned by the World Company. The site's policies contained a provision requiring people who posted stories or submitted comments to use their real names. By December, the site had received 78,000 unique visitors, as well as posts, comments, and photos from 700 different people in the community (Kealing, 2010d). More than 300 users had filled out a profile as well. In his December 2010 wrapup, Kealing noted the story with the most page views that year was one written by Britt about a fundraiser for the Willow Domestic Violence Center using a celebrity calendar featuring well-known Lawrence men sporting red high heels.

As WellCommons began sharing content with LJWorld.com, the primary news site of the *Journal-World,* anonymous comments started appearing on WellCommons (Stevens, 2011d). To engage the commenters, the site allowed three anonymous comments before requiring users to identify themselves, and WellCommons staff began moderating comments, removing those that were "abusive, overly snarky, or are off-topic, i.e., having nothing to do with the content of the post" (Stevens, 2011d). The site had become far more popular as well: Over a 30-day period from June to July 2011, the site had received more than 120,000 page views and 35,000 unique visitors (Stevens, 2011c).

Given this base of community support, this exploratory case study investigated how journalists and community members interacted with the site. Using a content analysis, the following research questions were investigated:

RQ1: What types of stories are being contributed by community members at WellCommons.com?

RQ2: What types and numbers of sources are being used in community-contributed content?

RQ3: What types of community individuals are contributing content to WellCommons.com?

Method

Story and user data were compiled using three trained coders. A set of 1,137 users who used the site from February 2010 to February 2012 was constructed from the website and coded. Story data focused on the first three months of the site from April 1, 2010, to June 30, 2010, and examined 705 posts, some of which appeared more than once in sections on the site to see what types of stories were contributed during those formative weeks. Duplicate posts were coded and included in the overall analysis because they appeared in separate sections and thus affected perceptions of readers of that group's content. A third dataset of 6,408 site interactions from February 2010 to February 2012 was pulled from the website using a Python script and did not require coding.

For this analysis, user data categories included *pseudonym*, which looked at whether the user was using a real name, a pseudonym, or a business name; *journalist*, which considered whether the user was a community member, journalist with the World Company or its affiliates, or a journalist with another news organization; and *medical knowledge*, which noted whether the contributor was a citizen with no medical background, a journalist or public-relations professional, a health-related but nonlicensed professional, or a licensed medical practitioner. These codes were designated based upon information supplied by the user. If a profile contained a first and last name, an actual identity was assumed and was coded as such. If no information was completed in a profile, the user was not classified as a journalist or medical professional because audience members would not be able to identify them as such. This set was then merged with the interaction dataset, which tracked four different types of interaction with the site: *joining* a group; *commenting* on a story; *posting* a story; or *reposting* a story. Posts could be as short as two words or as long as a traditional newspaper story with multiple sources. Some users also contributed standalone photos or videos.

Stories were coded by author, story type, and source type by at least two separate coders. A randomly selected portion of each dataset, with a sample selected for a 95% confidence interval, was dual-coded, and intercoder reliabilities of 80% or above were found for all variables (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Scott's Pi was also calculated to control for chance and included in tables for comparison. The author field indicated whether the contributor was a journalist with the World Company. For story type, online posts were coded with one of eight categories: Profile, explanatory piece, trend story, investigative story, descriptive day in the life, voices/perspective story, visual story, and event story.

The number of sources was computed by counting each source interviewed or referenced explicitly. Each hyperlink in the post to another source was also counted. For source type, each story was rated for the highest level of medical expertise included: 0 for personal knowledge, 1 for a nonmedical interview or written/online source, 2 for secondary medical source (such as an article about a medical study in a mainstream publication), 3 for primary medical sources, such as an interview with a licensed medical professional or a direct reference to a peer-reviewed medical study. First-person posts written by a medical professional were coded as primary medical sources.

Results

For RQ1, the story data for April 2010 through June 2010 were analyzed by the eight story types. For the three-month study period, non-journalists contributed 286 posts (40% of the content) in 37 groups (see Appendix A) on the site during the initial three months, while journalists contributed 419 posts (60% of the content). Non-journalists did not use the day-in-the-life or investigative story formats, and journalists used these forms only twice during the study period.

For both groups, explanatory stories made up a plurality of the posts, with 34% of the non-journalists' posts and 35% of the journalists' posts coming from this category. Both groups also used the event story, which accounted for 29% of the non-journalists' posts and 34% of the journalists' posts. The biggest difference came in the category of voice/

perspective stories; non-journalists used this format for 29% of their posts, compared with 13% by the journalists. When journalists used this first-person format, some did not refrain from becoming advocates for the community. Reporter Karrey Britt used such a format to write about her experience joining The World Company's Relay for Life team: "We look forward to doing the Electric Slide in the late hours of the night at Relay, and sharing laughs with our co-workers. We also believe in the cause" (Britt, 2010d).

Non-journalists did not use the day-in-the-life or investigative story formats, and journalists used these forms only twice during the study period.

Both groups also relied primarily on text to tell their stories. Few stories were visual (told primarily through photos or video); non-journalists used this form for 4% of the posts, and the journalists used it for 3% of their posts.

Table 1

Story types used by contributors (April 1, 2010 — June 30, 2010)

Story type	Journalists	Non-journalists
Profile	42	8
Explanatory	147	97
Trend	23	7
Investigative	1	0
Day in the life	1	0
Voice/perspective	53	84
Visual	11	12
Event	141	77
Total	419	285

Note. Intercoder reliability was 91% for story type (Scott's Pi=.91) and 100% for journalist/non-journalist categorization (Scott's Pi=1).

To answer RQ2, the number and types of sources were evaluated. Journalists used an average of 2.9 sources in the posts during the study period, while non-journalists used 1.3 sources. Intercoder reliability for the number of sources was the lowest of all categories at the minimally acceptable level of 80%, meaning this number should be interpreted cautiously; source type, however, had a reliability level of 87%.

Non-journalists were more likely than journalists to use personal knowledge as the foundation for their posts; 29% of non-journalists' posts had no sources beyond the personal. Such a minimal level of sourcing appear in 8% of the journalists' posts. For both groups, most sources reached the level of nonmedical, 42% for non-journalists and 58% for journalists. Many posts were not medical in nature; they covered topics as diverse as running, growing food locally, and shopping for health insurance. Several posts contained links to outside articles about health topics.

Table 2

Sources used by contributors (April 1, 2010 — June 30, 2010)

Contributor	Source	Number of stories	% of sources used
*Non-journalist**	Personal	84	29%
	Non-medical	122	42%
	Medical (secondary)	64	22%
	Medical (primary)	16	6%
Journalist	Personal	32	8%
	Non-medical	243	58%
	Medical (secondary)	100	24%
	Medical (primary)	44	11%

Note. One author posted a story as a business and was combined with the other non-journalist users. Intercoder reliability for source type was 89% (Scott's Pi=.78) and for number of sources was 80%. The journalist/non-journalist contributor type had a 100% intercoder reliability (Scott's Pi=1).

With regard to RQ3, a variety of community members participated in the site. Forty users were identified as journalists or people affiliated with the World Company in their profiles; six were journalists from other organizations. The remaining 1,091 users did not list a connection with the World Company. In examining occupations, 980 users, or 86% of the study group, were not journalists or medical professionals. The remainder of the group was 95 journalists or public-relations professionals, 40 health-related professionals, and 22 licensed medical professionals, such as doctors or dentists. The medical knowledge variable had an intercoder reliability of 94%.

A few power users were responsible for much of the primary posting on the site. From February 2010 to February 2012, 10 users – half of whom were non-journalists – were responsible for 2,753 (43%) of 6,408 interactions. WellCommons reporter Karrey Britt was responsible for much of the interaction on the site, accounting for 1,449 interactions (23%) and most of the story postings. The top non-journalist, Marilyn Hull of the LiveWell Lawrence community coalition, was the third-largest contributor, with 408 interactions. In contrast, all but 78 of the 1,138 users tracked had less than 10 interactions over the period.

Pseudonyms and Comments

From the beginning, WellCommons' creators sought real identities from the community to foster meaningful discussion and engagement; this requirement evolved from a recommendation of the original advisory board (Stevens, 2011d). Despite that rule, some anonymous commenters made their way onto the site from LJWorld.com. Still, dozens of users on the site disclosed at least a first and last name as part of their profile. Of the 1,137 user profiles analyzed, 471 (41%) included a full name, while 647 (57%) used a pseudonym; intercoder reliability for the pseudonym variable was 98%. The remaining 19 were business names registered as profiles.

To analyze content behavior, only commenting, posting, and reposting were considered, which accounted for 5,549 interactions on the site's five primary groups from February 2010 to February 2012. Among all users for these three categories, the most common behavior was commenting (45%), followed closely by posting (42%) and reposting (13%).

Most of the interactions (78%) came from users who identified themselves. Those with pseudonyms primarily focused on commenting. In some cases, an account with a fictional name would be created for the purpose of a single comment, either positive or negative. For example, a user with the moniker "iron_outlaw" commented on a December 21, 2011, story titled "Shoppers urged to bypass war toys," saying: "First World problems…." (WellCommons, 2011b). The user made no subsequent contributions to the site. In a few instances, organizations such as Lawrence Memorial Hospital registered an account under their official name and posted using the organization as an identity.

Table 3

User behaviors by identity

Behavior	Anonymous user	Identified user	Business/ institution
Commented	1,117	1,338	20
Posted	81	2,254	15
Reposted	1	715	7
Total	1,199	4,307	43

Note. Intercoder reliability for pseudonym (user type) was 98% (Scott's Pi=.96). Behaviors were already labeled by the site and did not have to be hand-coded.

Participatory Journalism: Relay for Life

The numbers from the content analysis provide an overall glimpse of interaction at the site, but focusing on a specific topic offers deeper insights into the journalistic process at WellCommons. One of the primary focal points for coverage during the April-June 2010 study period was the Relay for Life fundraising event in Douglas County. This example demonstrates how the journalists and community together covered a specific topic as a “process,” a series of posts that developed over days with contributions from multiple authors, both journalists and non-journalists (Robinson, 2011).

Several weeks before the event, WellCommons posted a story about the event during its beta period highlighting a Feb. 23 planning meeting (Britt, 2010a). On March 31, Britt did another preview, this time with a link to a promotional video from the American Cancer Society (Britt, 2010b). In April, Britt wrote two profiles of people dealing with cancer, a woman who had survived cancer and a doctor in need of a bone-marrow transplant. The story styles were traditional profiles typical of newspaper journalism of the past, with third-person narratives and pictures. Both were posted in the Relay for Life group on the site.

On May 7, the site featured a story using a format targeting the Web community (Britt, 2010c). It used a video, a series of photographs, and several bulleted lists of facts about the event. Quotations were included as block quotes, such as this one from Stacie Schroeder, community manager of development for the American Cancer Society:

> The survivor’s lap is one of my favorite activities. Every time it moves me to tears because it is just amazing to see almost 300 people pack the track and you know they’ve been through that journey and that we’ve helped them along their way (Britt, 2010c).

The post kicked off a monthlong series of daily stories to be featured on WellCommons until June 11, the date of the Relay for Life. Several posts were first-person accounts of cancer survivors or of those who knew someone with cancer. The titles often had "Relay" in them: "I Relay Because of the Stories," "Relay For Life…the power of HOPE," "Relay Chose Me." WellCommons and the World Company also created a Relay team that included Britt to participate in the event. Britt herself wrote a post titled, "Cancer has touched my life and so many others – that's why I relay" (Britt, 2010e).

Some of the posts inspired comments from the community and became places of conversation. A first-person post from Amanda Faulkner focused on her son Christian, a 9-year-old boy who survived non-Hodgkin's t-cell lymphoma, and a commenter identifying himself as John Harrod wrote: "Just think Christian, it was just five long years ago you and I did our first relay together. Look how we have grown. I think we may be doing our relays for a very long time" (WellCommons, 2010a). Jonathan Kealing, a WellCommons journalist, added a comment thanking Faulkner for sharing her story, adding: "I'm glad he beat it and you have channeled that into a desire to promote cancer research. We need to eliminate cancer from this planet, and this is a step in that direction" (Kealing, 2010b).

The day of the event, the staff live-blogged updates with photos, a video of the luminary lighting ceremony, and snippets of description from the scene. At 11:20 p.m., Jonathan Kealing wrote: "We're here until 7 a.m. We'd love to have you come out and walk a lap or two with us" (Kealing, 2010c). Two days later, Karrey Britt posted a story about Relay for Life reaching its fundraising goal, and its lead paragraph used a first-person pronoun: "We did it! Relay for Life of Douglas County reached its goal of raising $172,000 for the American Cancer Society" (Britt, 2010e).

Discussion

WellCommons demonstrates how a few dedicated online community members can build a niche space capable of attracting 30,000 visitors and 120,000 page views a month. With one primary journalist providing the bulk of the content and responses to community contributions, the site built interest and traffic. Though the bulk of the content came from power users, hundreds of people have contributed at least once to the site in some way over a two-year period, and thousands more have viewed content on the site.

With one primary journalist providing the bulk of the content and responses to community contributions, the site built interest and traffic.

But the site did not just have the community joining in as journalists at WellCommons; the journalists connected with the community. Though some stories featured the neutral, observational tone typical of the objective model of American journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Schudson, 1981), journalists contributing to WellCommons did not limit themselves to this style. Andrew Hartsock, associate sports editor at the paper, shared first-person posts about his biking experiences. Primary reporter Karrey Britt offered her personal story of cancer in her family as part of the coverage of the Relay for Life. And food reporter Sarah Henning cooked and provided recipes based on ingredients she picked up at the local farmers market.

Jane Stevens, director of media strategies, regularly spoke to the community through columns and made the site's distinctive style clear from the outset:

> As those of you who are participating in WellCommons know, this is a very different way that a news organizations (sic) serves its community, because it uses the tools of the Web to integrate community and journalism. How our community will change the structure and function of WellCommons remains to be seen – it's barely a month old. I think this structure is on the right path, though, to serving the needs of the Lawrence/Douglas County health community in a modern way (Stevens, 2010a).

From the beginning, journalists at WellCommons included the community in the process of developing, reporting, writing, and sharing information about health issues affecting the area in and around Lawrence. Though some stories were traditionally formatted, many embraced new-media storytelling strategies, with short posts about events, block quotes to highlight comments, links to outside information to help people make sense of issues, snapshots to enhance the visual impact, and personalized narratives to reduce the psychological barriers between the journalists and the community. As the community grew more comfortable freely contributing content and commenting on postings, that level of conversation helped spark an endorsement heuristic (Flanagin, Metzger & Medders, 2010) to enhance WellCommons' credibility. A follow-up study using focus groups or surveys from the community needs to be conducted to examine the issue more closely.

Identity seems to play a role in engagement. The users who used their real identities were the ones most likely to contribute original posts and links to events and issues of import to the community. They were also the ones far more likely to share content with others in the community, adding and expanding the conversation beyond the groups. With the number of groups, there seemed to be a danger of further fragmentation on an already focused site, but this sharing of content (which led to multiple postings of the same story) helped maintain a sense of community at the site as a whole. Identified users also kept the conversation in the comments supportive and informational, compared with anonymous users who often made one-off comments on a story, never to appear again. As this study focused on the users and stories, further investigation into the comments is needed to see what role those play in developing the community's sense of itself.

As home to Kansas' largest university, Lawrence is a medical hub ripe for this type of community experimentation. Whether a WellCommons-inspired project would work in other markets is not clear from a nongeneralizable case study. It also had the support of a legacy news organization with credibility in the community as well as reporting resources to help sustain the site; whether a standalone site could duplicate such successes is uncertain.

In September 2011, Stevens, one of the site's founders, left the World Company to start her own group of niche sites in California. In her column about her departure, she wrote:

> I believe that WellCommons is more fabulous than any of us envisioned. And it's because of you, our amazing, dedicated and caring community, that WellCommons is so successful (Stevens, 2011e).

Since then, the evolution at WellCommons has continued, and the community has continued to create groups and post stories. In response to the community, the site renamed all of the original super groups to make them more intuitive: Wellness to Healthy Body and Mind; NoTrauma to Trauma and Recovery; Nosurance to Un(der) Insured; Locavores to Food and Nutrition; and Wise to Aging Well. Christine Metz, one of the journalists helping to manage the site, wrote a post explaining the changes to the community:

> We've spent lots of time discussing the change and reached out to some of our most frequent users to ask them what they thought would work. … Feel free to let us know what you think. And, thanks for being such a great community (Metz, 2011).

Stevens and Metz still refer to the community in an arm's length manner, asking the audience to participate. But the journalists no longer fear complimenting the community out of an obligation to objectivity. Their role has changed from one of detached coverage to one of encouragement for engagement.

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Appendix A

A list of user groups in chronological order, listed by the date of the first post.

Name	Members	Date of First Post
Healthy Body & Mind	313	2/10/10
Relay For Life of Douglas County	94	2/11/10
Un(der)Insured	130	2/13/10
Food & Nutrition	188	2/15/10
Health Care Access Clinic	56	2/17/10
Trauma & Recovery	107	2/21/10
Bert Nash Community Mental Health Center	52	2/23/10
About WellCommons.com	52	2/24/10
Lawrence Memorial Hospital	46	2/24/10
Family Birthing Center	8	2/24/10
Douglas County Senior Services	35	2/25/10
Outside for a Better Inside	31	2/25/10
CHIP	20	2/26/10
LiveWell Lawrence	106	3/1/10
The Uninsured’s Handbook	10	3/2/10
Farmers Markets	56	3/4/10
Walk Kansas	11	3/4/10
Community Education	21	3/5/10
Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department	33	3/8/10
Lawrence Local Food	56	3/10/10
Lawrence Runners	46	3/12/10
Workplace Supports	6	3/17/10
Douglas County Community Foundation	28	3/19/10
Fitness and Exercise	48	3/23/10
Growing Food, Growing Health	58	4/2/10
Quit smoking	12	4/4/10
New Tradition Coalition	9	4/8/10
Heartland Community Health Center	29	4/9/10
Regional Prevention Center	6	4/12/10

Douglas County Dental Clinic	21	4/14/10
DCCCA, Inc.	10	4/16/10
First Step at Lakeview	7	4/16/10
Chiropractic Experience	46	4/20/10
Chiropractic Experience Massage Team	13	4/20/10
CHIP Access to Health Care	4	4/20/10
Caregivers Support Group	14	4/22/10
Aging Well	84	4/23/10
Independence, Inc.	34	5/5/10
World's Largest Community Workout	27	5/6/10
K-State Research & Extension - Douglas County	24	5/13/10
Dads of Douglas County	27	5/17/10
Families	10	5/17/10
KU Center for Physical Activity and Weight Management	9	5/25/10
Lawrence Athletic Club	12	6/1/10
James Otten, DDS	16	6/11/10
With All My Heart	7	6/11/10
United Way of Douglas County	25	6/16/10
Early Childhood in Douglas County	14	6/21/10
Simplify Your Life	11	6/22/10
The Salvation Army	13	6/24/10
Douglas County Food Policy Council	24	6/28/10
Cans & Fans - Food and Fan Drive	24	7/1/10
Headquarters Counseling Center	14	7/1/10
The Bert Nash Dash & Bash	11	7/3/10
ACEs	14	7/5/10
Fun Runs and Walks	31	7/7/10
RideLawrence	28	7/7/10
Fitness & Exercise for Women	19	7/8/10
Midland Care Connection	16	7/8/10
Free Dental Day	11	7/8/10
Give Kids A Smile Day	4	7/8/10
Lawrence Therapy Services	18	7/16/10

Trinity In-Home Care	15	7/18/10
Access to Health Care	9	7/19/10
The Willow Domestic Violence Center	21	7/20/10
GaDuGi SafeCenter	14	7/21/10
Access to Baby and Child Dentistry (ABCD)	4	7/21/10
Advanced Health Center, P.A. formerly Anthony Chiropractic	6	7/22/10
Baby Talk	17	7/23/10
Lawrence Parks and Recreation	9	7/23/10
Eudora A.C.E.S	7	7/31/10
WorkWell Lawrence	21	8/2/10
DCCOA: Douglas County Coalition on Aging	20	8/5/10
Biggest Winner Challenge	11	8/5/10
Healthy Kids!	16	8/6/10
Autism Speaks	12	8/10/10
Lawrence Farm to School Project	18	8/11/10
Trail Runners	6	8/11/10
Red Kettle Campaign	5	8/11/10
Just Food	16	8/16/10
Visiting Nurses	10	8/16/10
American Red Cross - Douglas County Chapter	12	8/23/10
Professionals Helping Children	3	8/26/10
Slow Food Time For Lunch Campaign	2	8/27/10
Marathon Club	14	8/30/10
Sigler Pharmacies	12	9/1/10
American Cancer Society	13	9/6/10
Hy-Vee	18	9/10/10
Project LIVELY	15	9/10/10
Bert Nash Dash Runners and Walkers	3	9/10/10
I Can Cope	4	9/16/10
The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society	6	9/17/10
Man to Man Info & Education Group	2	9/21/10
Big Brothers Big Sisters of Douglas County	6	10/6/10
Bobcat Marathon Club	13	10/12/10

CHEC Coalition to Honor End-of-Life Choices	8	10/18/10
Living With the Unknown	5	11/15/10
Lawrence Memorial Hospital Endowment Association	6	11/17/10
Health Care & Safe Environments	4	11/18/10
Lawrence Diabetes Group	1	11/21/10
Together Prepared	7	11/24/10
LiveWell EatWell Restaurant Challenge	17	11/29/10
Childcare & Early Education	9	12/2/10
Imagine Drop-In Childcare	8	12/2/10
SAD Warriors	5	12/13/10
Kiddos	51	12/16/10
DCCDA: Families, Farmers and Educators United For Healthy Child Development	9	12/17/10
Center for American Indian Community Health	4	1/3/11
Kansas Half-Marathon	8	1/25/11
Go Red for Women - American Heart Association	29	2/4/11
Sunflower Marathon Club	4	3/2/11
Free State High School Community and Learning Garden	7	3/21/11
Lawrence Meals On Wheels	3	4/11/11
100 Pushups	11	5/4/11
Arthritis Foundation, Heartland Region	6	6/20/11
KHI News Service	7	6/27/11
Red Dog's Dog Days	6	7/14/11
Wellspring Heart Health	2	7/20/11
Lawrence Hunger Project	7	7/24/11
Our Local Food – Kaw River Valley	4	8/1/11
Douglas County AIDS Project	6	8/4/11
Futures Fund	5	9/13/11
Hilltop Child Development Center	5	9/16/11
Recipe swap	4	11/7/11
Bridge Haven Care Cottage	4	12/19/11
LIVESTRONG for Douglas County, KS	2	1/9/12
JoCommons	3	2/7/12
River City Cosmopolitan Club	5	2/17/12

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Social Reading and Privacy Norms: The Aesthetic of Simplicity, Online Reading, and Interface Confusion

J. Richard Stevens

More legal codes and policy initiatives concerned with the regulation of consumer privacy appear throughout the world each year, yet the amount of personal information collected and stored continues to increase. Much of this data comes directly from individuals through "trivial and incremental" interactions. This article examines the effect of simplicity aesthetics in masking "architectures of vulnerability" that lead individuals to provide personal information in exchange for perceived advantages. Specifically, the introduction of Facebook's open graph platform, and news media outlets' release of social reader applications, provide yet another architecture of vulnerability, one that misrepresents choice by falsely communicating function.

The print journalism industry continues to contract, with some print newspapers discontinuing publication, some adopting new publication strategies, and some moving to online-only publication (Grabowicz, 2012). At the same time, online social networking has increased in volume and popularity in recent years, as millions of people continue to turn to technology to mediate relational information. These two trends appear to be converging, as some news enterprises are contracting with social networking platforms to put news content into social networking space.

As a consequence of these activities, the large amounts of personal information stored by social networking platforms are being leveraged across multiple sites and services, often in ways users do not understand. Although the aggregation and consolidation of personal data presents a variety of risks to users, the privacy protection tools embedded in social networking platforms (such as Facebook) are often by default set to weak protection settings to facilitate easy connections (Gross & Acquisti, 2005).

But even when comprehensive privacy enhancing technologies (PETs) and filters are available, users often do not implement available tools. Part of this reticence appears to come from inherent trust in the online community (boyd, 2004; Gross & Acquisti, 2006). But little research exists that examines the role interface plays in establishing privacy expectations. This paper examines the aesthetic of simplicity in social reader interfaces (specifically, the open graph application offered by Facebook), the affordances communicated by it, and its potential effect on the negotiation of user privacy choices.

Privacy's Context

Privacy attitudes are neither static nor inflexible. When people see that the potential benefits for an information transaction outweigh the potential risks, they often voluntarily adjust their privacy comfort levels (Friedman, 1997; Murphy, 1964). Stutzman (2006) surveyed 200 university students and found that while students tend to view protecting their identity information online as important and cite concerns about the consequences of sharing information, they do not feel their online identity is well-protected nor do they plan to curb their future disclosure activities.

Part of this seeming dissonance is likely related to the disconnection of the promotional and preservation functions, which Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais (2009) found emanate from different internal psychological processes. And certainly a knowledge gap appears to exist. An early study (Jones & Soltren, 2005) found that 89 percent of Facebook users surveyed had not read the privacy policy statement, and 91 percent were unfamiliar with the policy details. A few years later, Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield (2008) found that a majority of users had made at least a minor change to their privacy settings, but that maintaining the default settings were seen as necessary to attract a larger audience for one's content. Livingstone (2008) found deep frustration among Facebook users in the complexity of Facebook's privacy controls.

In order to grasp how privacy norms are manipulated in online environments, it will be necessary to examine what role contextual clues play in the information disclosure decisions of Internet users.

McMillan and Morrison (2006) used qualitative analysis to show college students' increasing reliance on Internet technology in each of four primary domains (self, family, real communities and virtual communities). But the relationships maintained in each of these domains can be fundamentally different, and the information disclosure decisions were found to be inconsistent between domains. The context of one's interactions appears to be rather important to how one manages personal information.

In order to grasp how privacy norms are manipulated in online environments, it will be necessary to examine what role contextual clues play in the information disclosure decisions of Internet users.

Rosen (2000) described privacy in terms of context, as decisions concerning information disclosure depend heavily on the circumstances, audience and perceived implications of the potential disclosure. When disclosing medical information, people often select how much detail to share based on whom they think might overhear and the potential for stigma that might occur f their information were widely known. Users do not usually make blanket decisions for disclosures, but adapt their behavior to their social context.

Palen and Dourish (2003) argue that privacy in online contexts is a negotiated process conditioned by the expectations and experiences of the disclosing users. Dey, Abowd and Salber (2001) defined context as:

> … any information that can be used to characterize the situation of entities (i.e., whether a person, place, or object) that are considered relevant to the interaction between a user and an application, including the user and the application themselves. Context is typically the location, identity, and state of the people, groups, and computational and physical objects (p.106).

Grudin (2001) presented an example of how changes in the context of information dissemination through aggregation of a search engine for a newsgroup called *Deja News* altered the experience for newsgroup readers. By allowing archives of previous contributions and conversations to become searchable, the access to past interactions created new contexts of understanding, often contributing contextual facts that were undesired. As one respondent explained, “we were discovering things about our colleagues that we didn’t want to know” (p.281).

Privacy decisions are largely informed by expectations, expectations that rely on context. From the genesis of the legal construct of privacy in American culture, privacy advocates have tried to control the circumstances under which certain facts about themselves could be disclosed. Technology has always played a key role in social deliberations over the boundaries of privacy. The next section will briefly review the origins and developments of American privacy in order to frame issues related to the current topic.

Considering the Technological Roots of American Privacy

Prior to 1890, no formal privacy code existed in the American legal system. But the political stagnation that had followed the Civil War (Cherny, 1997) began to yield to a new age of commerce, technological innovation and industrialization. Into this environment, one major technological innovation (flash photography) led directly to the establishment of a privacy protection for upper class members. The introduction of flash powder to the photography process cut the exposure time, and photographs could be taken in less than a single second. As a result, “snap shots” let a photographer take photographs without the permission (or even the knowledge) of the subject.

Following an event of scandalous reportage, two young lawyers from Boston decided to challenge the photographers’ newly acquired abilities with the law. The first law governing American privacy appeared in an 1890 *Harvard Law Review* article written by Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis titled, “The Right to Privacy.” Warren and Brandeis did not attempt to establish a right of privacy from either a constitutional justification or an argument of privacy’s intrinsic value to all societies. Rather, the argument presented posited that as American society had evolved, a “certain level of sophistication” in society has made it increasingly difficult for a person to retreat from external scrutiny:

> Recent inventions and business methods call attention to the next step, which must be taken for the protection of the person, and for securing to the individual, what Judge Cooley calls the right 'to be left alone.' Instantaneous photographs and newspaper enterprise have invaded the sacred precincts of private and domestic life; and numerous mechanical devices threaten to make good the prediction that "what is whispered in the closet shall be proclaimed from the housetops (Warren & Brandeis 1890, p. 195).

This argument frame led to their definition of the right to privacy simply as the "right to be left alone," a reference to Judge Thomas Cooley's statement concerning "personal immunity" (1888, p. 29) two years earlier. While elegant, this phrase was of little help in the legal arena, as determining to what extent someone should be left alone has varied almost as often as the circumstances under which the right is challenged by a competing right of access.

The authors argued that a right of privacy is due a person out of respect for his or her standing, and claimed that the unauthorized disclosure of private facts (the only form of violation mentioned in their article) can corrupt a society by encouraging the nation to divert its attention away from important political and economic issues. The article also claimed that each person possesses an "inviolable personality," an abstract collection of images, texts and facts that when assembled, form a person's identity. This view allowed the authors to argue that this "inviolable personality" should be controlled by the possessor, because the "common law secures to each individual the right of determining, ordinarily, to what extent his thoughts, sentiments, and emotions shall be communicated to others" (p.198). In effect, the argument applies the precedent of copyright law to make a person the owner of his or her image, with the implied control and disposal rights granted private property. Eventually, this link between privacy and copyright law also implied that a citizen had the right to sell his or her image as a commodity. "Inviolable personality" is an abstract self: made up of images, texts and facts, the collection of which can be sold as a commodity. Thus, the abstract self soon became a commodity in its own right.

Since its origins at the beginning of the 20th Century, privacy has become a rather tortured legal and social construct, often better defined by what it is not than what it is. Privacy discourse governs the limits of promotional rights, the limits of the government to know facts about the citizenry, the proverbial wall between public reputations and private experiences, the right for a woman to control her body, the right of an individual to control his or her personal information, the limits of clandestine surveillance, the right to control the use of one's genetic code, and a host of other issues that lay at the intersection of a person's role in society and their individual autonomy. So many disparate uses has led to much confusion and difficulties in consistently applying competing definitions of privacy to new emerging situations. Solove (2007) argues:

> … the quest for a traditional definition of privacy has led to a rather fruitless and unresolved debate. In the meantime, there are real

> problems that must be addressed, but they are either conflated or ignored because they do not fit into various prefabricated conceptions of privacy (p. 759).

Though privacy law has evolved and been adapted to safeguard other areas of personal control, inherent in most access-based privacy arguments is the foundational argument that people have a right to preserve their reputation and that the public disclosure of private facts is the root concern of privacy law. Controversies over privacy norms and expectations almost always occur when new technologies change the context or access to previously accepted information collections. For many privacy scholars, this connection ties privacy disputes to concerns about information management. For example, Gandy (1993) persuasively argued that access to one's data allows individuals to be categorized by others in ways with which few would be comfortable. Because these categories predict market behavior, consumer information has become a commodity in the information economy.

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In the networked age, information is routinely collected through a variety of information sources for modification and analysis (Castells, 1996, p.32). Modern Americans leave data trails with almost every interaction in which we engage: privacy may not be possible in a world in which credit cards, cell phones, biometric cameras and even toll roads are all used to track the movements of individuals (Bennet, Raab & Regan, 2003).

It is increasingly difficult for users to know what information is being collected, what it is being connected to, and who has access to it. When one considers the number of privacy disclosure agreements users sign in a given year (just a few common examples: medical disclosure forms, mortgage agreements, software agreements, credit card agreements, online bank access agreements, loans, cable and television service, etc.), it quickly becomes apparent that little about a person's behavior is not known by someone.

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Americans are not wholly ignorant of these issues, but seem ill equipped or unwilling to act in meaningful ways to protect their data. For example, a study conducted by Jupiter Research (2002) revealed that while 70% of U.S. consumers worry that their privacy is at risk, they report doing little to protect their data. Of particular interest, the study found that only 40% of those polled even read privacy statements before handing over personal information to websites (and only 30% of online consumers find website privacy statements easy to understand). These trends have remained consistent through the years. Recently, a survey found that more than two thirds of respondents were concerned about data collection activities related to using search engines (Purcell, Rainey & Brenner 2012).

Leathern (2002) argued that consumers should learn how to manage their data in ways that allow them to capitalize on its exchange and get value from its use. “Data” is defined as the plural form of “datum,” which means “something given.” Data is a commodity in the information economy, and yet it appears many users give away their data for little economic return.

Interface as Social Control

Interface design can serve as a form of social control. Wood (1974) defines social control as the “the use of power with the intention of influencing the behavior of others” (p.53). Berndt (1962) argued social control covers “all the processes and procedures which regulate behavior, in that they exert pressure on persons and groups to conform to the norms” (p.11). When describing media exposure, Mathiesen (1997) described social control as exerted by “disciplining our consciousness” (p. 216).

In physical space, architecture creates psychological and social effects (Tuan, 1977) including altering individual conduct (Katyal, 2002). In the classical example of contextually driven attitudes, a sense of crowdedness can depend on intentionality and environment, such as whether one is at a rock concert or ballroom dancing (Tuan 1977, p.61). Architecture alters intentions by connecting schema with opportunities for action, though not always consciously. Benjamin (1935) explained that architecture is experienced habitually and in a state of distraction, but nonetheless perceived.

Digital architecture affects online behavior in similar ways. Mok (1996, p.46) explained that “[i]nformation design makes information understandable by giving it a context. Information design builds new relationships between thoughts and places” (p.46).

In order to use online networks, almost every user must participate in the consensual hallucination: users believe they “visit” sites when in fact they are having online content delivered to their computer. The contextual frame of online media usage is not the setting of one’s computer, but rather the setting on the screen. Humans interface with the people and institutions of the world through the mental schema they develop. We constantly filter stimuli (tuning out noise, for example) by directing attention towards specific elements. Too much sensory input can cause stress and inhibit functionality (Brown & Wiser 1997), a core assumption of usability analysis. To some degree, all individuals interpret the world through mental representation. Gibson (1979) described this phenomenon as the reading of affordances, the practice of interpreting the world as an offering of possible actions, communicated through structural design. According to Gibson, one’s perception is influenced by environment, embodiment and perceived possible action.

Taking these perspectives into consideration, it becomes apparent that changes in context may not explicitly control actions so much as shape schema by directing attention towards particular features or visual cues. Contextual cues often cause cognition to be directed in a particular way, which can either encourage or discourage certain patterns of behavior. Users are not often aware of the differences between interface design and back-end architecture. As Raskin (2000, p.5) explained, “As far as the customer is concerned, the interface is the product.”

Users are not often aware of the differences between interface design and back-end architecture.

In his treatise on the aggregation of personal data through online interactions, Solove (2004, p.99) explained that current practices create “architectures of vulnerability,” insecure structures that create opportunities for significant harm. Such architectures encourage individuals to expose themselves to those who have greater access to online structures and thus more power. Currently, most of the collection of personal data occurs out of the user’s view. Most users do not appear to know when their information is gathered, where it is stored or how it is used. Furthermore, most companies that gather information are often not accountable to consumers.

But Solove’s architectures of vulnerabilities are filled with personal data by willing participants, who do not seem to understand the significance their actions take when interacting with digital object. This confusion may or may not be intentional, but is certainly created by the differences between what the interface communicates and what tasks the back-end architecture actually performs.

Interface Design, Aesthetics and Usability

Interface is defined by Johnson (1997) as “software that shapes the interaction between user and computer.” The interface serves as a translator and interpreter, mediating between the two parties “making one sensible to the other” (p.14). Castells (1996) describes the back-end of systems architecture as “unseen logic of the meta-network, where value is produced, cultural codes are created and power is decided” (p.508).

Human-computer interaction (HCI) is the area of study concerned with computer users’ mental processes and behaviors as they interact with computers. Researchers in the area of HCI have historically focused on the utility of interactions in terms of usage effectiveness or efficiency. Recognizing the limitations of these approaches, some scholars have begun to explore more holistic experiential measures (Hassenzahl & Tractinsky, 2006), such as the inclusion of social psychological and sociological methods to test assumptions of the effects of interface design variables.

Much of the traditional HCI research on website and computer interfaces analyzes usability. The International Organization for Standardization (2010) defines usability as “[t]he extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction in a specified context of use.”

Usability guru Jakob Nielsen (1999) defined usability as consisting of five attributes: learnability, efficiency, memorability, errors and satisfaction, and presents simplicity as a key factor behind a usable design. In this context, simplicity is defined as the lack of obstruction, or lack of complexity.

However, usability measures imply intentional uses and attitudes towards use, rendering the technology exclusively as functional object. Instead of seeing technological objects as instruments for specific goal-oriented use, researchers should struggle to give them "meaningful presence" (Hallnäs & Redström, 2002, p. 198). Usability presumes that the goals of the user and the information object align, that the object's use merely serves to facilitate the goals of the user. But what if the goals embedded in the design of the object diverge with those of the user? Researchers do not often appear to consider that some interfaces might intentionally designed to be, in certain respects, unusable.

As one scholar explained:

> What is needed [in technology design] is not the modern praise of new technology, but a critical and creative aesthetic-technical production orientation that unites modern information and communication technology with design, art, culture and society, and at the same time places the development of the new mediating technologies in their real every day context of changes in lifestyle, work and leisure (Ehn, 1998, p.154).

Social networking (and thus activities that occur within its platform, like social reading) would appear to be an area in which goals between users and digital objects are at odds. Because digital objects treat all relationships as equal relationships (the computer is no respecter of persons or social conventions), actions performed outside of a user's view might be deemed inappropriate for one type of relationship even if it were appropriate in another. For example, software that collects behavioral data for trend analysis does not differentiate between firms desiring this data. Users may accept this data's use in making product recommendations on Amazon more efficient, but may have a different sentiment when that data is shared with a financial institution or credit lender. The software itself usually does not usually distinguish between different types of institutions, providing resellers and banks similar access to collected data.

This tension, allowing technology to manage relationships, represents a core paradox at the heart of the function social networking in regards to privacy negotiation. Though social networking generally represents the unprecedented potential for diverse global contacts, most people continue strive to maintain local, strong ties connecting to members of the user's work and physical environment (Putnam, 2000). But the social networking connection to those strong ties is mediated by the social networking platform, a mediation that shapes social practices (Bakardjieva, 2005). These mediated connections are influenced by design affordances, the "functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object" (Hutchby, 2001, p.44).

For example, in an early study on the online behavior of teenagers, Livingstone (2008) found that social networking sites' affordances created a false sense of intimacy between users that challenged the distinctions between public and private spaces for media production and display. In that work, Livingstone related the seeming confusion concerning intimacy in a public space to a lack of teens' online literacy exacerbated by the affordances of the social networking platform.

For nondeterministic types of interactions, HCI scholars have recently begun to employ measurements of aesthetics in an attempt to move away from the functionalism of traditional HCI and towards a more integrative and critical perspective on how technology affects users and user behavior. Classic aesthetics literature has long attempted to identify and evaluate the attributes of beautiful objects. Relevant attributes include contrast and clarity (Gombrich, 1995, Solso 2003), taken from classic considerations of the competing attributes of simplicity and complexity (Birkhoff, 1933; Eysenck, 1941).

Noam Tractinsky (1997) demonstrated a correlation between users' perception of the aesthetic appreciation of automatic teller machines (ATM) and usability. Building upon this work, Tractinsky et al. (2000) demonstrated a consistent relationship between perceptions of visual aesthetics and perceived usability, inspiring a series of studies examining the relationship between visual aesthetics and perceptions of usability (Ben-Bassat et al., 2006; Hartmann et al., 2007; Hassenzahl, 2004; Sutcliffe & de Angeli, 2005; Thüring & Mahlke, 2007). General findings suggest that positive visual aesthetics in design interfaces can improve user performance (Moshagen et al., 2009; Sonderegger & Sauer, 2010).

A variety of other perception changes have been shown to result from visual aesthetics, most relevant to the current work, credibility (Fogg et al. 2003) and trustworthiness (Cyr et al., 2008; Karvonen, 2000; Kim & Moon, 1998). Karvonen (2000) found that the aesthetical appeal of simplicity increases perceptions of trust. For experienced users, webpage design "acts as a sign of technical refinement that lies underneath the visual layout, on the level of the infrastructure of the system behind the user interface" (3).

Legacy news media organizations have, until recently, shied away from social networking protocols (or at least, the kinds of social networking protocols that involve automated interactions among users). However, the recent adoption of news media social reader applications draws journalists and media companies more fully into social networking protocols, complete with the tensions created by differences in what is communicated through interface when compared to the computing functions occurring outside the view of the user.

Considering Open Graph and Social Readers

Open graph, or "frictionless sharing," is a platform introduced at Facebook's f8 event on September 22, 2011. Open graph is a protocol that allows media producers to embed content into social networking structures for the purpose of integrating it into social media platforms. Combined with the Facebook Connect API, the platform that allows broad authentication across different systems, the seams between Facebook and media site content began to blur, and the personal information contained in Facebook's account profiles and the media usage statistics began to be freely exchanged between sites.

The connections result in media content increasingly accessible from within Facebook, and Facebook account services available on external sites. Some media companies, hoping to capitalize on the push features of Facebook sharing, entered into agreements with Facebook in 2011 to leverage the Social Reader app to integrate the functions and user experiences between Facebook and their news content sites.

Due to the viral nature of open graph's function, the first few months following the Social Reader's introduction, the participating media companies saw an increase in traffic. By November 28, nine weeks after open graph was publicly announced, 10 million users had signed up for the Yahoo Social Reader, four million users had subscribed to the *Guardian*'s social reader and 3.5 million users had registered with the Washington Post Social Reader (Sonderman, 2011). Currently, only 9% of American adults report getting their news from Facebook (Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Christian, 2012), but that number is expected to grow in the coming years.

Not all print journalism outlets poised to take advantage of open graph chose to do so. Former *Times* developer Michael Donohoe (2011) explained privacy concerns were at the heart of the *New York Times'* decision not to release a social reader version of its content.

Controversies concerning the disclosure of personal information are hardly new for Facebook. A series of controversies involving the use of member data have demonstrated to users the potential for abuse when disclosing personal data online. These controversies, while stressful for many involved, actually shed light on the abilities of many firms dealing in personal information who choose not to disclose their privacy practices.

In September 2006, *Facebook* members suddenly found their social network filtered through an aggregating tool that reported the latest actions of members to a member's personal network. Within hours, tens of thousands of users voiced their anger over the changes (Calore, 2006), claiming that the aggregation of information was invasive. *Facebook* responded by posting a blog entry by founder Mark Zuckerberg, explaining that none of the information portrayed in the feeds was unavailable before the aggregation. "Nothing you do is being broadcast; rather, it is being shared with people who care about what you do – your friends" (Zuckerberg, 2006).

A survey of 180 undergraduate students conducted by the author soon after the controversy erupted reported that while more than 90% of respondents considered online data management to be important and more than two thirds did not agree that *Facebook* protected their personal data, only one student reported actually leaving *Facebook* because of privacy concerns, and even that one reported logging in via a friend's account to keep up with the content of her friends' pages (Stevens, 2007).

Another controversy occurred in November 2007, when *Facebook* launched Beacon, an aggregating advertisement utility that published users' activities on partner websites like *eBay*, *Fandango*, *Travelocity*, *Overstock* and *Blockbuster* (Story, 2007). To protest, more than 50,000 *Facebook* users signed an online protest organized by *MoveOn.org* (Story & Stone, 2007).

In February of 2008 another controversy erupted when many users discovered that should they ever decide to delete their *Facebook* account, their information would continue to be a permanent part of the network (Aspan, 2008). An analysis of the site's policy agreement suggested that its use of data was legal in the U.S., though it would not be in the European Union (Ramasastry, 2008).

By allowing users to see their data reconfigured and redistributed into multiple contexts, [Facebook] causes distress by demonstrating information aggregation techniques that have been enacted behind a veil of technological secrecy for years.

In each of these controversies, users expressed surprise and outrage at the changes in delivery format their data underwent to be distributed to other users. Though the users had personally supplied the data, the general lack of understanding of underlying database structures displayed by the more vocal critics indicated many users do not understand the implications of the distribution of data across networked environments.

What makes *Facebook* unusual compared to the millions of online venues that collect personal data is not its information collection techniques. Presumably, most sites that collect data are equally capable of combining together information strings and the contextual threads. *Facebook* becomes controversial for the transparency with which it operates. By allowing users to see their data reconfigured and redistributed into multiple contexts, the site causes distress by demonstrating information aggregation techniques that have been enacted behind a veil of technological secrecy for years.

Facebook appears to offer one set of expectations (drawn from the interface aesthetic, organized around the simplicity affordance) for its users, while the output of the collected data demonstrates a radically different relationship between the user and the architecture. In most data transactions, users are not privy to the output of their data collection, nor do they expect the simple interactions they engage in to create such processes.

Privacy Presentation Through Interface Design

Because simplicity aesthetics are utilized within most sites that collect personal information, most users have little or no awareness about how their data is treated within online databases. Because the interface is designed to reduce the orientation tendencies that distract users from content, the access provided between software and personal information is rarely explained in explicit terms.

Privacy decisions depend heavily upon perceived context, and yet it appears that many users do not possess a sense of digital literacy necessary to make informed decisions regarding their personal data. The interface that facilitates one's ability to easily use digital technology prevents observation of the underlying technology:

> Put simply, the importance of interface design revolves around this apparent paradox: we live in a society that is increasingly shaped by events in cyberspace, and yet cyberspace remains, for all practical purposes, invisible, outside our perceptual grasp. Our only access to this parallel universe of zeros and ones runs through the conduit of the computer interface, which means that the most dynamic and innovative region of the modern word reveals itself through the anonymous middlemen of interface design (Johnson, 1997, p.19).

Framing the context of interaction as a sense of place instead of a tool set is critical to understanding online interactions. Dourish (2001) explained that where users are located (or perceive they are located) determines what behavior or decisions are considered appropriate, rather than the abilities of a tool. One example he presented was the different behavior users engage when using a cell phone, depending on the setting of its use. Phones are used differently in different locations, with deference to what audience might overhear the disclosure, and how embarrassing the information may be.

Online aesthetics also create a sense of environment: how a user drafts an email to a bank representative will likely be different than the text comprising a message to friends. Dourish (2001) utilized Suchman's (1987) use of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) to bring a sociological understanding of interaction, ultimately arguing that "interaction is intimately connected with the settings in which it occurs" (p.19). In other words, users may have a different experience of setting, and that experience can enable different expectations of privacy.

Dourish encapsulated this view in his term "embodiment," which recognized that:

> [t]he technical infrastructures that deliver information into our homes and work environments create barriers that separate one stream of information from another and make coordination difficult. Humans respect barriers, too, but they are barriers of different sorts; boundaries between public and private, between home and work, between personal time and the company's time, and so forth. These barriers are more or less flexible, subject to negotiation and adapted to the needs of the moment. However, they map poorly to the kinds of barriers that technological systems put into place (p. 197).

Embodiment considers the establishment of meaning by considering the "place" of interaction (Harrison & Dourish, 1996) and in particular by examining the interpretations of interface presentation (Dourish & Button, 1998).

A user's understanding of a performed action within a given interface is heavily influenced by the aesthetic and affordances used by the designer of the interface. Hutchins et al. (1986) identify the "gulf of interpretation" as the difficulty of interpreting the system's state as a response to a user's command. Dourish (2004) illustrated particular concerns about network security, as computers negotiate heterogeneous network protocols in the name of seamless access (and its corresponding aesthetic), making a user's awareness of the particular security protocols at any given moment impossible, since the networking decisions are made at the architecture level, hidden from the user's view (p.12). These same observations apply to a user's understanding of how his or her data is collected, stored, analyzed or transmitted within a system or between systems.

To read a social app story, users are prompted to install the Washington Post Social Reader app (though, no mention of the affordance "install" appears on the displayed screen). The user is presented with two options, "Okay, Read Article," and "Cancel." Clicking "Okay, Read Article" button installs the app into a user's Facebook profile and displays the article in the browser window. Clicking the "Cancel" button loads the article from the corresponding website into the browser window without installing the social reader software.

No communication of the actual function of this offered choice is explicit: users are apparently expected to understand that "Cancel" will load the desired article from the *WashingtonPost.com* site instead of in the Social Reader app. In contrast with the "Okay, Read Article" button, the "Cancel" affordance takes on a connotation of NOT reading the article, which is precisely the opposite function clicking the button entails.

This affordance presentation also takes advantage of the user's goal in the interaction: by clicking on a news story associated with a trusted friend's profile, the user is encouraged to become a distributor for *Washington Post* content (and other content offerings by publications with affiliated connections to the *Post*) in their choice that appears to be an articulation of whether or not the article can be read.

On the page presenting the choice, the user is informed the purpose of the app is to "See what your friends are reading, and let your friends know what you read," though the relationship between these two functions is not clear. The user can opt to customize the distribution list for the app, and is informed the app will access "Your basic info," "About You" and "Your likes," though nothing is stated about how this information will be used. Finally, the app install screen disclaims, "This app may post on your behalf, including articles you read and more." This statement discloses that content will be published FROM the user's profile to the news feeds of his or her friends (the "may" is particularly misleading given the sole purpose of the app is to perform the task it disclaims it "may" do, though whether "may" is supposed to convey a sense of possibility or permission is unclear).

Once a user clicks the "Okay, Read Article" button, any article link the user clicks on (whether not that click originates from the Facebook site or the Washington Post site) is displayed on the news feed for that user. Furthermore, all of this activity happens automatically in perpetuity (or until the user uninstalls the app). So by the act of choosing to "read," the user chooses to become an unpaid distributor of content for a media organization.

Analysis and Conclusions

Ishii and Ulmer (1997) argued that Americans live in two worlds: the world of computation ("bits") and the world of physical reality ("atoms"). Recognizing both as part of a user's context, designers of information collection interfaces bear a responsibility for communicating the implications of computation in terms of the potential effect in the physical reality. Whereas computer interactions have largely been described in the past in terms of objects (computers themselves), computing decisions now consist of a myriad of situations, all represented to users by aesthetics (interfaces) that imply contexts that may or may not exist.

For most users, privacy decision-making is still performed in ways Warren and Brandeis defined in 1890 and Goffman articulated in 1959: the manipulation of image in public space. Though that framing of privacy is protected by laws originating from the invasion of the mechanical technology in the beginning of the industrial age, the legal codes protecting one's reputation do little to protect one's data or prepare users to make educated decisions regarding their data in response to the introduction of digital technologies in the present age.

Warren and Brandeis struggled to control the public display of images, but the challenge facing most contemporary information consumers is the nonpublic display of personal data between unknown data brokers. Thus, agents clandestinely trade credible "gossip" about users that does not defame anyone's public reputation, but nonetheless has no less real consequences for matters of authentication, trust and access. A person's credit score or browsing history might not actually be disclosed in public, but those collections can affect the way a person is treated within a system, which can have the same functional effect as the public disclosure of private facts.

But methods of information gathering, designed using aesthetics of simplicity to encourage interactions, are usually divorced from this brokerage altogether. Users have one experience of the digital object, which in turn populates a different (and invisible, as far as the user is concerned) object, which in turn communicates with other objects far from the user's view.

Pertinent regulations pertaining to data practices do exist. The *Code of Fair Information Practices* ("U.S. Dep't. of Health," 1973) is one such example, based on five noteworthy principles:

1. There must be no personal data record-keeping systems whose very existence is secret.

2. There must be a way for a person to find out what information about the person is in a record and how it is used.

3. There must be a way for a person to prevent information about the person that was obtained for one purpose from being used or made available for other purposes without the person's consent.

4. There must be a way for a person to correct or amend a record of identifiable information about the person.

5. Any organization creating, maintaining, using, or disseminating records of identifiable personal data must assure the reliability of the data for their intended use and must take precautions to prevent misuses of the data.

However, most Internet users report fears about data security but take no action to protect or account for how their data is being used. Because consumers have legal protections, most sites create carefully worded disclosure statements about the use of data, but then present such disclosures in a onerous way that makes it unlikely that a consumer will engage the disclosure statement in any meaningful way, hiding behind the aesthetic of simplicity that implies a context unrepresentative of the network structure of most tools.

The surveillance and storage of user data will continue to be an important part of computer and network interactions. For many, surveillance is viewed as a mere negative side effect, apparently not seeming intrusive enough to make us give up new technology services.

Trust between individuals in our society continues to decline (Paxton, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Individuals are increasingly likely to interact with strangers without the information needed to assess reputation (Heimer, 2001), primarily because they are increasingly part of large impersonal communities with highly mobile populations (Nock, 1993, pp.11-12). As a result, the core assumptions of American privacy law, forged during the Industrial Revolution during a time of intense class warfare, do little to protect one's personal data from being collected, transmitted, stored and transferred between credentialing agencies in the 21st Century.

> ***Interfaces serve as the digital ambassadors of systems interactions to the world of users.***

Interfaces serve as the digital ambassadors of systems interactions to the world of users. In most cases, interfaces and their embedded affordances (and what they communicate to the user) influence whether, and to what extent, users will interact with a given set of systems or tools. When affordances communicate a particular set of information values that are not held or practiced within the system, surprise and confusion occur when the difference is discovered. But the difference will rarely be discovered, as the back-end architecture of most systems is necessarily veiled from the gaze of the interacting users. User interfaces are currently not designed to explicitly communicate how data is used and stored, what potential risks are involved or even what can be done with the information provided.

News media organizations that adopt social reader applications contribute to this problem by offering their content as an enticement to increase the rate of social reader diffusion. By linking the apparent affordance of “read” to the poorly communicated “install” function (without explicit communication of the consequences of a user’s choices in the interface), for example, news media organizations exacerbate the confusion that undermines a user’s ability to make informed privacy decisions. If users are to obtain an understanding of information processes necessary to take responsibility for their choices and actions, those processes should be communicated more effectively through the user interface.

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“Best Practices” in the Journalism Ethics Frame: A Comparative Study

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The proliferation of online media has complicated the practice of journalism ethics. Through case studies and comparative analysis, this paper argues that “best practices” is becoming an increasingly useful framing device for applying the ethical complexities of digital media. The article examines several recent attempts to identify and codify best practices. The research questions addressed are: What are the common features of these attempts to articulate the application of a more open form of ethics? How might they shape and enhance best practices in their respective environments? And what are their potential implications for the teaching of journalism ethics?

Introduction

> “I have started a blog and while I was researching some information for some of my posts I came across a youtube video on a site. It wasnt from the actual youtube site but it was a YouTube video. I posted the video onto my blog. Is this alright?” (*sic*)

This email from a student arrived after a lecture on copyright in one of the subjects I teach. It may not be elegantly written, but it speaks volumes about the challenges we face as journalism educators when it comes to law and ethics curricula in journalism degree programs.

The proliferation of online media has complicated the practice of journalism ethics. While it can be argued that traditional ethical principles don’t fundamentally change when information is disseminated online, the application of codes across a range of platforms is becoming increasingly challenging in a rapidly evolving mediascape – especially as new kinds of interactions develop between journalists and audiences. As a journalism educator, I am constantly struck by how traditional ethical codes, while essential for an understanding of the principles of journalism, are increasingly difficult to align with rapidly evolving media practices.

This exploratory paper examines how attempts to address this question are unravelling, both in Australia, where the discussions about online ethics has been infused by a lively debate provoked by a recent federal government inquiry into media accountability, and in North America, where the potential and pitfalls of online media have been explored with even greater urgency in response to the relatively rapid decline in the traditional business model for print.

The main argument is that the term “best practices” is emerging as an increasingly useful framing device for investigating and responding to many of the ethical complexities of digital journalism. Furthermore, ongoing discussions of best practice principles are essential if traditional ethical norms are to be successfully extended and integrated into online media practice. While the details and nuances of the challenges vary, common questions underpinning all these discussions are: What are the limitations of traditional codes and standards for new media formats? How should ethics be understood in an environment where increasing numbers of content producers are not journalists? And who should be involved in developing ethical norms?

In some respects, these questions aren’t new at all. As Ward notes, new publishing technologies have, in the past, helped to shape ethical practices and norms and will continue to do so in the future (Ward, 2006).

Journalistic content is increasingly being produced and disseminated by people who do not identify as journalists and whose practices often take place outside of the kinds of institutional and professional milieus within which codes of ethics were developed. Consequently, traditional journalism ethical codes often do not address the kinds of issues encountered when content is produced outside of the institutional norms, processes and structures of traditional media.

As American journalism professor Jay Rosen told a group of Australian journalism educators at the University of Sydney: “What we need to do is completely explode the question of ethics, so that it includes new actors like bloggers and citizen journalists” (Rosen, 2010). For Rosen, ethics are “the practices that lead to trust on the platforms where users actually are. That’s what we should care about. How can we find them, and refine them and teach them to people?” (Rosen, 2010).

But how might such practices can best be identified and understood? It is one thing to acknowledge the traditional ethical imperative of correcting errors; quite another to gauge how this might be achieved across of a range of digital practices. Must every error be corrected, even minor ones, if technology permits? Who decides what’s trivial and what’s important? And how should amendments be displayed?

These are issues for journalism educators (see, for instance, Penenberg, 2007) as well as journalists, as “a once-dominant traditional ethics, constructed for professional journalism a century ago, are being questioned. Journalism ethics is a field where old and new values clash” (Ward, 2011a). In *Ethics and the Media: An Introduction,* (Ward, 2011c) Ward argues that the changes go to the core of media ethics:

> The challenge runs deeper than debates about one or another principle, such as objectivity. The challenge is greater than specific problems, such as how newsrooms can verify content from citizens. The revolution requires us to rethink assumptions. What can ethics *mean* for a profession that must provide instant news and analysis; where everyone with a modem is a publisher? (p. 208)

These questions have been emerging elsewhere: as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Director of Editorial Policies, Paul Chadwick, put it at the 2009 Melbourne Writers Festival:

> Over, say, the past two hundred years or so we have fashioned notions of what it is to be an ethical journalist from the rather small and privileged group who had access to the presses and broadcasting spectrum necessary to practise journalism on a large scale. Not all members of the group necessarily share these notions, and there is a rich but repetitive debate about whether they adhere to the notions. The interesting question is whether, as the numbers and range of people practising journalism increase, these notions will survive as the markers of ethical journalism. What do they omit or mis-state about ethical norms to which a far larger number of practising journalists may be willing to subscribe?” (Chadwick, 2010)

Ward uses an even wider lens when arguing that “the rise of internet-based media is a revolutionary event because it substantially alters the prevailing professional model of the JCP [journalists-communication-methods-public]. The journalistic element of this relationship is transformed to include, for the first time, ordinary citizens in great numbers” (Ward, 2011c, p. 21).

So why “best practices”? The idea for this paper evolved from two developments. The first is the observation that the term is being used – apparently at least partly coincidentally – in a number of disparate initiatives involving the application of ethical principles to online environments, as well as in discussions of how to optimise the capacities of technological innovations. Why is this happening, and to what extent are the discussions unravelling around the term exploring similar ideas, however inadvertently? This paper will explore these questions by discussing several “best practices” initiatives that offer open-ended and discursive approaches to emerging questions of journalism practice in a digital environment.

The second development is the debates that have evolved in Australia before, during and after the Independent Media Inquiry that was held at the end of 2011 (Department of Broadband Communications and the Digital Economy, 2011b). One theme to emerge in these debates is the perceived limitations of the current regulatory system for dealing with standards relating to emerging journalistic practices, especially in the online sphere.

This paper is not intending to evaluate the merits of specific best practices initiatives, or precisely how they might be adopted in particular forms or journalism or jurisdiction. But it will explore how the development of projects examining emerging best practices, especially in digital journalism, can be seen as a positive development at a time of rapid change.

While "best practices" guidelines have long been commonplace in professional organizations, they are not always used directly in relation to ethics. As discussed below, the term is sometimes used in contexts that are concerned more with efficiency and expediency. By contrast with these non-ethical accounts of best practices, in this paper I argue for an explicitly ethical account of journalistic best practices that draws on Alasdair MacIntyre's work on virtue ethics. In his most influential book, *After Virtue*, MacIntyre defines a practice as:

> any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 185) Also quoted in (Breit, 2004, p. 64).

The concept of practice and virtue ethics has been further explored in the context of journalism by Sandra Borden. In *Journalism as practice* she contends that MacIntyre's ideas about virtuous practices "provide a useful framework for thinking about journalism as a cooperative endeavour guided by a sense of moral purpose" (Borden, 2007, p. 21). One of the functions of virtues, she concludes, "is supporting the practice's regenerative capacities" (p. 78). Her focus here is on "intellectual accountability and intellectual modesty as the virtues needed to support a discipline of confirmation characterized by accessibility, transparency, and tentativeness". If conducted in cooperation with non-journalists, this discipline "can provide a system for the practice to continually improve itself and extend its conception of ends and means" (p. 139).

To this end, Borden stresses the importance of an interactive feedback process "characterized by accessibility, transparency, and tentativeness in the spirit of shared inquiry" involving " letting non-journalists interact with journalists on their turf; that is, in newspapers, on news sites, and on news programs. Its function would be to demonstrate openness to criticism, correction and comment – and to give such feedback a wide hearing." (pp. 78-79). The Internet, she adds, "may increase participation and learning through interactive feedback" (p. 79).

Borden also emphasizes the importance characteristic of tentativeness "which simply acknowledges the interim nature of knowledge" (p. 79). "Accompanied with intellectual modesty, tentativeness also mitigates inequality and promotes a feeling of belonging in the public sphere, rather than of merely being tolerated" (p.80).

In his discussion of best practices in journalism, Iyer (2010) suggests that the decline of print means that a best practice culture is more likely to evolve in an online environment. Best practice, he argues “does not need the incentive of accolades to prevail. But it does need some groundwork: it can only survive within an organizational culture of excellence” (Iyer, 2010, p. 31). Websites, he argues, are benefiting from increased competition. It is quite likely that best practice definitions will emerge from them (p. 31).

It’s not simply a matter of competition. An array of niche websites discussing the changing journalism landscape are constantly engaging with best practices issues. These include *MediaShift*, *10,000 Words*, *Reportr.net*, *Nieman Journalism Lab*, *Poynter*, and *Regret the Error* (now hosted on Poynter). The latter was launched in 2004 by Canadian journalist Craig Silverman as a site focused on media retractions, apologies, clarifications and trends regarding accuracy and honesty in the press. “It was a combination of wanting to start a media blog and noticing that corrections in particular were a fascinating and un-mined part of journalism,” he said in a 2007 interview (Scanlan, 2007). The virtue (quite literally in the sense that MacIntyre and Border discuss it) of Silverman’s *Regret the Error* project, which includes a book of the same name (Silverman, 2007), is that it is much more than a forum for sticklers: ‘‘Aside from being an essential nuts and bolts aspect of how we do our job, accuracy is a key that can unlock innovative, investigative journalism. It can help us forge a stronger bond with the public and with our sources” (Scanlan, 2007).

The case studies in this paper have been chosen because, like *Regret the Error*, they are proactive attempts to be part of the process of the regeneration of journalism through engagement with issues relating to best practices. In so doing, they extend and expand practices that would be regarded as excellent.

Method

Drawing on the work of Borden (2007), MacIntyre (1985), and Ward and Wasserman (2010), this paper provides a critical reading of several “best practice” developments, and analyses the extent to which initiatives that examine emerging issues in digital journalism might be applied outside of the specific environments for which they were created.

A common theme of many of these initiatives is their focus on addressing issues in journalism practice that have evolved as it shifts from a one-to-many form of professionally-presented authoritative knowledge, to a more inclusive, collaborative and community-orientated set of practices. The case studies include two reports from the Canadian Association of Journalists and two reports from the Center for Social Media in Washington D.C. that specifically address online issues. The final two cases studies focus on collaborative projects undertaken in Australia between several institutions to develop new guidelines for the reporting diversity and the reporting of suicide.

The analysis will examine what the concept of best practices might achieve, and what common features the case studies share. The discussion will consider how debates about online standards and best practices have been part of a broader discussion generated by the recent Media Inquiry in Australia (Department of Broadband Communications and the Digital Economy, 2011b). One seam of these debates has been how best digital media practices can be identified and developed as part of the process of addressing how best "to achieve the degree of accountability desirable in a democracy" where "online news publications are not covered" within the existing self-regulatory framework (Finkelstein, 2012, p. 8).

> ***A common theme of many of these initiatives is their focus on addressing issues in journalism practice that have evolved as it shifts from a one-to-many form of professionally-presented authoritative knowledge, to a more inclusive, collaborative and community-orientated set of practices.***

Case Studies

In North America a number of separate initiatives have been undertaken to address the challenges that online practices pose for journalism. What they have in common is a mission to interpret ethical issues in the online environment by identifying emerging best practices in discursive and exploratory rather than overtly prescriptive ways. They have, to varying degrees, been the product of collaborations between working journalists, industry associations, academics, and as Jay Rosen famously put it: the people formerly known as the audience (Rosen, 2006).

Scan and analysis of best practices in digital journalism in and outside U.S. public broadcasting

The Center for Social Media at the American University in Washington DC has published a number of best practices reports (Center for Social Media, 2012). In this paper we will discuss two of these projects, both of which were led by Patricia Aufderheide. The first, Scan and analysis of best practices in digital journalism in and outside U.S. public broadcasting, set out to "identify a set of best practices in digital new media journalism intended to guide planning and initiatives in this area specifically for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and more broadly for the Public Service Media community in the US" (Aufderheide, Clark, Nisbet, Donnelly, & Dessauer, 2009). According to the report, "best practices" is "more than a buzz phrase":

> In any professional sector or industry, researchers commonly identify a set of activities, principles, themes, norms, or routines that appear to aid industry members in meeting common challenges or achieving shared goals. Best practices are intended to be generalizable across organizations and settings, though the decision to adopt any recommended activity will depend on the needs, resources, and goals of a particular organization (Aufderheide et al., 2009).

The best practice categories identified in this report are:

- Involve
- Go deeper
- Reach new and non-traditional publics
- Repurpose, remix, recycle
- Collaborate
- Enable media literacy
- Play with form to innovate and integrate new technologies
- Promote political discussion and participation

The report focuses on example-based discussion. Each category is outlined in brief in the executive summary, then “the specifics of how a particular digital technology or medium achieves these principles are represented in the range of contemporary examples”. Innovative individual projects are also discussed to “illuminate trends and possibilities” (Aufderheide et al., 2009). The potential application of this methodology is discussed further by co-author Matthew Nisbet in a separate article, where he states that “though the report is focused on journalism generally, each of the recommendations also applies to media projects in the areas of science, environmental, and health journalism” (Nisbet, 2009).

It is a significant reflection of the definition of best practices offered by the report that its findings were intended to be applicable beyond the practices of traditional broadcasting, and that the report – while designed in part for a specific organization – is also explicitly intended as a reference point for a broader public.

In so doing, the report affirms the qualities of accessibility, tentativeness, transparency, and intellectual modesty outlined by Borden as virtues required to support journalism’s regenerative capacities (Borden, 2007).

Fair Use

The Center for Social Media has also developed an ongoing Fair Use project hat provides copyright information for media practitioners. In February 2012 the Center launched the report Copyright, free speech, and the public’s right to know: How journalists think about fair use (Aufderheide & Jaszi, 2012) that concluded that the very fate of journalism hinges on establishing best fair use practices:

> Until journalists establish their own best practices in fair use, journalists and their institutions and gatekeepers will continue to be haunted by fear, letting unfounded risk-management calculations substitute for a clear understanding of what is normal and appropriate in employment of fair use. As new opportunities develop with the evolution of digital culture, the very mission of journalism is at stake. (Aufderheide and Jaszi, 2012)

While this report was not specifically focused on digital media practice (previous reports from the Center for Social Media examined best practice for fair use for online video (Center for Social Media, 2008b) and user-generated content (Center for Social Media, 2008a)), it was informed by the observation that "social media, video, and user-generated content pose new challenges and unfamiliar choices. Online aggregators, bloggers and citizen journalists copy original material and further destabilize business models." The report went on to examine specific copyright issues that arise in social media and web-based situations, and included interviews with bloggers who were "in the top tier of the online journalist's schema" and found that they shared values with traditional journalists (Aufderheide & Jaszi, 2012).

In a post about this report in *MediaShift* Aufderheide (2012) elaborated on how journalists could learn much from other communities of practice, such as teachers, scholars, librarians and documentary filmmakers who have developed codes of best practice in fair use while respecting copyright (Aufderheide, 2012).

For these groups, following best practices is, in part, a matter of professional self-interest to journalists, not simply a moral requirement. This supports the argument to be developed in this paper that a "best practices" framework has the potential to facilitate "ethics plus" rather than "ethics lite", especially if embedded in a range of practices that apply ethical principles.

Unpublishing

The Canadian Association of Journalists has also been active in developing best practices initiatives in response to the evolution of digital media. In 2010 a panel headed by the *Toronto Star* 's public editor Kathy English published "The ethics of unpublishing" report which offered guidelines on the issues correcting online content and handling public requests to "unpublish" material (English, Currie, & Link, 2010).

This is significant because the capacity to "unpublish" – that is, remove material from a website – is something that was not possible in the print era, and traditional ethical codes don't really equip publishers with guidance as to under what circumstances it is ethical to unpublish. Further complicating the issue is that while it's technically simple for an editor or blogger to erase content from a site, this does not eliminate the many echoes that may exist all over the web on search engines, blogs and news sites (Fisher, 2010).

In their unpublishing study, the CAJ panel drew on a research paper English completed for the Associated Press Managing Editors' Online credibility project (Associated Press Media Editors, 2012), co-sponsored by the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation. That research "The longtail of news: To unpublish or not to unpublish" (English, 2009) was based primarily on a survey of 110 North American news organizations to determine how the news industry is handling requests to unpublish digital content. The main issue identified in the CAJ unpublishing report was that "requests to unpublish raise questions about accuracy and fairness, as well as trust and credibility with our readers and the communities we serve" (English et al., 2010).

The report explains that it is news organizations, not search engines, that must deal with the issue. Web masters have the option to remove the information, take the page down entirely or block Google’s search bots from indexing the page (English et al., 2010).

The report illustrates the issues by discussing unpublishing requests made by *Toronto Star* readers, then offers 10 recommended best practices for handling requests to unpublish digital content under these headings: We are in the publishing business and generally should not unpublish; ongoing accuracy is our responsibility; put a clear policy in place; unpublish for the right reasons; it’s fair to be human; source remorse is not a right reason to unpublish; unpublish by consensus: explain your unpublishing policy; help sources understand the implications of digital publishing; and consider the implications of publishing before publication (English et al., 2010).

These recommendations were underpinned by three key unpublishing principles that became the basis of a subsequent report on best practices in digital accuracy and correction:

- Published digital content is part of the historical record and should not be unpublished. News organizations do not rewrite history or make news disappear.
- Accuracy is the foundation of media credibility. Though we should resist unpublishing, we have a responsibility to ensure the accuracy of all published content. If we err, or if new relevant facts emerge, we should publish correctives and/or update online articles as soon as we verify errors and/or new information.
- Transparency demands that we are clear with audiences about changes that have been made to correct/amend or update digital content. We should not “scrub” digital content, that is, simply fix it and hope that no one has noticed.

Digital Accuracy and Correction

The CAJ’s subsequent report on digital accuracy and correction begins with the suggestion that while the principles outlined in their unpublishing report all reinforce normative ethical practices, they also raise some “relatively new issues”. These are:

- Is there a difference between corrections and updates to digital content in a 24/7 publishing cycle?
- When digital content requires an update, amendment or correction, should changes be made to in the article text and the content republished, or …
- Does transparency demand that corrections note are appended to tell audiences when content has been updated/amended/corrected?
- Should corrective notes explicitly acknowledge the changes made to content?

- Are varied measures of corrective action required, depending on the nature of the error?

- How do news organizations ensure consistency across publishing platforms as information is updated, amended and corrected? (English, 2011)

The preamble affirms that the changing mediascape requires engagement with the identification of best practices – in other words, that the application of an ethical issue, correcting errors, needed to be viewed afresh in the digital context.

"In recognition of the obligations of journalists to pursue accuracy and to be accountable for their work, the Canadian Association of Journalists' Principles for Ethical Journalism states: 'When we make a mistake, we correct it promptly and ungrudgingly, and in a manner that matches the seriousness of the error.' This is not a new idea, *but digital publishing raises new challenges for defining best practices in corrections*." (my emphasis) (English, 2011)

One of the online correction issues to be considered in a best practices framework is placement. As Silverman, who is one of authors of the report, explained to this author in a radio interview:

> There's an element of presentation here, and one of the standards that a lot of publications in the United States seem to be following to is that they will either add the correction at the top of the article, or they will put 'Correction appended' at the top of the article, and put the correction at the bottom. (Zion, 2011)

The tone here, as in both CAJ reports, is one of engagement and exploration: the priority is to identify and analyse emerging issues, but the approach is more "to be continued" than "shalt not". Silverman's *Columbia Journalism Review* blog post "Best practices for social media verification" embodies precisely these qualities (Silverman, 2011).

Reporting Diversity

Two Australian projects share many of the characteristics of the North American best practices case studies. The first of these is the Reporting Diversity project, which evolved from an earlier project called The Journalism in Multicultural Australia Project or JMA (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2007c), that focused on developing best practices by "raising awareness about the way multicultural issues were being reported in the Australian media in order to identify ways of improving journalistic practice … and thereby enhance community harmony".

The aims reflect Australia's multicultural population. Forty-five percent of Australians were born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas (Van Vliet, 2011), and the country has a longstanding multicultural policy framework. Yet the Reporting Diversity report was completed in the aftermath of Australia's worst riots in living memory in the Sydney suburb of Cronulla (Anonymous, 2005) where media reporting was seen to play a role in perpetuating ethnic stereotypes (Foster, Cook, Barter-Godfrey, & Furneaux, 2011), and even, in the case of one radio presenter, of incitement (Bodey, 2007).

Like other best practices projects, Reporting Diversity was a collaboration, in this case between Australia’s Journalism Education Association (JEAA), the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), several universities and community organisations, the market research company Media Monitors, and Australia’s multicultural broadcasting network, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS).

While the terms “diversity” and “multiculturalism” are not synonymous, Reporting Diversity’s main focus was on issues involving multiculturalism and ethnic diversity. And while not specifically designed to examine best practices in digital media, this collaboration between academics, government, and media organizations involved extensive community consultation and produced a series of resources for use by journalism educators for the education and training of journalists in universities and newsrooms (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2007a). Its aims included providing “media practitioners, academics and students with tools to enhance their understanding of multicultural issues and equip them with skills to improve reporting practice” (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2007b). To this end it published five curriculum modules designed “to provide journalism trainers in universities and industry with realistic scenarios to assist in increasing cultural awareness amongst reporters and to improve reporting practice in story selection and the treatment of material involving people from diverse ethnic communities” (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2007a). Questions posed in the Cronulla riots case study included:

- Can a “tolerant” society also be racist?
- Should journalists report tensions between ethnic groups in a community? Why?
- Do media have a role in making audiences more culturally aware? Why?
- Is there a difference between a person born here of ethnic descent and someone who migrates to Australia? Why?
- Are the expectations on citizens born in Australia different to immigrants? (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2007a)

Like the previously discussed CAJ reports, the tone here is exploratory rather than prescriptive, and the process of identifying best practices is approached through engagement with complex issues and raising questions. And while the Reporting Diversity project doesn’t provide an overall set of best practice recommendations, which perhaps diminishes its utility for practitioners and students, a report associated with the project about reporting terrorism offers 12 tips for journalists reporting on terrorism-related events, terrorists, and suspected terrorists (Ewart, 2010).

Reporting Suicide

The final case study comes from the Australian Press Council. Established in 1976, the Australian Press Council describes itself "as the principal body that sets and monitors standards of good practice for the publication of news and comment in Australian newspapers, magazines and their associated websites" (Australian Press Council, 2012). It is also main body that "considers complaints about reporting of news and comment across this range of publications."

But while the Council issues adjudications which newspapers are encouraged to publish, it has no actual power to enforce its finding, and is largely funded by newspaper publishers, which has contributed to its reputation as a ''toothless tiger'' (Hyland, 2012), see also (Taylor, 2011). But since 2009, through its chairman, Julian Disney, the APC has endeavoured to extend its role from being primarily a complaints handler to playing a leading role in revising and improving standards within the media industry, with a special focus on the internet (Australian Press Council, 2011b).

The Council's jurisdiction includes both the print and online publications of its members. But in 2010 Disney noted that the Council was receiving more complaints about online content, which challenged the existing standards that were developed for print publications. He also argued that "the assertion by many editors that the same standards should apply to print and Internet does not appear to be appropriate or realistic in all circumstances. Certainly it is not always being applied in practice, even by some who espouse it" (Disney, 2010).

These themes would go on to be widely discussed in the Australian media before and during the subsequent Media Inquiry hearings (Holmes, 2011; Burrowes, 2011; Dwyer & Martin, 2011; Martin, 2011b).

The first report from the APC's Standards project is the [Press Council guidelines on the reporting of suicide] (Australian Press Council, 2011). The Standards relating to Suicide were developed:

> through extensive consultation with the print and electronic media, mental health professionals and service providers who offer support to those at risk of suicide. The Standards cover general reporting and discussion, whether to report an individual instance, reporting the method and location, reporting with responsibility and balance, reporting with sensitivity and moderation, and sources of assistance (Australian Press Council, 2011).

The report specifically addressed the reality that traditional media no longer controls the reporting of suicide. In an article in the Melbourne newspaper *The Age*, Disney explained that: "The likelihood that people will find out about a suicide through social media is very, very high … This highlights the need for the mainstream media to be engaged in responsible reporting" (Griffin & O'Malley, 2011). The same article pointed out that the release of the guidelines meant that "the journalistic euphemism for suicide – 'police said there were no suspicious circumstances' - may fade away now that the new guidelines acknowledge that reporting suicide can be of public benefit”. But the same article also points out that the report “urged journalists and editors to publish only after seeking permission from family or friends, and only in ways that do not encourage copycats” (Griffin & O'Malley, 2011).

The next planned installment in the APC's Standards project will provide guidelines relating to contacting patients in hospitals and nursing homes (*Independent Inquiry into Media and Media Regulation - Public Hearings*, 2011).

Analysis

In light of the examples outlined in the case studies, what does “best practices” look like? What common principles do these cases share? Although the Australian case studies are limited in the extent to which they address digital media issues directly, these “best practices” cases can be usefully seen, to varying degrees, as being part of the development of an “open ethics”. In “Towards an open ethics: Implications of new media platforms for global ethics discourse” Ward and Wasserman (2010) discuss what they describe as a continuum between open and closed ethics (p. 278).

The best practice case studies discussed in this article are all at the “open” end of the Ward/Wasserman continuum in important respects.

To decide whether the practice of ethics by a group is closed or open, they suggest looking at three features: who are the intended users of the ethics, who participates in ethical discourse and decisions, and who determines and modifies the content of the ethic. “The evaluation of an open ethics is based not only on who participates but also on the quality and meaningfulness of that participation (p. 277). The terms “closed” and “open”, they argue, “do not refer to the content of the ethics in question, for example, the principles of a code of ethics. They refer to how principles are discussed and who controls that discussion (pp. 276-277). An open ethics seeks to be inclusive, broadening discussion and meaningful participation to as many people as possible – whether they are considered members or non-members of a group. A closed ethics, meanwhile does not regard participation with non-members as essential (p. 278).

The best practice case studies discussed in this article are all at the “open” end of the Ward/Wasserman continuum in important respects. In the North American cases there is an emphasis on identifying and discussing emerging practices rather than with providing fixed and immutable rules. This acknowledges that the principles and practices put forward are framed as part of an ongoing conversation, not simply as edicts. Secondly, many of the best practices identified are designed to facilitate enhanced interaction with readers and audiences. This is consistent with the virtues of modesty and tentativeness that Borden suggests are crucial to support the regenerative capacities of journalism (Borden, 2007, p. 78). And, thirdly, by citing specific examples of how these practices are already being realised (as well as where they're not), they are demonstrating, to restate Ward, “a method or model for applying these aims and principles to concrete situations and issues” (Ward, 2011c, p. 68). Take, for instance, the first of the emerging best practices identified by the CAJ’s digital accuracy and corrections report: “Helping Readers Report Errors” which aims to use digital technology to make “every reader a fact checker” (English, 2011).

Most of the case studies discussed here involve journalists in the process, if not in developing the guidelines themselves, then by providing a forum to react to them. For instance, the Reporting Suicide initiative received substantial media coverage, and raised discussion amongst journalists. It was also the subject of an ABC radio current affairs documentary feature. One concern expressed in this program by journalist Chris Uhlmann was that the report hadn’t clarified some of the issues of reporting suicide (Metherell, 2012).

The discussion that the reporting suicide guidelines has generated is consistent with Ward and Wasserman’s concept of “open ethics” and many of the attributes of “best practice” discussion as outlined in the Center for Social Media’s Scan and Analysis project (Aufderheide et al., 2009). And while it’s beyond the scope of this paper to fully assess the impact of the different case studies, it’s worth noting how the Reporting Suicide report itself became a reference point in media discussions after news broke in late 2011 that former cricketer and broadcaster Peter Roebuck had taken his own life. The former leader of the New South Wales Liberal Party took exception to the reporting of Roebuck’s suicide because the method of his suicide was discussed: “I don’t know if it’s because he’s a high-profile person so there’s a blood lust, but to publicly write and talk about the means by which he committed suicide, not the fact that he committed suicide, was an extraordinary breach of the guidelines the media have” (Metherell, 2011).

The (mostly) common characteristics, then, of the best practices initiatives discussed here can be summarized as follows. They:

- Identify emerging situations – in each instance the case studies are attempting to address moving targets.
- Share findings – The guidelines, and in all cases here, the rationale behind them, are accessible by the public.
- Foster collaboration – none of these projects could have been realized solely through the expertise of a single group.
- Suggest rather than prescribe – problems are being addressed and discussed rather than solved.
- Consult – all of these projects use expertise and engagement with communities to develop guidelines.
- Enhance media literacy – the reports are designed to provide guidelines to

journalists and other content producers that will improve interactions with their users/audiences.

- Regenerate – the case studies connect back to the practices linked to tradition by exploring emerging practices.

Discussion

So where might the concept of best practices get us? What is the potential application of the case studies as models for how journalism itself can regenerate? These are timely questions in Australia. At the time of writing, discussions about ethics, regulation and accountability have been brought to a head in the wake of the recently published Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Media and Media Regulation (Inquiry hereafter) (Finkelstein, 2012) that concluded that self-regulation wasn’t working.

To address this, it made the highly controversial recommendation to establish a government-funded statutory authority to be called the News Media Council with the power to enforce news standards across all news media outlets and platforms, including online. “In appropriate cases, the News Media Council should have power to require a news media outlet to publish an apology, correction or retraction, or afford a person a right to reply. This is in line with the ideals contained in existing ethical codes but in practice often difficult to obtain,” the report stated. (Finkelstein, 2012), adding that these proposals “are made at a time when polls consistently reveal low levels of trust in the media, when there is declining newspaper circulation, and when there are frequent controversies about media performance” (p. 281).

How is this related to best practices? Notwithstanding the case studies discussed in this paper, in Australia the discussion about best practices for journalism has often been an internal, fragmented, ad hoc process involving only limited engagement with the public or non-media stakeholders. But the Inquiry – perhaps inadvertently – provided precisely the right circumstances to stage a more open national debate.

In many respects the Inquiry is a product of, and an expression of the kinds of challenges to journalism ethics that were outlined in the introduction to this paper. In particular, it is about extending ethics to different platforms, while the proposal for a regulatory body for all platforms is recognition of a crisis of journalism ethics.

The Inquiry was called by Australia’s Labor government in September 2011 following revelations that journalists at the *News of the World*, a newspaper owned by News International, the English subsidiary of News Corporation, had engaged in phone hacking of politicians, murder victims, footballers and entertainers. This provoked calls in Australia for the establishment of a wide-ranging investigation into the media. It was not suggested that News Limited, the Australian subsidiary of News Corporation, had engaged in similar practices. But the leader of the Greens, Senator Brown, called for a general inquiry into the newspaper industry”(Finkelstein, 2012, p. 15).

Another rationale for the Inquiry was that it would support an independent Convergence Review, also established by the Australian Government, "to examine the policy and regulatory frameworks that apply to the converged media and communications landscape in Australia" (2011a). The Convergence Review report, which was released on April 30, 2012 (Department of Broadband Communications and the Digital Economy, 2012), recommended and "industry-led body to oversee journalistic standards for news and commentary across all platforms" (ABC News, 2012) but at the time of writing the government had yet to respond to its recommendations.

This Media Inquiry is potentially of interest beyond Australia not because of what was discovered (nothing as lurid as what has been uncovered by the Leveson inquiry), but because of the disconnects that it revealed within a system that hasn't adapted to the transformative processes reshaping the media. The cracks were especially exposed when it came to discussions how accountability and standards might apply to online news media.

Some background: Australia's mediascape is "similar but different" to that of other English-speaking Western countries. News Limited is said to control around 70 % of the national newspaper market – though the precise figure is disputed in some quarters (Manne, 2011). Most of the other major dailies, including the Melbourne and Sydney broadsheets *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, as well as the *Australian Financial Review* are the leading mastheads of the only other large print-based group, Fairfax. In an article in *The Australian*, the Federal Government's Chief Whip, Joel Fitzgibbon wrote: "Together News Limited and Fairfax hold 86% of the daily newspaper circulation. This represents the highest level of market concentration in the developed world, dwarfing the situation in Britain, where the top two hold 54% of the market" (Fitzgibbon, 2012).

The publicly-funded national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (hereafter ABC) plays a role commensurate in many respects with that of the BBC in the UK and the CBC in Canada. It is consistently identified – including in the report of the Inquiry – as the most trusted media organization in the country (Finkelstein, 2012). The extent of this trust can be directly connected to the broadcaster's attempts to address issues of transparency and accountability. Under the stewardship of Managing Director Mark Scott, for instance, a Director of Editorial Standards has been appointed (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2006) and the organization's weekly "Media Watch" TV program includes criticisms of the ABC's own programs in its coverage of contentious media issues (Brady, 2010). Commercial broadcast media includes three commercial free-to-air TV networks, each of which have recently launched digital channels, the multicultural broadcaster SBS (Special Broadcasting Service), cable, and array of commercial and public radio stations.

Online news media includes niche players such as the media, marketing and entertainment website *mUmbrella*, *The Conversation*, a not-for-profit which is "an independent source of information, analysis and commentary from the university and research sector – written by acknowledged experts and delivered directly to the public"

(The Conversation, 2011), and Private Media, which publishes several daily news and business websites, including *Crikey*, *The Power Index*, *and* *Smart Company*. In February 2012 the philanthropically-funded news and features website *The Global Mail* was launched with the mission of delivering deliver “original, fearless, independent journalism”. But one concern voiced at the Inquiry is that the web in Australia is still dominated by the brands of major print and broadcasts outlets (Dwyer, Martin, & Dunn, 2011).

While the code of ethics developed by Australia’s journalists union (Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance) is intended to apply to all journalists regardless of platform, it hasn’t been updated since 1997, and does not specifically address online issues. TV and radio are covered by the Code of Practice of the Commercial Television Industry the Codes of Practice and Guidelines of Commercial Radio Australia. Broadcasters are also regulated through the statutory body the Australian Communications and Media Authority, the Standards of Practice of the Australian Press Council currently apply to the online sites of newspaper mastheads, but before 2012, only one internet-only publication was a member, and therefore nearly all web-only publications were not been bound by its standards. However, at the time of writing, it has been reported that four online-only sites had become members (Leys, 2012).

The array of codes for Australia’s media espouse many common principles, as academic and former journalist Dennis Muller (2011) noted in his submission to the Inquiry. These include:

- Honesty in obtaining and presenting material;
- Fairness in dealing and in portraying;
- Independence, expressed as fidelity to the ideal of publishing without fear or favour;
- Integrity, for example in avoiding or declaring conflicts of interest;
- Respect for confidences, privacy and grief;
- Respect for all people regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, colour, religion or political belief;
- Transparency in dealing with people and in disclosing the origins of material;
- Responsibility in protecting freedom of expression and in using the freedom for good.

While similar to journalistic codes in other countries, Muller (2011) notes that “there is no specific application to online platforms other than those operated by media organizations that one way or another are party to one of the existing codes.”

Although the Inquiry's main focus was the Australian press, it also raised issues relating to online media. The Issues Paper (Department of Broadband Communications and the Digital Economy, 2011a) circulated ahead of the Inquiry in September 2011 set the scene for the ensuing discussion by raising a series of questions about standards and regulation. Those relating to online media included:

3 - Is it appropriate that media outlets conform to standards of conduct or codes of practice? For example, should standards such as those in the Australian Press Council's Statements of Principles (1999) apply to the proprietors of print and online media?

6 - To what extent, if any, does the increased use of online platforms affect the applicability or usefulness of existing standards of conduct or codes of practice?

7 - Can and should the standards of conduct or codes of practice that apply to the traditional print media also apply to the online media?

9.1 - Is there effective self-regulation of (a) print media and (b) online media by the Australian Press Council?

9.2 - What are the Australian Press Council's strengths and limitations as a regulator of those two forms of publication?

These issues were distilled especially in the first of the four terms of reference for the Inquiry: "The effectiveness of the current media codes of practice in Australia, particularly in light of technological change that is leading to the migration of print media to digital and online platforms" (Department of Broadband Communications and the Digital Economy, 2011a).

A number of submissions addressed perceived systemic shortcomings. One commonly-expressed view was that a non platform-specific set of guidelines was necessary. In his submission, Professor Mark Pearson pointed to:

"the confusing array of self-regulatory and co-regulatory documents guiding ethical standards of journalists and their outlets in this country" (Pearson, 2011). What is needed, he argued, is "a single ethical principles document should be developed in collaboration with the existing co-regulatory and self-regulatory bodies to provide an agreed professional platform for Australian journalism." These points were amplified by Muller's submission, which also stressed the fragmentation and irregularity "of the entire media accountability system" (Muller, 2011).

While many espoused the importance of a uniform cross-platform code, a submission to the inquiry from the University of Sydney's Media Studies department also argued for more focus on online practices. While "the [Press] Council's Statements of Principles could usefully apply to both print and online, it needs specific guidelines formulated to clarify the new relationship between media outlets and their users in online publications" (Dwyer et al., 2011). It suggested that these new guidelines could usefully address the responsibilities and obligations of outlets “to correct, amend, retract or otherwise modify online content, where that material is persistent, inaccurate and damaging to the subject”; to user-collaborators “whose comments, photographs or other creative works are published online”; and ”to moderate online discussion, and publish codes of contribution, to ensure civil communication between user-collaborators” (Dwyer et al., 2011).

But one of the authors of the submission argued that the onus was also on online publishers themselves to develop “best practices” policies. In a commentary piece published during the Inquiry she wrote: “While Justice Finkelstein ponders whether self-regulation is the best option for a digitizing print media, there are three obvious things that online publishers could do right now to improve media accountability – beyond a greater institutional investment in self-monitoring”: facilitate greater transparency, develop more responsive interactions with users, and develop better moderation policies. “The codes of conduct and standards that govern the print industry haven’t been updated to respond to the era of interactivity and user generated content” (Martin, 2011a).

In a report written for the APC investigating operational, legal and ethical trends in convergent and online news production and consumption Martin and Dwyer suggest that this is problematic because it’s not clear how standards, principles and guidelines developed for print can be applied in online contexts:

> The increased volume and speed of publication that is enabled online, alongside the competitive pressure to publish more rapidly, can adversely impact on the accuracy and depth of online news. Online-only publishers, bloggers and news aggregators have not been part of a comprehensive media content regulation environment and thus their journalism has not been subject to consistent oversight. Yet their work appears in online formats otherwise indistinguishable from that of Council members. (Martin & Dwyer, 2012)

In her Inquiry submission, journalist and academic Margaret Simons argued that there was a more general problem with the framing of the issues of new media, expressing concern at “the tendency, both in the inquiry’s issues paper and the majority of submissions, to frame new media as the source of all evil and entirely a threat to standards, rather than exploring the potential positive impact on transparency, accountability and media diversity” (Simons, 2011).

A similar view has since been advanced with even more vigor in the British context. As Media Standards Trust Director Martin Moore put it: “Mainstream media should learn lessons on standards on openness and transparency from digital publishers including key industry bloggers, tweeters and citizen journalists … UK journalism needs to see various structural crises as an opportunity to rebuild itself from the ground up”’(McAthy, 2012).

Whether or not the proposed News Media Council is realised, or the Press Council revamped, or some other form of self-regulation is fashioned, a more coherent process for identifying online best practices in Australia will need to be addressed by industry bodies, media institutions, and publishers of online content.

> ***Whether or not the proposed News Media Council is realised, or the Press Council revamped, or some other form of self-regulation is fashioned, a more coherent process for identifying online best practices in Australia will need to be addressed both by industry bodies and media institutions.***

What can be learned from elsewhere? The North American "best practices" case studies discussed in this paper all have potential application to the Australian context. To quote from the *Scan and Analysis* report:

> While many of the best practice examples reviewed in the body of this report are targeting audiences at the level of the local community or those aligned around niche interests and identities, these practices can be used by traditional news organizations and others to engage publics at a national level, or even across national and cultural boundaries. Transnational and global online journalism projects can serve as both partners and models for public broadcasters. (Aufderheide et al, 2009)

And it's potentially a two-way street. Though not intentionally global in focus, the Australian case studies on reporting diversity and reporting suicide could prove to be useful reference points for similarly-themed projects in other countries. Ward has acknowledged the desirability of a global goal with his proposal for a theory of global media ethics: "My theory operates deliberately at this high level of generality so as to be a theory with a chance of crossing borders. The theory is designed to be tolerant of differences in ethics, in culture, and in media systems" (Ward, 2011b, p. 745).

> ***Though not intentionally global in focus, the Australian case studies on reporting diversity and reporting suicide could prove to be useful reference points for similarly-themed projects in other countries.***

A potential concern for the term "best practices", though, is that like "ethics" – perhaps more than "ethics" in some circumstances – its meaning is highly contingent on context. What might be a useful framing device in one country, or even the West in general, may not work elsewhere. In the abstract for his book *Best Practices of Journalism in Asia*, Eric Loo argues that "discussions on what constitutes 'best practices' of journalism in the Asian context are ideologically polarized", and that "best practices is thus perceived and understood according to divergent expectations of what functions the media ought to serve in different societies" (Loo, 2009).

This doesn’t mean, however, that “best practices” is a framing device that won’t travel – especially in the increasingly porous digital world. A version of Ward’s call for an “ethical flourishing”, driven in part by cosmopolitanism, appears to be unfolding at both ends of the Pacific.

Another concern with the term “best practices” has recently been put forward by Carrie Lozano. Discussing the recently released report “Collective Work: Best Practices for Collaborative Investigative Reporting” that she co-authored in a post in *MediaShift* she states that “best practices”

> is a highfalutin’ term we used in our proposal to the Knight Foundation just as our office, the Investigative Reporting Program at U.C. Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism (IRP), was about to launch into “Post Mortem,” a collaboration about death investigation in America with PBS Frontline, ProPublica and NPR. In retrospect, “blueprint” would have been a better term to use than “best practices,” since we all know that there’s rarely one draft of a blueprint.” (Lozano, 2012).

While Lozano may have a point, in another sense her implication that identifying “best practices” is a complex and ongoing process is consistent with the point emphasized in the North American case studies that there’s an element of “work in progress” when identifying best practices in an emerging contexts – in other words, to return to Borden, such attempts must embody the characteristic of tentativeness “which simply acknowledges the interim nature of knowledge” (2007 p. 79).

Another possible objection to the term being deployed as a framing device is that “best practices” is simply another way of talking about ethics. As Ward has argued: “Ethics is sometimes identified with an inflexible set of rules and self-righteous moralizing. It is said that rules are rules – an action is either right or wrong. It either breaks a rule or it doesn’t. This view over-simplifies ethical thinking” (Ward, 2010).

True, but perhaps one advantage of the term “best practices” is that it circumvents this potential misconception. It implies the uncertainty surrounding ethical behavior and that there is a strong communal element to ethical practices, while avoiding a decline into instrumental consequentialism. Tonally, “best practices” is normative without being rigidly prescriptive.

Even if the meanings and connotations of “ethics” and “best practices” overlap, the case studies presented in this paper support the contention that “best practices” may provide a more productive way to frame the debates that appear to be out of control in Australia, and suggest a more coherent way of thinking about some of the issues raised by Australia’s Media Inquiry.

In any event, the ambiguity of the term might not be a bad thing. The web is crawling with sites claiming to provide lists of “best practices” that don’t necessarily imply ethical behaviour or ethical content – the term can relate to questions of efficiency, expediency, and commercial considerations of market share – see, for instance, Facebook's best practice guide for journalists (Lavrusik & Cameron, 2011), or "6 Best Practices for SEO" (Everhart, 2011) which, like many other posts on the popular site *Mashable*, points users to what are claimed to be the most effective ways to enhance their visibility online.

… the blurring between the different meanings of the term "best practices" could help synergize elements of ethics and efficiency.

Yet the content of these posts isn't necessarily incompatible with the quest to enhance ethical practice. Indeed there may be some synergies at play. Think of a blogger publishing material about how best to attribute sources. Won't she be more effective in sharing her views with a broader audience if she understands which keywords to embed in her URL, or what hashtag to include with her tweet about the article, what tags and will enhance searchability?

In other words, the blurring between the different meanings of the term "best practices" could help synergise elements of ethics and efficiency. While it's beyond the scope of this paper to provide a systematic study of how the term "best practices" is used in association with journalism, most of the main listings found in the first results page of a Google search of "best practices journalism" lead to items that discuss "best practice" in a context of ethics and excellence. For bloggers and other content producers who are not professional journalists, the term "best practices" may be more tangible than "ethics" – providing a situation comparable to the scenario presented in a 1990 Australian television commercial for the cereal known in Australia as Sultana Bran, where a young man derides "health food" not realising that the cereal he's devouring is, you guessed it, Sultana Bran. "Kellogg's Sultana Bran – don't mention it's healthy and they'll eat it by the boxful", is the ad's tagline.

It might seem crass and patronizing to apply this "spoonful of sugar" principle to a cohort of journalists working for a large media organization. But this isn't a call to dumb down ethics: rather, what's being suggested is exploring the potential utility of a term affirming the qualities associated with ethics at a time when most people publishing content online have no training in or professional experience of mainstream journalism. Writing about ethics codes and privacy in the digital media age, Ginny Whitehouse concludes that "citizen journalists, bloggers, and even those making comments on mainstream news pages do not have the same expectation to follow journalism ethics codes" (Whitehouse, 2010, p. 324) also quoted in (Lazaroiu, 2011). But, she argues, if these standards can be embedded into journalism practice, "then expectations about privacy and nonmainstream digital forums might be strengthened" (p. 324).

As already argued, even professional journalists must grapple with the fact that traditional codes often lag behind media practices, especially when content is produced outside of the institutional norms, processes and structures of traditional media. Therefore, notions of "ethics" become difficult to operationalize without ongoing explorations of best practices.

Conclusion

The Center for Social Media team are right: “best practices” really is “more than a buzz phrase” (Aufderheide et al., 2009). A greater focus on identifying and developing best practices could be productively deployed to step around and even resolve some of the debate recently seen in Australia around press freedom and regulation. There has been a tendency to couch debate in absolute terms: on the one side advocating unfettered freedom of the press, and on the other, calling for regulation of the press because self-regulation hasn’t worked.

This is a false opposition – partly because this is not really what is at stake. The discussions about best practices developed in North America and, to a lesser degree in Australia, suggest a different approach; one in which the industry, in association with the public, works to develop an open ethics as part of its own housekeeping and to ensure the relevance of these ideas to new and emerging platforms and practices.

There is also an opportunity for journalism educators to develop new strategies for instilling ethical values by emphasizing excellence through practice.

There is also an opportunity for journalism educators to develop new strategies for instilling ethical values by emphasizing excellence through practice. Ward usefully addresses this by suggesting five main principles for teaching journalism ethics in the digital age: start from the students’ media world; assist students with reflective engagement; insist on critical thinking, not what is fashionable; be transitional; and be global in your teaching (Ward, 2011a).

This author’s own experience at La Trobe University is that it is especially important that the curriculum of journalism degrees engages with how students produce and consume media in and outside of the classroom. What we’ve discovered is that this is often best realised in subjects where “ethics” is not the explicit focus, and where the teaching method is collaborative, not instructional. For instance students who enrol in our new final-year subject Online Editing and Publishing, where they take on roles in the editorial team of the site *upstart*, develop (and bring to the group) a grasp of best practices issues not through formal classes, but in their daily collaborations with their classmates and academic staff in a practicum.[1]

In other words, the ethical instincts we want to instil in our students are often forged by activating and exploring best practices principles into the routine questions that come with daily digital publishing. Should we have run the comment from a reader who called the author of a post about Lady Gaga (De Neef, 2010) a “massive douche”? Yes, as it happened:[2] the post and subsequent exchange were published in early 2010 and are now discussed with each semester’s students as a model of what issues should be considered when moderating comments from readers.

To return to the question raised by the second-year student at the start of this paper. She'd posted a YouTube video that wasn't from the actual YouTube site on her blog and wanted to know if this was all right. I couldn't answer her directly because I didn't know the answer, or even if there was one single answer. It depended on the context. (As it happens, the Center for Social Media's Fair Use report points to widespread uncertainties amongst the sample of journalists surveyed on the use of video on the web) (Aufderheide & Jaszi, 2012).

Perhaps what we have really learnt is that it's only by engaging students – and staff – in a reflective process to identify the best practices of journalism that you end up with the best questions.

Endnotes

1. I say more about this *upstart* and it's impact on our curriculum in (Zion, 2010)

2. The author, Matt de Neef, responded with "Hi Georgina. Thanks for taking the time to leave your thoughts. I'm interested to know exactly what it was that evoked such a strong and, some would say, rather personal reaction to this piece?"

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From Student Journalists to Local News Entrepreneurs: A Case Study of *Technically Media*

Mark Berkey-Gerard

This case study of *Technically Media*, a media consultancy and publisher of the local technology blog *TechnicallyPhilly.com*, seeks to gain a systemic understanding of key entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, and behaviors demonstrated at an online news startup and to investigate how one particular group of young journalists developed those core competencies in their educational and work experiences. It offers suggestions for how entrepreneurial values and practices can be incorporated into a journalism curriculum.

In 2009, Christopher Wink, Sean Blanda, and Brian James Kirk – three aspiring journalists in their early 20s – faced a humbling reality: their undergraduate degrees, internships, awards, and news clips were not enough to land a full-time journalism job, at least not the kind of job they wanted. So the three Temple University graduates cobbled together $250 to purchase a few website domain names and a small-business license and launched their own online news venture. One staff member recalled:

> It was shear desperation and fear. All three of us saw ourselves as more above average journalists, more than above average writers, [and] above average in everything we did. For us not to have people on their knees begging for us caused a lot of humility. We felt like we had to do something (C. Wink, personal communication, June 11, 2011).

Today, Wink, Blanda, and Kirk run a company that has been described as “a prototype plucked from an entrepreneurial journalism textbook” (Slocum, 2009). They publish the blog *TechnicallyPhilly.com* and cover technology-related businesses, issues, and policy in the Philadelphia region. They organize Philly Tech Week, an annual event that draws more than 4,000 participants and generates enough revenue from sponsorships to fund the online publication. They have secured philanthropic grants to report on digital divide issues and to create web-based and mobile applications using city government data. They also provide media consulting to other nonprofit and news organizations seeking to build online content and web audiences.

Technically Media is still a small business, generating approximately $250,000 in revenue annually, but it is profitable enough to employ the three co-founders and an additional reporter. And unlike many local news startups that have launched in recent years, it has a business model that does not rely heavily on advertising, outside investment, or large foundation grants.

This paper is an in-depth case study of *Technically Media*, a media consultancy and publisher of *TechnicallyPhilly.com*. The purpose is to gain a systemic understanding of key entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, and behaviors required at an online news startup and to investigate how one particular group of young journalists developed those core competencies in their educational and work experiences. The research also seeks insight into how entrepreneurial values and practices that might be incorporated into a journalism curriculum.

While it is a limited study of a single organization with small staff and budget, it has relevance for wider discussions of entrepreneurial journalism and education. *Technically Media* plays a significant role in the Philadelphia news ecosystem, serving as a connector to dozens of local and niche online publications. Because the co-founders launched the business with minimal professional experience, this research provides a unique assessment of their university journalism education and training. By placing the experiences of *Technically Media* in a framework of entrepreneurial learning outcomes, the case study offers practical suggestions for journalism educators.

Literature Review

The study builds on previous research on entrepreneurial journalism education (Baines & Kennedy, 2010; De Burgh, 2003; Deuze, 2006; Hunter & Nel, 2011) and online news startups. An overview of *Technically Media* and *Technically Philly* provides history and context.

Entrepreneurial Journalism Education

Entrepreneurship has been defined as the ability to apply a set of behaviors, attitudes, and skills to a successful business venture (Herrmann, 2010). Lazear (2003) argues that an entrepreneur must be competent in a wide range of skills, rather than a specialist. Research also suggests that the motivation for launching a company is not merely financial, but also emotional (Wadhwa, Aggarwal, Holly, & Salkever, 2009). Gibb (2005) proposes an educational framework of entrepreneurial learning outcomes that identifies 12 key entrepreneurial capacities: opportunity seeking, initiative taking, ownership of a development, commitment to see things through, personal locus of control, intuitive decision making with limited information, networking capacity, strategic thinking, negotiation capacity, selling/persuasive capacity, achievement orientation, and incremental risk taking.

Increasingly, entrepreneurship is a stated goal of journalism education. Courses and advanced degrees in entrepreneurial journalism are offered at many universities

(Benkoil, 2010; Chung, 2011; Jarvis, 2010; Paley Center for Media, 2010). Workshops, textbooks, and instructional resources aim to provide business skills and training to journalism students and mid-career professionals (Briggs, 2012; Buttry, 2010; Entrepreneurial Journalism Education, 2010; Gillmor, 2010; McLellan, 2009). There is a growing body of research on the challenges and benefits of not only preparing journalism students to gain employment in the news industry, but to pioneer new products and business models (Baines & Kennedy, 2010; De Burgh, 2003; Deuze, 2006). Hunter and Nel (2011) argue that entrepreneurial journalism education involves more than merely adding business courses to a journalism curriculum, but requires opportunities for students to practice the attributes associated with entrepreneurship in a news publication setting.

Online News Startups

It is impossible to accurately assess the number of independent online news ventures launched in the United States in recent years. The increasing breakdown of the boundaries between news producers and the audience and the use of traditional press tools by citizens to gather and distribute information has helped local online news outlets proliferate (Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Outing, 2005; Rosen, 2008). J-Lab has created a database of more than 1,200 local news startups in the U.S. (Schaffer, 2011). The *Columbia Journalism Review* has profiled more than 250 new online news websites (Stivers, 2012). In her research, McLellan (2010) surveyed 800 web publications and identified a list of “promising online local news sites” that demonstrate journalistic content, practices, engagement, frequency and a serious attempt to develop a sustainable business model (McLellan, 2010). McLellan also divided these startups into subcategories for more precise classification, including “niche” websites that are characterized by a tight focus on a specific topic. Niche news sites can also be geographically specific to a region, city, community, or neighborhood. *Technically Philly* defines itself as both a “niche” and a “local” online news publication. Regional technology news websites and blogs similar to *Technically Philly* have also sprung up in Minnesota, Portland, Omaha, Des Moines, and Kansas City (Engle, 2012).

Overview of Technically Media and Technically Philly

Blanda, Kirk, and Wink founded *Technically Media* in February 2009. The company describes itself as a media consultancy that provides content and editorial strategies for businesses, news organizations, and nonprofit organizations. Their slogan boasts: “We build audiences” (Technically Media, 2012). *Technically Media* is the parent company of *TechnicallyPhilly.com,* a regional technology blog for the Philadelphia metropolitan area. *Technically Philly* provides news on local and regional startup businesses, venture capital, social media, web design and development, digital access, science and math education, and technology-related government policy (Technically Philly, 2012). *Technically Philly* publishes five days a week and attracts approximately 25,000 unique visitors a month. A 2011 readers survey identified *Technically Philly’s* target audience as affluent young people who work in the technology, science, and media industries; approximately 70% of readers are in their 20s or 30s and 63% earn $50,000 or more annually. Nearly half of readers said they visit *Technically Philly* at least once a day (Technically Media, 2012b).

In 2011, the company generated approximately $250,000 in revenue; about 51% of *Technically Media* revenue comes from consulting, 35% from philanthropic grants, 12% from events, and 2% from advertising. The fastest growing source of revenue is events.

As a consultancy, *Technically Media* assists clients in creating editorial content for websites, blogs, and social media. Consulting clients include the National Constitution Center, a museum located on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, *PlanPhilly.com,* a nonprofit news website that covers issues of land use and zoning, *CampusPhilly.org*, an organization that provides information and services to college students, and *PhiladelphaSportsDaily.com,* a local sports blog (Technically Media, 2012).

Technically Media hosts multiple events related to technology, media, and news, which has helped establish its unique role in the Philadelphia news ecosystem (Anderson, 2012). Philly Tech Week, the company's signature event, draws more than 4,000 participants to 70 events (Armstrong, 2011). Since 2009, the company has also hosted BarCamp News Innovation, an annual one-day "unconference" on online journalism that follows a format of participatory, user-generated workshops. Lail (2010) described the attendees of BarCamp News Innovation as an eclectic group of "news and technology geeks, seasoned traditional journalists trying to refashion careers, software developers with visions of the future, mainstream journalists looking outside their box, [and] enthusiastic journalism students full of hope and ambition and others just eager to carve a space in the media landscape."

> ***About 51% of Technically Media revenue comes from consulting, 35% from philanthropic grants, 12% from events, and 2% from advertising. The fastest growing source of revenue is events.***

Technically Media has received grant support to cover digital divide issues and to advocate for public access and applications for government and non-city data. In 2011, *Technically Media* received $82,500 from the William Penn Foundation to cover the "open data movement" in Philadelphia. Grants from J-Lab have funded coverage of the city's plan to expand broadband to underserved neighborhoods, a database of abandoned property in Philadelphia, and the creation of mobile application for locating Wi-Fi hotspots in the city (Schaffer, 2011).

Future plans for the company include expanding its regional technology blog into other markets. In 2012, the organization launched a new publication, *Technically Baltimore,* to test if the model can be replicated in another location. *Technically Philly* is also exploring a paid membership program that would provide members with discounted events and access to a database of local investors.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed to gain insight into how entrepreneurship is developed in the context of a local, niche online news venture and how those practices might inform a journalism curriculum.

RQ1: What domain-specific skills and knowledge has the staff of *Technically Media* developed in the launch and operation of the online news venture?

RQ2: How has the staff of *Technically Media* acquired the skills and knowledge required for the launch and operation of the online news venture?

RQ3: How have key entrepreneurial capacities shaped the business model and strategies of *Technically Media*?

RQ4: What are the recommendations for integrating the skills, knowledge, and experience of *Technically Media* into a journalism curriculum?

Method

This research project is a case study of *Technically Media*. Yin (2009) defines case study research as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (p. 18). This method can be particularly useful in understanding a particular organization and how decisions are made within an organization (Berg, 2007). This study focuses on a singular organization to gain insight into entrepreneurial journalism. It relies on multiple qualitative data sources, including direct observations, interviews, and internal and public documents. The three co-founders of *Technically Media* provided the researcher with access. The researcher conducted direct observations during the week of June 13-18, 2011, and attended staff meetings, a public presentation, work sessions, and meetings with consulting clients and grant officers to understand the daily operation of the company. In addition, the co-founders provided the initial *Technically Media* business plan, a series of public presentations, internal memos, timesheets, and financial information.

The researcher conducted a total of 8.5 hours of interviews with the three co-founders. Interviews were conducted on two dates – June 15, 2011 and February 22, 2012 – at the offices of *Technically Media* at 1515 Market Street in Philadelphia. The questions were semi-standardized, which allowed for exploration of issues that emerged in the discussion (Wengraf, 2001). All interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder with the permission of the respondent and transcribed verbatim. The content of the interviews were analyzed following the five stages outlined by McCracken (1988). Each of the five stages represents a higher level of generality. The first stage identifies useful utterance on its own terms. The second stage develops expanded observations. The third stage examines interconnectedness of the observed comments. The fourth stage entails collective scrutiny of observations for patterns and themes. The fifth stage takes patterns and themes as they appear in several interviews and subjects them to analysis.

Data from all of the sources were coded and analyzed using key themes that emerged from the research study, as outlined by Lindlof and Taylor (2002).

Results

RQ1: Skills and Knowledge

The staff members of *Technically Media* report working between 50 and 70 hours a week. Staff members work from a variety of locations, including telecommuting from home, reporting in the field, working in the office, and attending events in the evenings. While the company produces a five-day a week online publication, the staff spends a significant portion of the workweek on business operations, dividing time between the publication, consulting, grants, and events.

Many of the journalism-specific skills employed by the staff are similar to those of a traditional reporter or editor. To create news content for *Technically Philly*, the researcher observed skills such as interviewing, developing sources, writing, fact checking, proofreading, exercising news judgment, and working under tight deadlines. In addition, attention to search engine optimization principles and web analytics, use of an open source content management system, website development, and social media strategies are essential to operating the independent online publication. While multimedia skills like shooting photos and video and producing information graphics are a routine aspect of the job, the staff emphasizes simplicity and practicality over high production value. The staff of *Technically Media* also engaged in discussions of ethics, policies for message boards, and the challenge of avoiding conflict of interest with companies who are advertisers or event sponsors, but are also the subject of news coverage.

Business skills observed include those often associated with the publishing side of the news industry, including contacting advertisers, meeting with potential consulting clients, budgeting, and strategic planning. In addition, staff members were involved in various aspects of grant-funded work, including producing reports for funders and managing project budgets. Staff planned for future events, including discussions of sponsorships and promotion. In their work as consultants, *Technically Media* staff operates as project managers, facilitating group sessions with client staff and coordinating tasks with outside web development firms. Finally, the routine tasks associated with running a small business – monitoring cash flow, taxes, paying vendors, and payroll – were also observed.

In interviews, *Technically Media* co-founders emphasized that the skills and knowledge required to operate the company are not particularly specialized or unique. Staff members attribute the success of the venture to the implementation of widely shared ideas. Staff members expressed this in the following ways:

> I’m a firm believer that ideas are cheap, but execution is costly. In the news ecosystem, let’s be honest, there are the same five ideas being tossed around. And the people who ballyhoo their ideas as being

> beyond pale are idiots. The hard part is execution (C. Wink, personal communication, June 15, 2011).
>
> It was a necessity. We didn't have a job. This had to make money or it was not worth our time. It's like if you kick someone off in a jungle to fend for themselves and you came back in a week and said, 'How did you learn to hunt?' It's because I'm hungry. I had to figure this out (S. Blanda, personal communication, February 22, 2012).
>
> There is no shortage of people who are smarter than we are, more accomplished than we are, better resources, better instincts, but just don't do it. Take everything way from us, but we do things. And that is what I'm most proud of (C. Wink, personal communication, June 15, 2011).

The *Technically Media* founders also acknowledged that while constant multitasking is a requirement of running a start-up, it presents significant challenges. Staff stated:

> We try to keep a wall [between news reporting and business]. If one of us sells an ad and has a business relationship, then he doesn't write content about that company. This is admittedly not sustainable for the long haul, but for a small staff and a small community it has worked for three years. (C. Wink, personal correspondence, June 15, 2011).

RQ2: Acquiring Skills and Knowledge

The staff of *Technically Media* identified several key educational experiences and work-related strategies for acquiring and developing the knowledge and skills required to launch and operate an online news venture. They valued the practical, hands-on educational and job-related opportunities more than traditional university course work.

Student publication and internships. When asked about their undergraduate education, staff referenced *The Temple News,* a twice-weekly student-run university newspaper at Temple University, as one of the most valuable undergraduate journalism experiences. Blanda, Kirk, and James all worked on the newspaper and its website, and it was at the newspaper that they formed the relationships that would lead to *Technically Media*. C. Wink (personal communication, February 22, 2012) stated:

> The great success of my college career was relationships. I met a lot of smart professors and other students that I still deal with. I saw college as a way to get to a place. I wanted to be in a big East Coast city. Temple gave that to me. I wanted to meet a lot of smart people that I can work with. Temple gave that to me.

In addition to course work and student publications, the co-founders collectively performed internships at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Philadelphia Daily News*, *Philadelphia Business Journal*, *Metro*, *Philadelphia Magazine*, *Pennsylvania Legislative Correspondents' Association*, and *Philebrity.com*. S. Blanda (personal communication, February 22, 2012) said:

> The reason I liked Temple and the reason I think historically it's a good journalism school is that they would just throw you out to internships to the *Daily News* and the *Inquirer* and you would learn how it all worked. You'd learn.

Reporting as a pathway to business knowledge. When asked how they developed their business knowledge, staff members of *Technically Media* also emphasized that they use their skills as journalists to identify the information they lack. They stated:

> Our approach has been that we don't know the information, and we are going to find out that information. It is so boring, but every business decision we have ever made, all we did was use the same process that we use when we report on technology. Who are the smart people we need to talk to? Where are the credible online resources? Everything you teach in Journalism 101 is what we did (C. Wink, personal communication, February 22, 2012).
>
> Journalism prepares you for many things. You are not afraid to talk to random people. You learn how to organize your thoughts on the fly. Even the concept of a lead is really important in selling – what is the thing I need to know? It's funny that in learning about how the business world works, we see how journalism helps you do that (S. Blanda, personal communication, February 22, 2012).

Creating forums for discussion and education. When the staff of *Technically Media* cannot find the information or expertise they need, they create forums and platforms to facilitate the transfer and sharing of knowledge. For example, the first BarCamp News Innovation event organized in 2009 was created in part so that *Technically Media* could meet others who were launching similar online journalism ventures and struggling with the same challenges. B. J. Kirk (personal communication, June 15, 2011) stated:

> We wanted to learn from others, but there wasn't any infrastructure for these conversations. So in a way we had to create it. With BarCamp, none of us wanted to travel to the middle of the country and none of us could afford it…. The conversations are so new in the industry that there was nowhere we could go to seek advice about what we were doing. So we had to look broader than just Philadelphia. There are a few other organizations like us. But it was hard to get a conversation going about what we needed to do to survive. I think we have a lot of great contacts and a lot of great

> mentors throughout the news industry in Philadelphia too, but they are not doing the consulting piece. They are not small organizations. So it was really hard to find lessons from others. So naturally, it was like if no one is going to talk about it, then we'll talk about it.

And in the same spirit, often when the *Technically Media* staff learns something new or has an insight into the business of online news, they share it with others at an event or on their personal blogs. C. Wink (personal communication, February 22, 2012) stated:

> Every time we learn something we write a blog post about it. For us, that is because that information didn't exist. So three years from now when someone is looking for it, they'll have it.

Second-jobs. Despite their successes, the staff of *Technically Media* had to work second jobs for much of the first three years in business. Blanda covered the media industry for *Vital Business Media*. Wink took a public relations job with an organization working the homeless individuals. Kirk freelanced for area weeklies, magazines, and blogs. While each staff members said they learned value skills in their other jobs, having to work a patchwork of jobs was also a difficult aspect of being an entrepreneur.

RQ3: Entrepreneurial Behaviors, Attitudes, and Skills

In observations, interviews, and documents, the researcher observed evidence of all 12 of the entrepreneurial behaviors, attitudes, and skills outlined by Gibb (2005). However, several key developments in the launch and development of *Technically Media* emerged as the most critical, including initiative and opportunity seeking in the initial launch of the site, intuitive decision making in seeking out alternative revenue sources, selling/persuasive capacity in establishing a media consultancy, networking capacity in the use of events, a personal sense of ownership in the development of the organization, and incremental risk taking in the strategic plans to move the technology blog into other markets.

Initial launch. The idea for *Technically Media* and *Technically Philly* originated from several sources. The co-founders had a general interest in technology journalism. As students, they were writing about it and building websites in various capacities. They recognized that there might be an audience for online news publication covering local technology issues after observing the popularity of events like Ignite Philly, a gathering of young professionals who make five-minute pitches for how to improve the city. After a few brief conversations, they launched *Technically Philly* and drew up a rough business plan. They emphasized the importance of setting the publication up quickly and then adapting to the response. C. Wink (personal communication, June 15, 2011) said:

> We didn't talk much about what the content would be. We said let's just do it and let it grow. February 9, 2009, tossed up a blog platform that Sean [Blanda] set up. Sean bought the domain name I believe. And let's just do it. Let's not take 18 months studying it, let's just do

> it, and see what was going to happen. And our thought was maybe we'd get a month or two in and just say there is nothing here. But that clearly wasn't the case…. In April 2009, after a month or so, we said, "Let's talk about it." We looked at it. And that business plan has a lot of things that we are doing now. The timeline was silly, but in the structure of a lot of it was there. In early 2009, it was every idea that was on the table and [let's] throw out things that don't work for us.

Facing the limits of traditional revenue generating ideas. In 2010, *Technically Media* faced the challenge that plagues many online journalism ventures: advertising revenue is not sufficient to support the news operation. This reality forced the company to more aggressively seek out new revenue streams, including event sponsorships. C. Wink (personal communication, June 15, 2011) said:

> We had really struggled with moving on the finances of *Technically Philly*. That was the hurdle. We kept coming up against our shortcomings in ad sales, in marketing, in business planning, in accounting. But we were doing well editorially. We were starting to connect with people and going to events. And we are good at that.

These events also led to more conversations with other local and niche news startups where *Technically Media* staff worked alongside the founders of other websites who were struggling with similar challenges. One possible solution, the staff thought, was to create a business services hub that could reduce overhead costs for multiple websites. The staff turned the idea into a Knight News Challenge proposal called "News Inkubator" and submitted it to the competition that funds innovative news projects. The proposal did not receive grant funding, but it eventually led to *Technically Media*'s consulting business. Staff members stated:

> Putting our ideas out there in such a broad way made us the touch point for a lot of conversations…. I think those Knight Challenges are good thought experiments. Because every once in a while you should sit back and say, 'If I had unlimited resources what would I do?' It helps to find your mission. It has helped us do that (S. Blanda, personal communication, June 15, 2011).
>
> In those conversations, in a lot of brainstorming sessions, we talked about that we could offer support for nonprofits or others. That was the seed: that there are other people who could benefit from these services (C. Wink, personal communication, June 15, 2011).

Over time it became clear to the founders that it was unlikely that *Technically Media* would receive significant outside investment or large funding grants. Staff said:

> Talking to venture capitalists for *Technically Philly*, I ask them what would it take to invest in media companies. They say, obviously it

> needs to scale and the only way it can scale is you are doing page view grabs like *Huffington Post*…. Or do what *SBnation.com* and *Bleacher Report* are doing, which is user-generated content, and then you sell against it by paying ridiculously low amounts of money [to bloggers]. And those are the only two ways that mass media has proven to scale online as far as I can tell. So investors aren't going to invest in anything that is less than that. And those models are terrible for journalism (S. Blanda, personal communication, February 22, 2012).

> Everything that we do we pitch to someone with money and they say "no." And then we end up having to tough it out and do it ourselves (B. J. Kirk, personal communication, June 15, 2011).

Selling the news process as a product. In 2010, *Technically Media* took their basic ideas about building online publications – growing audiences by offering quality information and content and developing strategies for how to convert web visitors to financial backers – to other nonprofits and businesses. S. Blanda (personal communication, June 15, 2011) described the idea in these terms:

> No matter whether you are a nonprofit or a small news site, the idea is the same. You gather these people to consume what you are writing and then you want them to do something. Traditionally, that was backwards, you subscribed, and then you read. Online, you read and then you have to subscribe or donate or purchase something or whatever. Content, at the end of the day, is marketing for something. It makes the content better if it is of journalistic value.

Technically Media landed several contracts, including one with the National Constitution Center. They built a blog platform for the museum where legal scholars, historians, and museum staff write about timely constitutional issues and current events. *Technically Media*'s goal is to instill some of the values of a news publication into a museum culture to help it extend its programming to a digital platform. In turn, the museum hopes to widen its reach, attract visitors to exhibits, and ultimately educate more people about constitutional issues. *Technically Media* had to sell the museum on the idea that it should view its online content the same way a journalist does. B. J. Kirk (personal communication, June 15, 2011) said:

> The National Constitution Center (NCC) is a great example. They have tracked over time how much less mainstream news there is about constitutional issues. They are a non-profit, non-partisan institution… so why can't NCC be a journalism publication or be seen as that? It helps their mission. It helps cover that uncovered area of constitutional issues. So I think that is what is innovative. We see being able to provide news goes beyond a news bureau.

Building an event funded online news publication. The revenue from the consulting side of the company allowed the staff to invest more time and resources into *Technically Philly*, and in particular into the larger, weeklong series of events called Philly Tech Week. By its second year, event sponsorships for Philly Tech Week and some moderate grant funding generated enough revenue to pay for the staffing of the blog and the hiring an additional reporter:

> We took the money we made in consulting and invested our time in bringing *Technically Philly* to a place where it is sustainable. With events, some modest advertising, and grant funding for journalism projects, we make money (C. Wink, personal communication, February 22, 2012).

Future of the business. For the first three and a half years, *Technically Media* was been driven by a key characteristic of an entrepreneurial venture: the founders' personal stake in the company's development. In the future, the company will have to rely more on strategies that can be implemented by new employees.

In June 2012, Blanda left the company. While all three co-founders described the departure as an amicable one, Blanda said he left in part because he thought the organization needs a more focused mission. The diverse business model has allowed *Technically Media* to survive, but it may make it difficult to grow the organization. Blanda described his decision this way:

> We have a consultancy side. We have a *Technically Philly* side. We have an events side too. If these are not developed with a cohesive strategy then they going to grow like an amoeba, slowly, as opposed to straight up the way we should. I think having a singular focus and direction is the most important thing of any business…. We need fewer leaders. I felt like I had to push harder that I am the leader or I had to get out of the way (personal communication, February 22, 2012).

The two other co-founders agreed that of *Technically Media* has company has hit a plateau and must take additional risks to continue to grow. The next test of their business model is to replicate the local technology blog and brand in other markets. In the summer of 2012, the company expanded to Baltimore. Staff said:

> In 2011, the struggle was achieving stability. And we struggled to know what the next step was. It was either going to be a lifestyle business, where we were consulting and have a handful of clients. Or we had to be really risky and put ourselves out there go more national (B. J. Kirk, personal communication, February 22, 2012).
>
> Baltimore will be a test of our model. Is it us? Is it the market? Is it the location? Is it the timing? Is it the writing? We think Baltimore

> is Philadelphia three years ago. We will open shop and see what happens (S. Blanda, personal communication, February 22, 2012).

RQ4: Journalism Curriculum/Education

When asked for recommendations for integrating their experience at *Technically Media* into a journalism curriculum, the staff said that journalism education should focus less on skill-based training for employment in the news industry and create more opportunities for students to build online publications and journalism tools as part of their educational experience. Staff members said:

> There are tons of people in my generation and slightly younger who are bitter that they followed the right path and the jobs are not available. We need to teach students to recognize when the old way doesn't work and to shift accordingly….We are not teaching students to be flexible in new ways. We are still turning out newspaper reporters. And that's a problem (S. Blanda, personal communication, February 22, 2012).

> I think the multimedia knowledge set and everything that we are using and talking about – Twitter, Facebook, Storify, Adobe Flash – all these tools are just tools. These are things that help you create or position content, but [in journalism school] you don't need to learn Adobe Flash, you need to learn to how to acquire new skills all the time (B. J. Kirk, personal communication, February 22, 2012).

> From a trade-school perspective, journalism is a hard sell. But if you infuse entrepreneurial teaching into a journalism program, it has the potential to be enlightening. Then I know how media works, how communication works, how business works, how advertising works, and how messaging works (S. Blanda, personal communication, February 22, 2012).

"We are not teaching students to be flexible in new ways. We are still turning out newspaper reporters. And that's a problem."

Staff members said that student journalists should be testing their products in the market place and exploring revenue streams beyond advertising. They stated:

> I launched a business out of that [Temple entrepreneurial journalism] class. It didn't go anywhere, and it wasn't *Technically Philly*. But I walked out of there with a media kit that I was selling to people. It was a failure, but that was so valuable. It made me think about things differently. Or it forced me to action. I wouldn't have thought I could produce something in three months. That was huge for me (B. J. Kirk, personal communication, February 22, 2012).

> Everything should be tested. Everything should be a student having an idea and testing it. The most successful computer science students and programmers build their own products and business while they are in school. They are constantly testing things, learning things, and exposed to some of the best minds in the country. Why don't we do that in journalism? (S. Blanda, personal communication, February 22, 2012).
>
> I was scared to death to sell anything, and I can sell now. It's because you can learn it. It's a practice thing. You can't teach someone to be less risk reverse, but you can teach someone to sell something, to understand your marketplace, and to research the probability of success (B. J. Kirk, personal communication, February 22, 2012).

Staff also said that even if student publications and projects do not become viable businesses, demonstrating the ability to produce something independently has become increasingly important to gaining employment with traditional news organizations. C. Wink (personal communication, February 22, 2012) put it this way:

> If *Technically Philly* was to implode tomorrow, I could probably get a job covering business or technology. [Having] that line on your resume that shows you have built something close to what you want to do is part of your education. It may become a fundamental step. Newsrooms are saying, "Before we waste our time or our business resources on you, you need to have already done something. Then maybe we'll find resources and bring you on after you've proven you can do it."

Conclusions

This case study is limited to a single organization, a few staff members, and a relatively short time frame. Any case study that relies only on information and perspectives from within the organization is inherently constrained. Future research that provides additional perspectives could bring a better understanding of the subject. For example, a comparison of the business models of *Technically Media* compared to other regional technology blogs may illustrate what is truly unique about this organization and its approach.

Yet despite the limitations of this study, a close examination of *Technically Media* offers multiple insights for news entrepreneurs and journalism educators.

Based on experiences of the founders, entrepreneurial skills and experience are increasingly a requirement for employment in the news industry. If graduates want meaningful employment, they may have to create their own jobs. Even if entrepreneurial news businesses do not survive in the long-term, the experience and track record can be significant assets in securing future employment.

Educators should find it encouraging that *Technically Media* staff cited the basics of the journalistic craft – learning how to obtain information and communicate it in an effective manner – as essential tools for acquiring business knowledge. The successes of *Technically Media* have come largely from hard work and the execution of existing ideas. In addition, many undergraduate and graduate university journalism programs already have significant assets for the development of an entrepreneurial curriculum through student publications, internships, and project-based courses. These are the learning environments that the *Technically Media* staff identified as particularly valuable.

> ***Entrepreneurial skills and experience are increasingly a requirement for employment in the news industry. If graduates want meaningful employment, they may have to create their own jobs.***

The case study also provides insight into the increasingly porous boundaries between journalism, public relations, and content creation. The skill set of an entrepreneurial journalist goes beyond the reporting, writing, and multimedia production skills required in a newsroom. Those seeking to build a successful venture will likely spend a bulk of their time on the financial aspects of their business and finding new ways to generate revenue through a diverse collection of revenue streams that connect content and audiences.

This research also supports the increasingly shared notion that journalism education should move beyond a "skill-based" approach and challenge students to become more creative and innovative. In an educational setting, adding opportunities for students to explore alternative revenue models can enhance the entrepreneurial aspects of a journalism curriculum. However, many entrepreneurial journalism courses are currently designed around advertising revenue models or encourage students to pitch ideas for products to possible investors. The experience of *Technically Media* suggests that local online news publications may be less likely to survive on advertising or to receive outside funding.

Finally, there are limits to the knowledge and experiences that even the best journalism curriculum can provide, and the experience of *Technically Media* suggests that news entrepreneurs must create their own forums and platforms for sharing information. Just as the models for news publications and revenue must continue to innovate, so must the ways in which student journalists approach the education process.

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Is This the Future of News? An Examination of *Samoa Topix*

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Mainstream online news organizations are proactively encouraging citizen journalism and commentary for democratic debate. Some have argued that by adopting tenets of public journalism, mainstream news media are embracing what have historically been viewed as alternative media practices and ignoring traditional journalistic values, such as balance, fairness and objectivity. This research examines a case study of Samoa Topix, an online news site that strongly encourages discussion and active participation in the news. In doing so, this study explores the tension between public journalism and news values, while questioning what Topix might tell us about journalism in the 21st Century.

This paper examines *Samoa Topix* as a case study of how news is created in an online, participatory context. *Samoa Topix* claims to be a “leading news community”, “continually updated”, with “thousands of sources” that gives “everyone access,” but how are these claims supported by reality and evidence on the web site? This study will explore whether *Samoa Topix*, as a case study of online news aggregation and journalistic discussion forums, offers “a more pluralist and democratic debate” (Franklin, 2008, p. 631); whether the discussion in forums relates to the news content in any way; if the news stories that *Samoa Topix* aggregates are dependent upon traditional approaches to journalism and if the news topics on *Samoa Topix* are similar to the news topics in the Samoa Observer, the national newspaper of record in Samoa. There has been much research exploring the possibilities of online journalism within the participatory and pluralist context of native reporting. This research hopes to better understand the present capabilities and limitations of online journalism through a case study of *Samoa Topix*.

What is online news?

Journalism, in the broadest sense, examines proximate topics that involve prominent individuals and have broad effects (MacDougall & Reid, 1987). Using these unique qualities as the foundation for growth, mainstream journalism has evolved into a modern bureaucratic network of organizations that aim to observe and objectively document events in a shared reality (Davis, 1996). Yet, like all cultural institutions (Williams, 1977), journalism’s norms and practices are constantly changing. The notion of journalism as a solidified foundation of institutionalized practices, such as news beats and organizational routines (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) continues to exist on one level. While some recent research has questioned this underlying presumption that all media, including newer multimedia content, is equally driven by consistent routines and norms (Keith, 2010), there is still the widespread assumption that some similarities in media routines, organizational influences, extramedia influences, ideological influences and individual influences exist across the journalistic spectrum. Alongside this expanding discussion is the notion that news is a manufactured representation from a decidedly elite ideology (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Tuchman, 1978) – a position further problematized by the increasingly egalitarian online sphere of communication.

Perhaps because of these tensions, contemporary journalism is still largely, and perhaps reflexively, viewed as both the result of cultural influences (Gitlin, 1980; Hall, Chritcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Robert, 1978) and largely still a professionalized embodiment of reality, which continues to follow a traditional adherence to ethical norms such as balance, fairness (Singer, 2006) and objectivity (Deuze, 2005). Embedded within these ethical norms has been a maintenance to what could be called responsible news values (Norris, 1992) that rely upon a rhetoric of the "social responsibility to inform" (Winter, 1993, p. 18). Some authors (i.e., Masterton, 1992) suggested that such responsible news values and practices have worldwide application, particularly in regards to issues where norms and values are often seen as crossing national barriers (Dunwoody & Peters, 1992). Hallin (2006) argued that journalists in democratic societies around the globe often conceptualize themselves as the "voice of the public" (as cited in Rupar, 2006, p. 14).

The responsible news values of journalism have been under increasing pressure from the capabilities inherent in relatively recent technological advancements. Roughly 30.2% of the world population, or just over 2 billion people, were using the Internet as of March of 2011 (Internet World Stats, 2011). Many of those online are not only reading content, but are also creating content that draws upon shared modes of delivery in both the aesthetic style and organizational approach of news reporting that is so widely used in mainstream media. This similarity leads many readers to assume that such content is some form of reputable journalism based on perceptions of professionalized news values, when that might not be the case (Kenix, 2007; Peabody, 2008; Wall, 2005). Such relatively low levels of media literacy have important implications for democracies in an environment where media as a whole is almost completely digitized – and therefore also rapidly altered by content creators and contributors. Indeed, most newspapers have already shifted to either a uniformly or partially digitized format as a response to consumer demand. For example, the *Guardian* newspaper readership dropped from 487,000 in 1985 to 365,562 in 2007. However, the online *Guardian Unlimited* attracts 16 million readers and 147 million page impressions each month (Franklin, 2008). As this shift to digital communication continues, media organizations are increasingly taking advantage of the technological capabilities inherent in online communication.

One such example of how technology is driving changes in the newsroom is through sourcing. Historically, news media have operated largely through a hierarchy of access

(Atton, 2002), which often dictates who is sourced in the news according to perceived credibility. This hierarchy of access has extended throughout the media spectrum, regardless of the size of the organization. A study of three regional newspapers in England, for example, showed how the local press, just like its national counterpart, favored elite sources over common ones; male over female sources; and white over black (Ross, 2010). When that is subverted, and citizens are called upon to help create content, then the news can become "an inclusive, radical form of civic journalism" (Atton, 2003, p. 267). This type of journalism has been called native reporting (Atton, 2002, pp. 112–117) and has been found to be an instrumental part of independent current event weblogs (Matheson & Allan, 2003) as well as other open publishing sources online, such as Indymedia (Platon & Deuze, 2003), which have technological capabilities that easily allow for reader contributions to content. Native reporting has also extended into mainstream websites such as CNN's iReport, MSNBC's First Person, Fox News' UReport and Broadcast Interactive Media's YouNews. Indeed, iReport, appears to draw as much from Indymedia as it does from CNN. However, the long-held belief that mainstream news media adhere to traditional principles of objective and professionalized reporting, while other, more alternative media allow for individual-level, opinionated ideological influence, could also be eroding in an online news media environment. Recent research has argued that both the mainstream and alternative press are moving away from objectivity as a guiding principle and towards transparency as information becomes more readily accessible to readers (Kenix, 2011). Mainstream newspapers are increasingly adapting to media technology and how readers now wish to engage with the news – encouraging citizen journalism, blogging commentary and reader responses to "construct a more pluralist and democratic debate about matters of public interest" (Franklin, 2008, p. 631). By adopting tenets of public journalism, media as a whole are promoting democratic ideals and adopting what have historically been viewed as strictly alternative media practices (Hass, 2004).

However, the long-held belief that mainstream news media adhere to traditional principles of objective and professionalized reporting, while other, more alternative media allow for individual-level, opinionated ideological influence, could also be eroding in an online news media environment. Recent research has argued that both the mainstream and alternative press are moving away from objectivity as a guiding principle and towards transparency as information becomes more readily accessible to readers (Kenix, 2011).

The trend towards transparency, particularly online, may seem to indicate a form of journalism that is less bound by organizational rules and is more open to individual input. However, it also raises questions regarding fairness and balance and the importance of context. These principles of traditional journalism are no less crucial in a world where news is increasingly produced at a micro level. An important question is whether the appeal inherent in journalism generated from alternative sources overwrites the need for proven credibility. Couldry (2010) analyzed the web sites of what he calls writer-gatherers (a term he prefers to citizen journalist) in order to answer the question: “if there is potentially a democratization of journalism under way, are its likely preconditions being met in the practice of those writer-gatherers?” (p. 139). These preconditions include an extension, even in a new language, of something like journalistic values, or the development of new sources on which journalistic practice can rely; the time for actors to carry out such a role; the money and resources to carry out such a role; and the legitimacy and recognition for such a role (p. 139). Couldry (2010) found that the existence of sites where the public can voice their opinion could possibly lead to a “new form of pressure on related professional elites” (p. 150). However, he argues that we have not achieved this tipping point yet.

While this pressure on professional elites might not be as pervasive as Couldry argues it could be, news media are utilizing aspects of interactive technology to build relationships with readers and “to promote the impression of a greater accountability to a generalised readership” (Conboy & Steel, 2008, p. 654). Scholars have long conceptualized the Internet through the framework of public participation within a directly democratic forum (Bertelson, 1992). As the Internet has grown in popularity, so too have the comparisons to a participatory public sphere first put forth by Habermas (1989). Citizens can presumably engage in an unhindered exchange of information, ideas and rational debate while online. According to Brezovsek (1995), civic participation has been said to require four basic criteria: “(1) individuals are included; (2) it is voluntary; (3) it refers to a specific activity, which is (4) directed towards influencing the government or authorities in general” (as cited in Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008, p. 761). Voluntary citizen participation through online news groups and discussion forums, in particular, appear to meet each of these criteria and are readily available in most online news websites.

The trend towards transparency, particularly online, may seem to indicate a form of journalism that is less bound by organizational rules and is more open to individual input. However, it also raises questions regarding fairness and balance and the importance of context. These principles of traditional journalism are no less crucial in a world where news is increasingly produced at a micro level. An important question is whether the appeal inherent in journalism generated from alternative sources overwrites the need for proven credibility.

An important caveat to the potentiality of citizen engagement online should be that even if one’s activity might be viewed as participatory, it does not necessarily mean it is also considered integral to a deliberative democracy. For example, the mainstream

Guangzhou Daily has a well-used discussion forum, which suggests some level of participatory engagement not found in traditional journalism. However, closer scrutiny reveals infrequent follow-up posts, a lack of diversity in topics, a tendency for discussion to focus on issues outside of politics, low levels of complexity in discourse and a lack of meaningful debate online (Zhou et al., 2008) Therefore, even though citizens may be involved in the process of some form of civic participation online, it might not qualify as any actualization of deliberative democracy. That being said, citizen participation and native reporting can empower the "former audience" (Gillmor, 2006) to become more involved in their community and their media. It can serve as a kind of bridge media that links "traditional media with forms of civic participation" (Schaffer, 2007, p. 3). The ability of ordinary citizens to post comments online is in itself a radical departure from established mass media practices. The ability to post like-minded comments also may facilitate a sense of community online. Participating within a thread of commentary allows viewers to not only consume a mediated product, but also works to help create and construct the meaning of that product (Rheingold, 2002). However, anonymously constructed public spheres can also result in a level of debate that quickly turns vitriolic (Kenix, 2011). Anonymous and unaccountable anger within discussion forums can be pointed in almost any direction: specific commentators, those who oppose their views in general, or the creators of the initial post. While these contributions may serve to coalesce the community by helping to confirm what the majority of commentators believe to be right, they also work against a "pluralist and democratic debate" (Franklin, 2008, p. 631). Habermas (1989) argued that democracy can be messy but, by almost any definition, a self-assured, one-dimensional and oppositional fighting front does not equate to democratic debate within a public sphere.

Increased engagement, in whatever form, is not only situated within citizen journalists, or writer-gatherers, but may be within the more professionalized contemporary news media as well. The BBC's former correspondent Martin Bell calls such news the "journalism of attachment" (Bell, 1998). This form of journalism is actively not neutral and makes clear claims about who is right and who is wrong. Journalism of attachment can become much more obvious in times of global conflict, such as the news coverage of the Bosnian war, which largely supported the Bosnian Muslim government and not the Serbs (Gowing, 1997). This type of coverage is not found only in editorial pages but throughout news reporting (Hammond, 2000). In America, the Pew Research Center reported that 73% of Fox news stories included opinions from reporters and anchors. While this number, which far exceeds the 29% of opinion from cable rival MSNBC (cited in Johnson, 2005), may be a harbinger of future reporting styles, it raises several important questions regarding the blurring between what is a personal opinion and what are facts supported by credible sources. September 11th further brought forth opinion and commentary directly into news content. Scenes of personal emotion abounded as reporters cried on camera from Ground Zero (Tumber, 2002) and journalists raced to morally interpret who were "the 'friends' and 'enemies' of a state" (Ruigrok, 2010, p. 87).

The increased engagement from citizens and professionalized journalists would presumably lead to a richer mediated news environment. However, Redden & Witschge (2010) have found that while "there is an abundance of news online" (p. 184), content itself varies very little from one news outlet to another and little opportunity for the public to actually "participate beyond interpreting and responding to stories" (p. 185). While there may be a "blurring of news and non-news spaces" (p. 185) on social networking platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook), "the contributions on non-news spaces are often responses to news and involve a repurposing of mainstream news content, underlining rather than challenging the position of the mainstream media as gatekeeper" (pp. 185-186).

In doing so, this research embraces the academic complexity of what now constitutes online news and hopes to potentially problematize that definition even further with the goal being a more nuanced and contemporary understanding of a "media world in upheaval" (Keith, 2010, p. 12).

There is also supporting research that continues to find relatively little interactive reporting, small gains in public communication and only slight attempts at building relationships with readers across many online news sites (Oblak, 2005; Quandt, 2008; Rosenberry, 2005). Although, it should be said that in 2004, longitudinal research did find definitive improvements in interactivity online over time (Greer & Mensing, 2004). The relatively recent arrival of blogs, wikis and other communicative technological advancements, as well as the continued rise and potential competition of citizen journalism, may now be leading mainstream media into a new interactive form of citizen-based news (Paulussen, Heinonen, Domingo, & Quandt, 2007). This research tests this assumption through a case study of how one particular example, the *Topix* news organization, creates and disseminates its news online. In doing so, this research embraces the academic complexity of what now constitutes online news and hopes to potentially problematize that definition even further with the goal being a more nuanced and contemporary understanding of a "media world in upheaval" (Keith, 2010, p. 12).

Samoa Topix as a Case Study

Samoa was purposefully selected as a case study to illustrate the changing face of journalism in the context of such dramatic technological innovations, which appear to be radically shifting content and distribution. Journalism within the boundaries of Samoa continues to be formed around profound tensions in press freedoms. In Samoa, journalists work under the threat of the 1992 Printers and Publishers Act, a law that "directs publishers and editors to reveal their sources of information to government leaders such as Prime Minister, cabinet ministers, MPs, and heads of government departments, who claim they have been defamed by the media, mainly newspapers" (Malifa, 2010, p. 41). This might explain why an initial overview of the use of sources in news stories coming out of Samoa rather quickly reveals a heavy reliance on non-specific sources such as "the Government," "the Cabinet" or even "unnamed sources." Samoa also has a policy that public funds can be used for legal fees of government leaders in defamation lawsuits. Taken together, many independent journalists in Samoa, like their colleagues throughout the troubled region, live in fear of governmental reprisals for critical news coverage that can extend indefinitely through lengthy court cases fully supported by public funds. While some would argue that Samoan journalists have been "vocal and fearless critics of government abuse" (Singh, 2005, p. 44), it is clear that reporters are under extreme pressure by law to report favorably on the government. On the *Samoa Observer* web site, Savea Sano Malifa, the Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper explains these tensions:

> …as unshakable believers in freedom of expression and the public's right to know, we have unfortunately been engaged in more stressful confrontations with the mighty and powerful than we care to admit. Along the way our efforts to maintain this stand in the face of legal threats brought by government officials has been a source of much frustration (Malifa, 2012).

Given that this is the case, it would be reasonable to assume that Samoans, and those who have emigrated from Samoa, may wish to seek out alternate news about Samoa online.

While alternative online news about a particular geographical region is always of importance to those who live both inside and outside its borders, it is particularly important in this context given that the majority of ethnic Samoans actually live in countries other than Samoa (Statistics New Zealand, 2011). The importance of online news to those who have emigrated from Samoa cannot be understated given such phenomenal rates of their diaspora around the world. Media connects citizens, cognitively and emotionally back to their homelands. Indeed, media now redefines transnational boundaries and actively constructs multiple, temporal public spheres based on a shared cultural identity. Bonini (2011) eloquently states that "the media serve as a portable set, a modular backdrop that represents our home and that we use when we are travelling to take a picture of ourselves, pretending that we never left" (p. 870). Digital diasporas can quickly network and coalesce cultures together through infinitely expanding online models of geo-political mobilization (Gillespie, 2009). This research will examine whether anything close to such a potentiality has been attained in this instance through the relatively democratic online news media about Samoa, which is situated outside the geographic borders of a relatively constrained Samoan journalistic system.

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Samoa Topix, like all media, sits on a continuum of alternative and mainstream media and is not easily categorized as one or the other. It is a regional section of the parent company *Topix*, which is a privately held company based in Palo Alto, California. It receives substantial funding from three historically powerful newspaper conglomerates: Gannet, McClatchy and Tribune Company (*Topix*, 2011). Their stated goal, when they first began in 2004, was to aggregate news based on topic categories and present that information cohesively on separate web pages. In response to consumer demand, the company added discussion forums in 2007 so that users could discuss and share news content. *Topix* makes an impressively bold statement on their website that they have "combined the best technology with the strongest local participation to create the best destination for news and discussion. By giving everyone access to the tools to talk – and an audience to listen – *Topix* redefines what it means to make the news" (*Topix*, 2011). The potential ability for *Topix* to serve as a powerful democratic tool for information dissemination and exchange between and within diasporic Samoan communities and Samoan nationals appears to be present in *Samoa Topix*.

Research Questions & Hypotheses

This research examines *Samoa Topix* as a case study of how news is created in an online, participatory context. *Samoa Topix* claims to be a "leading news community", "continually updated", with "thousands of sources" that gives "everyone access." This research explores the veracity of these claims, and in so doing, also examines how *Samoa Topix* might be potentially shifting the definitional boundaries of what constitutes journalism in the 21st century. More specifically, this study explores the following research questions:

RQ1: Do the comments on *Samoa Topix* illustrate the potential towards "a more pluralist and democratic debate" (Franklin, 2008, p. 631)?

RQ2: Does the discussion relate to the news content in any way (i.e. does it drive news content on *Samoa Topix*, repeat news content or show no relation to news content)?

RQ3: Are the news stories that *Samoa Topix* aggregates dependent upon traditional approaches to journalism (i.e. professionalism, objectivity, balance, elite sources)?

RQ4: Are the news topics on *Samoa Topix* similar to the news topics in the *Samoa Observer*, the national newspaper of Samoa?

Methodology

A total of 103 forums were qualitatively assessed from the "Forums & Polls" section of *Samoa Topix*. This qualitative narrative analysis of content on the *Samoa Topix* discussion forum was conducted to assess whether news aggregating web sites such as *Samoa Topix* exemplified participatory reader input and deliberative exchange, which the first research question explores. The forums are organized according to date of the most recent comment, so the date when these forums were originally created varies greatly. Each time a new comment is added to an existing forum, the topic moves to the top of the list. The earliest forum was created May 10, 2007 and the latest on January 1, 2012.

After a qualitative examination of forum content, it was possible to ascertain whether a thread was created in response to a news item as an extension or reframing of the news material or if the thread pertained to an extraneous issue. The forum topics were also analyzed to identify possible reasons that the readers of *Samoa Topix* may be engaging with the material and the nature of their participation. In addition, the information design and technological capabilities of the website were also examined for the potential degree of interactivity, participation and exchange possible through *Samoa Topix*.

This research follows the example of previous work, which has examined individual narrative fragments from different sources that combine to form an overarching narrative (Atkinson, 2006; McGee, 1990). This approach argues that meta-narratives are comprised of multiple parts and do not exist as a complete entity but rather as a multitude of pieces. The term, narrative, itself refers to “a dense reconstruction of all the bits of discourse from which [they were] made” (McGee, 1990, p. 70). These bits of narrative can culminate at a specific cultural site, as was illustrated by an examination of the Vietnam War Memorial (Ehrenhaus, 1993) or across a longitudinal range of magazine publications, and as was discussed through an examination of the historical New Zealand newsmagazine, *Earwig* (Kenix, 2010). A broader meaning, which is comprised of previous narrative fragments, can coalesce together into a cultural site that comes to define, in this case, a particular website.

Such a cultural site is created by competing and conciliatory narratives, which are conceptualized against one another to create a larger, comprehensive, narrative. These narratives actually work against and with each other to reformulate a new reality through what has been called an “ideological rhetorical force” (Chatman, 1990, p. 198). Such force comes from the culmination of cultural value and identity. As a narrative forms, a common identity within a particular cultural sphere that is based on “the unity of experiences and actions” (Carr, 1986, p. 149) develops. This shared identity allows those within that participatory sphere to recognize common qualities within themselves, the text and each other. This shared cultural value and identity also inevitably leads to an increased understanding of what it is that is different in other cultural spheres (Kelly, 2004). As Foucault (1989, 1991) argued, and the work of Atkinson (2006) confirms, discourses are inevitably not about a particular person, place or thing. Rather, discourses are part of a complex network of identity and power relations. Thus, this methodological approach, drawing from the original work of Fairclough (1995) and the later work of Atton and Wickenden (2005), examines the interdependencies between textual, discursive and social practices through narrative fragments and constitutive functions. This critical approach also involves a systematic process and examination of lexical choices, questioning the range of possible vocabulary items that could have been utilized otherwise (Matheson, 2005). These studies can be difficult to replicate and are quite labour intensive (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). However, they also allow for a deeper and more complex level of analysis.

In this study, a total of 104 news stories were collected between October 19, 2011 and January 1, 2012 from the *Samoa Topix* website. These news stories, or more precisely news headlines on *Samoa Topix* with links to the actual stories from other news outlets, were quantitatively analyzed according to several variables including provenance, topic, the type and gender of the sources used in the story, and whether the stories adhered to traditional journalism principles such as balance and the inclusion of context. The information gathered through this process helps to answer the third research question exploring the level of traditional journalism norms in online news content. Frequencies of these variables may also help to unpack how *Samoa Topix* aggregates news stories, where the items are most likely to come from, and whether that content constitutes content of a sufficient quality, based on prescribed journalistic norms, to be of service to diasporic Samoan populations around the world. This information, when contrasted against forum narratives, will assist in answering the second research question, which explores the interrelationship between forums and the news.

Finally, in order to examine *Samoa Topix's* news story selection and the quality of its aggregated choices, this research also collected 113 stories from the online edition of the *Samoa Observer* between September 17 and December 30, 2011 as a logical point of comparison for Samoan news content. The *Samoa Observer* group publishes three newspapers in Samoa: The *Samoa Observer* from Monday to Friday, the *Weekend Observer* on Saturday, and the *Sunday Samoan*. They have a weekly readership of 350,000, in a country of less than 200,000 people (Malifa, 2012). Topics from the aggregated *Samoa Topix* were compared against news stories reported from Samoa to see if there was any correlation between the two, which would suggest some degree of relevance to Samoan issues. This portion of the study addresses the fourth research question: are the news topics on *Samoa Topix* similar to those in the *Samoa Observer.*

Through this multi-methodological triangulated analysis of over 300 news articles and news forum postings, this research aims to explore whether *Samoa Topix* has indeed become “the best destination for news and discussion” and redefined “what it means to make the news” (*Topix*, 2011). The results of this study will be discussed in relation to recent scholarship exploring the potential limitations and possibilities of online journalism.

Results

Level of debate

Examining the possibility of a pluralist and democratic debate on *Samoa Topix* involves exploring whether *Samoa Topix* created an environment online where such deliberative discourse *could* take place and also whether such idealized communication actually *did* take place. *Samoa Topix,* and the umbrella corporation of geographically-specific *Topix* websites elsewhere around the globe, rely on new technologies to generate activity online. The use of social networking sites and Web 2.0 principles is extensive throughout the site. Icons for Facebook and Twitter as well as prompts for participatory actions such as “Like” and “Comment?” appear repeatedly throughout the website. There is an obvious reliance on users to generate traffic and they are constantly encouraged to “share a story” or “start a new discussion now!” This reflects the widespread movement throughout media institutions to introduce new participatory technologies in newsrooms

(Anderson, 2011). These technologies promote “the empowerment of audiences, the creativity of audiences, the fact that audience preferences needed to be taken into account, and the fact that audiences (are) “partners” with journalists in the creation and consumption of news” (p. 557).

Most of the participants on the discussion forums in *Samoa Topix* appear to come from outside Samoa based on the comments made within the forum about the geographical locations of users. Of the 21 people who left 52 comments on the forum “why are samoans so fat?” for example, five came from New Zealand, five from Australia, five from the United States and its territories, one each from Tonga, the Cook Islands and the Netherlands and three were hidden. The preponderance of those outside of Samoa commenting in these forums was repeated throughout this sample. This may be a result of expatriates wanting to connect with “home” but the low number of local Samoans using the site may also be due to the connection rates and Internet access in Samoa. With a population of just under 200,000 people, only 4.7%, or roughly 9,400 people, have Internet access within Samoa (Internet World Stats, 2011).

The very existence of a forum section could, in and of itself, be considered a means of giving users (people who are not in control of the content and flow of news traditionally) more freedom to voice their opinion, not only about events but also on how these events are reported by the media. Other existing tools on the *Topix* website, such as the option to share a story on social networking sites (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) or to email it to someone, for example, could also be considered to enhance the agency of users to disseminate information/news about events they are interested in. So, in theory at least, these tools alone could demonstrate an attempt at “a more pluralist and democratic debate” (Franklin, 2008, p. 631).

However, in practice the forum section is used mainly for two things: a) for people to voice their ethnic views and b) for people of Samoan heritage to express their own ethnic identity. Within those dual narrative umbrellas, this analysis found that only 24.2% of forum comments were directly about news stories. This relatively low number would seem to support Redden and Witschge’s (2010) conclusions that online news provides few chances to go “beyond interpreting and responding to stories” (p. 185). While there is the possibility of further exchange embedded within the technology itself, an examination of comments made throughout the forum reveals a cultural site that precludes such interpretation. The broader meaning, comprised by the narrative fragments of commentary made by those posting to these forums, presents a meta-narrative largely oppositional to such discourse.

Another 20.3% of forums seemed to have no other purpose than stirring ethnic animosity mainly between people of Samoan and Tongan heritage. The two countries have a long history of conflict and reconciliation dating back to 1100 A.D. when Tongan kings ruled the Pacific region. Continued resentment between the two countries was evident throughout the discussion forum. Forums such as “who's got better athletes out of Tonga and samoa” or “how come Samoans rarely take showers?” are representative of this type “ethnic bating.” One forum titled “why are samoans so fat?” was created on

November 4, 2011 by TONGANZ from Tonga with the opening post: “Have you seen the boo yah tribe? ahahahah fakn slobks.. Samoans are Hella fat and smelly with diseases ahahahahah,” which prompted the following response from Let there be Rock from Wellington New Zealand on November 6, 2011:

> Tonganz (aka lil One) I remember you now from a previous website. You’re that sad little dwarf hermaphrodite, that is jealous of successful Samoans because you do not possess any talent except for susu poki! That’s how your family survived during those hard times, aye! because they rented you out to sailors that come to nuku’alofa looking for a night of unusual sweaty dwarf debauchery. I thought those stretch-marks around your mouth looked familiar, are you still in a wheelchair lil One (oops! you’re not so little now are you? pu kele!) or do you walk bow legged with a limp now? Hahaha!!!! See ya later sa’a.

The remaining 55.3% of forums were largely social and interpersonal in nature. As was reflected continuously throughout all of the forum comments, these narrative fragments were underpinned by a fundamental expression of Samoan identity. Much of the focus in these forums was centered on how to date Samoans (e.g., forum titled “Where are the Samoan men?”), affirmation of Samoan identity and culture (e.g., forum titled “The Orator – The new Samoan movie”), religion (e.g., forum titled “Should Samoans be concerned about new religions within Samoa?”), and Samoans distinguishing themselves around the world for positive (e.g., forum titled “Samoans in the NFL”) or negative reasons (e.g., forum titled “Low lives take over South Auckland”).

The narrative arc of Samoan representation was threaded through fragments of participants directly relating to their own individual sense of Samoan identity, but, again, not to the news content itself: “This is a SAMOAN TOPIX FORUM. Whatever language we choose to speak, it’s OUR choice.” (In “Call for deportation” forum,” SURF808 from Mililani, Hawaii, Sept. 24, 2009). Other notable post topics were “What does being Samoan mean to those living outside of Samoa?” forum with 109 comments; “I was raised samoan but born thai & filipina Why do the sistas wanna fight me 4?” forum from a young woman who comes from Thai and Filipino parents but was adopted and raised by Samoan parents and considers herself of Samoan identity; “What is your favorite Samoan song?” forum with 924 comments; and the “Ancient Samoa History” forum (37 comments), which discusses links between Samoa and Tonga historically and tensions between the two identities.

Topix states that they “encourage the free exchange of views and opinions” (*Samoa Topix*, 2012) suggesting that they support the free flow of ideas necessary for a more deliberative and democratic debate to emerge. They urge users to “try to be interesting [and] polite.” But they warn forum participants that if they may get upset by “the free expression of ideas [which] is often heated and offensive, [they should] not use *Topix*” (*Samoa Topix*, 2012). Outside of these generalized suggestions, which are posted on a separate page from the forums themselves, there does not appear to be any moderation of comments. People have the option to “Report Abuse” next to each comment on a forum and on the homepage. However, judging by the number of inflammatory comments posted on the forums, it seems that there is either very little reporting of abuse or that *Topix* does not take action against abusers.

For example, one particular forum user, TONGANZ from Tonga, has created or participated in most of the forums that feature ethnic animosity between Tongans and Samoans. Over the course of the three months during which we observed forums, he/she was never absent, suggesting that either no one made a complaint about him/her or that *Topix* does not bar participants from its forums no matter what they post. Examples of TONGANZ’s posts include: “ahahahah Samoa is the only place that wipes ass with rocks.. y'all utilize bandages? Fak u use your brain like a normal human being and used Toilet paper or if outdoors use a leaf” (Forum titled: “many people eat Horse... but who the heck wipes ass wif Rocks?,” November 4, 2011) or “hahahah u stink like my sweaty balls after I came back from the bush hhh mui lafa” (Forum titled: Samoans/Tongans -- are Chinese-looking not pure bloods?, November 7, 2011). This lack of response to abusive comments reflects a widespread ambivalence within the media towards reader feedback (Anderson, 2011).

One forum titled “Calls for Samoans to be deported from Australia” was created on November 2, 2008 in reaction to a link to a story from the *Samoa Observer*’s digital edition. This forum has attracted 4,191 posts to date. The original story explained how Aborigines in Brisbane, Australia, were demanding the deportation of Samoans following the death of a man from their community who was allegedly beaten to death by a group of Samoans between the ages of 15 and 24. At best, this particular forum paints a vivid picture of race relations and immigration tensions in Australia, not only between Aborigines and White Australians, but also between Aborigines and immigrants. The forum has enabled the many ethnic groups in Australia to voice their opinions and vent their anger about racism. For example, Abo 2 from Brisbane, Australia commented on November 3, 2008:

> Most the crime and sin comes from white fellas, go to the courts and have a look around, all the glassing that goes on started with the white fellas, all the bikie gangs, and scrap you see in the streets mostly white fellas, piss off and leave us alone never seen so many white fellas suffer from depression, cause they so greedy and selfish many of them live lonely lives and dont even stick together, go home pig faces we dont need ya!

In an extensive post on November 4, 2008, Just Cos I Can from Sydney, Australia commented:

> The government has approved over 2500 Pacific Islander VISA's to come to Australia & work because the product of "convicts" from way back (eg: YOU) are lazy dole bludging criminals who'd rather get freebies than do a days worth of honest work. I'm sick of people

> taking credit for the actions of those in the past! Get used to it, Pacific Islander's are taking over Australia & there aint a damn thing u can do about it. Love that bit the most! All that talk about the white man being superior? Bitch please, while Egyptian Pharaoh's were ruling the world, your kind were stuck in caves, hitting each other over the head with clubs. Your "superior status" is only in your head. White people are raping children, murdering the elderly & screwing over their families every day so fuck up with your deluded bullshit.

This forum had an overwhelming reliance on racial slurs with almost no connection back to the news story itself. One needs to ask whether this is what a “more democratic debate” looks like. This forum seemed to deliver a vantage point from which to express views most often associated with extreme right wing, anti-immigration propaganda such as a) immigrants steal jobs; b) immigrants are involved in criminal activity (e.g., “My question is why it took so long to get rid of them. They must have cost the community hundreds of thousands of dollars.” And “Samoan-born so you have to ask - why aren't these animals being sent back to Samoa?”); c) immigrants spend their life on welfare (e.g., “Obviously there is always going to be the handful of islanders doing well but they are the minority. Most, if it not 95% of them are supported by some sort of welfare in the new country.”); d) immigrants have a lot of children so they can stay and get benefits (e.g., “The taxpaper is forking out millions of Dollars in Hospital bills because these people are unable to control their own appetite. They have in excess of 4 kids knowingly they can't even afford to raise one. Thats okay the government will pay for the rest. Maybe its different there in the states and all islanders are hard working people, we must get all the Arseholes living in NZ then.”). None of these general comments connected directly back to the news story for which the forum was created. Rather, the story served as a catalyst for commentators to express previously held viewpoints on loosely related topics using charged language in an uncensored forum with no accountability.

Some of the participants in forums utilized the hyperlinking technology of the web to post news stories generally related to criminal cases involving Pacific Islanders or allegedly committed by people described as Pacific Islanders. By linking to these stories in forums, the commentator could “prove” the guilt of all Pacific Islanders. For example, one forum participant posted a link to a *Telegraph* news story titled: “Two violent Sydney robberies linked” in which the alleged robbers were described as “being of Pacific Islander appearance.” Here a relationship is created between these two Sydney robberies that may have been perpetrated by Pacific Islanders and all Samoans – merely by their hyperlinked association.

The research question, which asked do the comments on *Samoa Topix* illustrate the potential towards “a more pluralist and democratic debate” (Franklin, 2008, p. 631) was not supported. *Samoa Topix* appeared to provide a forum for such a potential debate to occur, but based on the narrative fragments found throughout this sample, comments remained largely superficial, ethnically-motivated and quite distinct from the news content within the site. Any deliberation that did occur, was centered upon solidifying the identity of Samoan people and denouncing those who disagreed.

The news and the forum

There was no evidence of any forum generating news content. As was stated in the previous section, 24.2% of the forums were started with a direct comment on a news story, suggesting that news *could* generate discussion. A visitor must click on “Leave a Comment” below the story to make a comment on a news item. The forums triggered by direct comments, as opposed to those created as forums to begin with, are easy to identify in the list of forums by a small icon that resembles a newspaper. The fact that less than one quarter of the forums were created as a result of a news item indicates that news content generates a relatively low direct response from users. As for the number of comments attached to these forums, they vary wildly from 1 comment up to more than 4,000. This analysis found that as comments increase, the less likely it is that those comments will be directly connected to the original story and more likely that the discourse will descend into some form of mudslinging between Samoans and another ethnic group. So, while the forums that have been created as a result of a comment on a news story initially provide an avenue for users to voice their opinion on a particular event covered in a news story, they however, more often than not end up focusing on other issues than the one presented in the story. For example, a forum titled “Samoan prison gang in Hawaii – USO – Target of FBI investigation” was started by a comment on a news story from *Samoa News* in November 2011. While the first few posts discussed the presence of Samoan gangs in the United States and the possibility of Polynesians being especially targeted by police, it quickly degenerated into ethnic name-calling. For example, Cherie KahaHane from Springfield Gardens, N.Y., posted the following comment on November 19, 2011, early in the thread:

> Why just the Samoans are pointed out. I feel it goes for all races over there. I’m pretty sure the Samoans ain’t the only ones involved in whatever they are doing wrong over there. Gangs have been a problem in this world for a very long time….. We have to learn to stick together and unite instead of killing each other and our own kind… Minority killing the minority and the majority only gets stronger and richer!! It’s sad what this world has come too. I just pray for all of them.

And on December 2, 2011, Manoa from American Samoa wrote:

> This is not something to be proud of....less than one% of the general population....75% of inmate polulation. Something is wrong with this picture...either the police force is targeting the poly's or the poly's are commiting most of the crime. Or the judge....u know what i mean...

These comments demonstrated a certain critical reflection on possible Polynesian gangs in the U.S., but later comments descend into argumentation and racism: “They are as stupid as an Oakland Niglett.” (Posted by Rich Dude from San Jose, California on February 12, 2012) or:

> Bring all your gangster prisoners here and we'll make them climb a coconut tree upside down.....and of course butt naked. That will be a scene. US recently reported our Prison Systems one of the worst in the world and GAVE us recommendations. Our PM only read the first page of the report...and who knows what he did with it... (Posted by kiuss from Apia, Samoa on February 19, 2012).

Journalism norms

In a broader sense, examining traditional approaches to journalism in relation to *Samoa Topix* was difficult because they do not produce news, they aggregate their news stories. *Topix* uses algorithms that trawl the Internet and selects stories with the word "Samoa" in it. This is obvious given the repeated stories that have nothing to do with Samoa, such as "Christo Velkov wins sailor of the year Award," a story about a Bulgarian sailor whose only relation to Samoa is that he made a stop in Apia. Thus, if this research focuses solely on *Samoa Topix*, it does not appear that they follow any traditional approaches to journalism. They have no ethics per se since their content appears to be machine-generated. The reason why there are so many stories about American Samoa in *Samoa Topix*'s timeline, for example, is that they feature the word "Samoa" and because the American media are a lot more present, a lot more stories are produced about American Samoa than there are about Samoa. This raises important questions about online news and the way it is generated. Can an algorithm-generated news service such as *Samoa Topix* provide properly targeted news to a diasporic community? Moreover, can such a service adhere to any kind of journalistic ethic or approach (i.e. professionalism, objectivity, balance)?

The reason why there are so many stories about American Samoa in Samoa Topix's timeline, for example, is that they feature the word "Samoa" and because the American media are a lot more present, a lot more stories are produced about American Samoa than there are about Samoa. This raises important questions about online news and the way it is generated. Can an algorithm-generated news service such as Samoa Topix provide properly targeted news to a diasporic community?

Samoa Topix aggregates a majority of its content from a small number of news providers, which suggests first, that certain news providers pay more attention to Samoa than others and second, those specific providers can be examined in accordance to traditional principles of news gathering and reporting. At first glance, it may seem that stories about Samoa are disseminated quite widely across the world. Of the 104 stories presented on *Samoa Topix* that were collected for the study, 23.0% came from American news outlets, 19.2% from *Samoa News*, 15.3% from New Zealand, 16.3% from Pacific

Island news websites (including 9.6% from Fijian sources), 9.6% from European news providers, 3.8% from Australia and 12.5% from a variety of other sources. However, most of the news items coming from American news providers had nothing to do with the Independent State of Samoa. The vast majority focused on American Samoa, a U.S. territory. The few stories that were specifically about events in Samoa had to do with the soccer World Cup qualifying in the Oceania region, which was held in Apia, the capital of Samoa, and was widely reported in the U.S. because of American Samoa's surprise performance. The other main topic had to do with the decision by Samoa to adjust its international dateline to be on the same day as Australia and New Zealand, its main trade partners.

This research examined the adherence of *Samoa Topix*'s sources of news to traditional journalism principles, such as the type of sources they used, whether the sources were Samoan or foreign, whether the story was balanced (i.e., offered more than one position), and whether it provided context. Sources were identified as four types: Samoans quoted (25%); Samoans mentioned but not quoted (16.3%), non-Samoans quoted (41.3%), and non-Samoans mentioned but not quoted (36.5%). These four types were then subdivided into three categories: authority figures (e.g., government officials, business or religious leaders, members of the legal system); entertainment figures (e.g., athletes/sport officials, journalists, entertainers); and common sources (e.g., Samoan citizens or expatriates, victims of crime). Each source was coded so one story could have more than one source type. The overall breakdown of sources by category (as shown in Table 1), demonstrates that, in general, well-known non-Samoan entertainment figures are the sources most often used in stories. When Samoans were quoted, they were most likely to be authority figures.

Table 1

Breakdown of sources by type and category

	Category		
Type (%)	Authority figures (%)	Entertainment figures (%)	Common sources (%)
Samoans quoted (25)	15.3	11.5	5.76
Samoans mentioned (16.3)	4.8	9.6	1.9
Non-Samoans quoted (41.3)	16.3	23	5.8
Non-Samoans mentioned (36.5)	14.4	28.8	5.7

If categories are broken down further, then the most frequent Samoan authority figures quoted are government officials (81.25%), religious leaders (12.5%), and members of the legal system (6.25%). Quotes from Samoan well-known entertainment figures mainly involve athletes/sports officials (33.33%) and journalists (33.33%) while quotes from common sources usually involve Samoan citizens (83.33%) and Samoan expatriates (16.66%). When Samoan authority figures are mentioned but not quoted, they involve government officials (60%) and religious leaders (40%). As for entertainment Samoans mentioned but not quoted, they are usually athletes/sports officials (90%) and entertainers (10%) while common sources are divided equally between Samoan citizens and expatriates.

In the case of non-Samoan authority figures, the quotes usually come from government officials (52.9%), business leaders (35.3%), and equally from military officials and members of the legal system (5.2% each). Entertainment non-Samoans quotes are primarily athletes/sports officials (54.1%), but also a mix of journalists (12.5%), entertainers (12.5%) and a variety of other sources (20.8%) such as academics or NGO spokespeople. Finally, non-Samoan sources are also mentioned but not quoted directly. Authority figures made up of government officials (40%), members of the legal system (40%), entertainers (16.66%), religious and business leaders (6.66% each) and military officials (6.66%). Well-known entertainment non-Samoan sources include athletes/sports officials (56.66%) and former government officials (20%).

In addition to looking at the sources used in the news items available on *Samoa Topix*, this research also examined if the stories were balanced (i.e., providing more than one side of the story) and provided context. In terms of balance, 38.46% of the stories were deemed balanced, 36.54% not balanced while the criteria did not apply to the rest. As for context, all the stories that could provide it did so.

Story sources

Almost 20% of news items came from another online news service: samoanews.com, which is another American Samoa based news service. This means that while some of the stories may be of interest to Samoans in general, they are not specifically about Samoa. The country that had the most thorough and directed coverage of stories about Samoa was New Zealand. A little over 15% of the stories presented on *Samoa Topix* came from a variety of New Zealand media. They covered stories surrounding Samoans distinguishing themselves (e.g., Samoan businessman being made Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit), religion, trade relations (e.g., the impact of changing the dateline), sports (e.g., Samoa performance at the Rugby World Cup, boxing), and culture (e.g., review of Samoan film The Orator). Samoans constitute the single largest ethnic group from the Pacific Islands in New Zealand, which may explain why the media are interested in catering to the community. The 2006 census indicates that almost 266,000 Samoans live in New Zealand, comprising nearly 50% of the total Pacific Island population in the country (Statistics New Zealand, 2006).

When stories are aggregated based on the presence of keywords rather than according to some type of journalistic guiding principle, there is a great discrepancy in the level of quality of the items on offer. Stories from developed countries (e.g., American, New Zealand, Australia, and Europe) followed traditional approaches to journalism while news from Pacific Island nations was often less “professional” in its approach. For example, a story such as “Amazing transformation of American Samoa from whipping boys to winners” from *The Guardian* (November 26, 2011) provides a fascinating account of the crushing defeat of 31-0 American Samoa suffered to Australia in 2001 and how the team was rebuilt eventually leading to their remarkable performance at the Oceania World Cup qualifying in 2011. The article includes quotes from the producer of a documentary about the team, the new coach, and a transgender player on the team. In comparison, a story such as “Spreading the 9s code” about a rugby tournament in Fiji posted on the *Fiji Times online* (December 7, 2011) only quotes the chief executive of the Fiji National Rugby League and gives very little information about the tournament itself.

A profile such as “Jimmy 'Thunder' Peau down but not out”, about a Samoan-born boxer now living in New Zealand, published on November 11, 2011 in the *Southland Times*, a regional New Zealand newspaper, is representative of what is traditionally expected in terms of journalistic quality. It features a variety of credible sources, provides background information, and tells a captivating story. In comparison, “Miss American Samoa attends Miss South Pacific pageant” posted on samoanews.com on December 7, 2011, is a profile of the American Samoa representative at the pageant and reads like a transcripted interview with quotes put one after the other from a single source. Stories originating from these news providers often failed to provide balance through the use of several sources and context. Several sources were also left unnamed throughout content.

Samoa Topix **and the** ***Samoa Observer***

As detailed in Table 2, the topics covered in *Samoa Topix* and the *Samoa Observer* were similar but represented in very different proportions except for sports. Sport was the most popular topic accounting for 25% of news items on *Samoa Topix* and 29.2% in the *Observer*. The space devoted to this topic on both web sites is not surprising since sport is an area that gives Samoans great pride, particularly when it comes to their national rugby team. Moreover, the popularity of sports-related stories may in part be due to two major events held in the region at the time the sample was taken: the Rugby World Cup in New Zealand and the Oceania Soccer World Cup Qualifying in Apia, Samoa. However, the difference between the sports coverage by *Samoa Topix* and the *Samoa Observer* online is in the content.

The *Samoa Observer* focused mostly on Manu Samoa, the national rugby team, with stories such as “ Samoans in their hundreds rally for outspoken player” about a player who used Twitter to express his disenchantment about the International Rugby Board and “PM orders audit of millions” about the squandering of $4 million in funds by management during the Rugby World Cup. *Samoa Topix* linked mostly to stories on events held in Samoa (e.g., soccer, judo, track and field) but with a focus on other countries’ teams. A lot of coverage for example was given to the American Samoa soccer team’s surprising success at the Soccer World Cup Qualifying with stories such as “Glory days for soccer in tiny American Samoa” or “Dreams and history made in Oceania.” A story titled “American Samoa can't follow up historic win as they fall to rivals Samoa” clearly shows that the coverage is not aimed at Samoans from the Independent State but people from American Samoa. The difference is in great part due to the fact that the *Samoa Observer* is a local newspaper while *Samoa Topix* is an international media aggregator. Since 19.2% of the items on *Samoa Topix* come from Samoa News, an online service out of American Samoa, it is not surprising to see that the focus is on the American territory and not on the Independent State of Samoa.

Table 2

Topic comparison between Samoa Topix and Samoa Observer

Samoa Observer (113 stories)			*Samoa Topix* (104 stories)		
Topic	n	%	Topic	n	%
Sports	33	29.2	Sports	26	25
Court cases	19	16.8	Court cases	7	6.73
Government policy	10	8.8	Government policy	4	3.85
Business	9	7.96	Business	12	11.54
Student awards/scholarships	7	6.19	Student awards/scholarships	1	0.96
Profiles	7	6.19	Profiles	5	4.8
Tourism/entertainment	6	5.3	Tourism/entertainment	22	21.15
Natural disasters/threats	4	3.54	Natural disasters/threats	7	6.73
Traffic accidents	4	3.54	Traffic accidents	0	0
Labor disputes	4	3.54	Labor disputes	0	0
Media	2	1.77	Media	1	0.96
International relations	2	1.77	International relations	9	8.65

When the content in the other categories was examined, it became quite obvious that the two news outlets have very different aims. The second most popular category on *Samoa Topix* was tourism/entertainment (21.1%) and business (11.5%) with stories highlighting the business community in American Samoa such as "Ace American Industries the big winner at 4th Annual Business Award ceremony" or the Miss South Pacific Pageant. The same categories only accounted for 5.3% and 7.9% of items in the *Samoa Observer* respectively. International relations (8.65%) and natural disaster/threat (6.7%) were also relatively popular topics on *Samoa Topix* but captured less attention in the *Observer* with 1.7 and 3.5% of stories. Two topics that were quite popular in the *Observer*, court cases (16.8%) with news items such as "Police officer jailed for prisoner assault" and government policy (8.8%) with stories such as "If it's not broken, don't fix it" about the decriminalization of homosexuality, failed to garner as much coverage on *Samoa Topix* with only 6.7 and 3.8% of stories respectively. Overall, these figures highlight the *Observer*'s distinctly local focus of attention compared to *Samoa Topix*'s more global approach.

Samoa Topix also seems to rely on web metrics to boost its relevance and traffic rather than on a particular drive to offer their Samoan readers relevant content. Graphics, such as the ones provided on the homepage under the title of "News Trends," are used to identify trending topics - a measurement of popularity borrowed from the social networking site Twitter. Stories are also ranked by the number of comments they generate, which can direct users to stories that are driving widespread discussion but may also give unimportant stories an inflated weight. Finally, there are two counters at the bottom of the homepage: one for the number of "Comments made yesterday" and the other, constantly creeping up, for "Total comments across all topics."

Anderson (2011) argues that web metrics have transformed the way news items are selected in online newsrooms. During his time observing the operation of *Philly.com*, a news aggregating web site in Philadelphia, he noticed that “traffic often appeared to be the primary ingredient in [the website’s] news judgment” (p. 561). When he probed to see if there was an organizational culture in place that would be used to counterweight “number of clicks” with story quality, web producers (those in charge of aggregating and repurposing stories from the two printed newspapers affiliated with *Philly.com*) admitted that their judgment was more informed by an intuitive knowledge of which stories would get “clicks” (p. 562). There seems to be a significant difference however, between a news outlet like *Philly.com* and *Samoa Topix*. While the former’s selection of stories seems to indicate at least that someone is “at the helm,” the same cannot be said of the latter, which seems to be aggregating stories using an algorithm. This means that while the stories on *Philly.com* reflect a desire to capture the interest of the Philadelphia public, albeit one that is driven by “number of clicks” and “page views,” the stories collected on *Samoa Topix* only seem to indicate a computer system trawling the Internet for stories with the word “Samoa” in them. This conclusion is based on the relative randomness of stories found within *Samoa Topix.* For example, a story about the victory of Ukrainian judokas from a Ukrainian radio station was linked to on November 14, 2011 because it mentioned in passing that the Judo World Cup was in Apia, Samoa. The story would have been of little significance to Samoans but because it used the word Samoa in the text, it ended up as a news item on *Samoa Topix*.

Considering how *Samoa Topix* seems to be aggregating its news items, it is quite surprising to see that no stories from the *Samoa Observer* was picked up by its algorithm. This is surprising since the *Samoa Observer* is probably the news outlet that publishes/posts the most stories about Samoa. It is impossible to know if the *Observer* is preventing *Samoa Topix* to trawl its stories.

Discussion

The level of discussion found in *Samoa Topix* was found to be largely divisive, ethnically-charged and superficial. However, this study raises an important question: should *Samoa Topix* be lauded for *providing* the tools for a “more democratic debate” despite the fact that they are barely used in this way? Alternatively, should *Topix* and comparable websites be accountable for the fact that these tools alone do not contribute to a climate that supports democratic debate? The relatively superficial, ethnically-challenging and socially interpersonal narrative fragments examined for this study were situated at quite a distance from the news content linked to the site. However, the journalistic quality of the content itself was problematic, which also could have factored into the context of debased forum discussion. In assessing the democratic capabilities of *Samoa Topix,* one needs to ask if the act of providing the tools sufficient? Can *Topix* really say that: “By giving everyone access to the tools to talk - and an audience to listen”, it “redefines what it means to make the news”? This technologically-deterministic perspective absolves *Topix* and other sites like them from any responsibility to foster and maintain debate. Surely, if one is to provide the means for discussion then there is at least some onus on that operating body to facilitate that discussion as well. Undoubtedly, *Topix* is under financial constraints that limit them from intervening in such matters, but as scholars examining these forums, there are important resultant questions that arise from the repeated instances of anonymous bullying happening throughout news forums such as these. At a minimum, forums could be encouraged, through active posts by those who are employed by Topix, to focus on news content and news-related issues.

The lack of adherence to traditional journalism norms found within content linked through *Samoa Topix* suggests a lack of training, experience and resources in news outlets from the Pacific Island region. While more established media (e.g., from New Zealand, Australia, the United States) that find their stories on *Samoa Topix* reflect fairness, balance and context, the same cannot be said of media such as Samoa News, the Fiji Times online, or Fiji Village for example. Among the many factors behind these differences is the lack of money and resources, the lack of trained journalists, and the pressure on freedom of the press experienced in many Pacific Island nations. The founder and editor of Talamua Media, Apulu Lance Polu has bemoaned the lack of trained journalists in Samoa and has argued that training is necessary to “enable journalists in school and on the job to bring balance, responsibility and professionalism” (Enoka, 2011) to local journalism.

There was no obvious parallel between the content found in *Samoa Topix* and the *Samoa Observer*. From a liberal pluralist perspective, this, in and of itself, suggests a lack of relevance to what is actually happening in Samoa. The news items selected for *Topix* suggests a disconnect in focus to events in Samoa. The generalized topics emphasized in the *Topix* website also work to construct a reality not reflected within the news about Samoa from within Samoa. Given that the *Observer* is the paper of record from within Samoa, one would have assumed at least a slightly larger reliance on its content within *Topix*, but that was not the case here. It could be argued that perhaps an aggregator of news content simply does not make sense in a country of such a small size. However, there is a plethora of independent websites around the globe that actually are talking about Samoan issues and covering Samoan news. One comprehensive example is the Pacific Scoop website edited by Auckland University of Technology’s Pacific Media Centre. The algorithms used to aggregate content in this instance simply did not appear to reflect the issues relevant to Samoa itself.

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Popularity is Not the Same Thing as Influence: A Study of the Bay Area News System

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This pilot study of networked news organizations in the San Francisco Bay area examined linking patterns between 114 news sites. We confirmed previous studies that show most links originate from a small number of sites and that traditional news sites attract the most links within the ecosystem. However, we discovered that many links are driven by commercial concerns and do not seem to indicate meaningful relationships. In contrast, the linking patterns of the emerging non-profit news sector indicate the development of an alternative model of relationship building. We conclude that in a networked media environment, popularity does not equal influence.

Introduction

It is an open question whether the agenda setting or "gatekeeping" role of news organizations will continue in an online environment (McCombs, 2005). The earliest research suggested that traditional news organizations might retain this role (e.g., Cornfield, et. al., 2005; Reese, et. al. 2007; Roberts et. al., 2002). Subsequent research, however, indicates that they may not (Carpenter, 2010; Meraz, 2011). The more recent studies observe that there are simply too many sources of information online, and audience attention to these sources is too fragmented, for the news media to play this "gatekeeping" role any longer (e.g., Bennett, 2004). Even Maier (2010), who generally finds that a majority of online news tracks with the top stories made available by mainstream news organizations, admits that less than one-third of the stories linked to by blogs and social media correspond with the editorial choices of mainstream news organizations (see also Holt & Karlsson, 2011).

Thus far, researchers have explained the waning of the news media's agenda-setting role as a consequence of structure rather than choice. The low cost of production makes the web an information-saturated environment, and audiences are fragmenting around this information in such a way that it is difficult, if not impossible, for any subset of organizations to reliably and predictably direct a news agenda (see Benkler, 2006 for the general argument concerning the Internet). Even if, the argument goes, news organizations might wish to retain their influence, the structure of the new medium prevents them from doing so.

In many respects, this argument seems reasonable. However, some structural traits of the web imply that traditional news media are well positioned to play their familiar gatekeeping role. As many scholars have noted, information flows online tend to have small world characteristics (e.g., Barábasi, 2003; Buchanan, 2003; Watts, 2003). One such characteristic is that hubs, a relatively small subset of nodes, strongly mediate the flow of information in a network. In fact, in a small world, hubs may account for as much as 80-90% of information circulating through a network. Regional daily newspapers seem especially well poised to be hubs in their communities. It is true that online regional news systems have begun to diversify (e.g., Fancher, 2011; Gordon & Johnson, 2011). But unlike the national or international news system, urban dailies stand unrivaled in the level of resources and reach they bring to regional news. In principal, it should not be difficult for them to dominate the production and circulation of regional online news as they have done for decades.

Our research on the linking practices of online news organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area region indicates that, in fact, regional dailies do dominate regional news flows. However, it also shows that they may be intentionally choosing NOT to use this advantage to play their traditional agenda setting role. Strange as it may be to say, the data suggest that these organizations are voluntarily relinquishing their role as agenda setters in their communities.

The data suggest that regional dailies are voluntarily relinquishing their role as agenda setters in their communities.

Literature Review

Our argument unfolds in a series of steps. We begin by noting that influence online is established by linking practices. A link is a grant of authority from one site to another (e.g., Kleinberg, 1997). Ordinarily, the more links a site accrues from others, the more influence that site obtains. As in other small world networks, our data show that regional daily newspapers account for the vast majority of linking activity in the region. By most measures of network centrality, they are the primary hubs for news and information in their communities. But popularity is not the same as influence.[1] Our data also show that these dailies mostly link to themselves, and that most of this internal linking seems to be driven by the template structure of content management systems and efforts to elevate advertising rates for their pages (Stray, 2010). In other words, their linking strategies are motivated by commercial imperatives rather than an interest in setting news agendas in their communities. Moreover, other media companies account for the majority of links to urban daily news sites. These companies appear to be pursuing similar commercial strategies, and to be doing so by focusing on “soft” news topics like food, entertainment, and sports. Finally, urban dailies rarely link to other sites, an indication that they have little interest in the information environment beyond their own sites, or that commercial imperatives have restricted their linking practices. As other scholars have noted in similar studies of hyperlinks: “news media use new technology to replicate old practices” (Himelbolm, 2010, p. 373; Tremayne, 2005).

The conclusion we draw from these data is that, in pursuit of popularity, urban dailies are relinquishing their influence. Theirs is a version of the “commercialization” strategy that has motivated news decisions within urban dailies for three decades (e.g., McManus, 1993; Squires, 1993; Underwood, 1993). According to this strategy, news organizations use marketing tools to discover audience interests, and devote most of their resources to delivering content that aligns with these interests. The result has been less investment in “hard” news and more investment in “soft news.” As this strategy unfolds online, these organizations are becoming less news-oriented and more media-oriented, less interested in shaping the public agenda than in driving audience traffic via the production of soft news content. This outcome is not inevitable. It is not caused by structural characteristics of the web. Rather, it is a choice being made by these companies to chase “digital dimes” to replace the “print dollars” they have lost in advertising revenue from their core products (i.e., the newspaper).[2]

The web is not inevitably hostile to the formation of coherent news agendas.

At the same time, our analysis shows that non-profit news sites, like California Watch and public media, such as KQED in San Francisco, seem to be stepping into the gatekeeping role vacated by urban dailies. The linking strategies of these organizations demonstrate that the web is not inevitably hostile to the formation of coherent news agendas, at least in regional news systems.

Methods

The extant literature on news agenda formation online is scant. Thus far, much of this research has combined content analysis of a sample of coverage of particular issues with counts of hyperlinks between a defined set of news sites. So, for instance, Dmitrova et. al. (2003) trace hyperlinks between 15 American newspapers in their coverage of Timothy McVeigh’s execution. Lim (2006) tracks hyperlinks between stories in three South Korean daily newspaper websites and a news agency. And, Reese et. al. (2007) examine linking patterns between political blogs and mainstream news sites on posts generated during one week.

In some ways, the reasoning that underlies this method is easy to understand. The focus on stories and/or issues stems directly from the prevailing agenda setting theory. According to this theory, issues that remain in the news agenda for some period of time (from weeks to months), tend to structure the range of issues raised in the public agenda. In the age of mass media, tracking issues in the news agenda required little more than analyzing the content of the most elite news outlets in a community. This is because less elite outlets tended to follow the direction of more elite outlets (e.g., Reese and Danielian, 1989). In effect, this meant that every other news outlet tended to take its cue from major urban daily newspapers – the most elite news outlets in most communities (e.g., Lopez-Escobar et. al., 1998; Roberts & McCombs, 1994). Thus, to identify the news agenda, researchers conducted content analyses of elite news outlets in a given community. Because their reach was limited, and they mostly followed the cues of elite news outlets anyway, less elite outlets were ignored by researchers.

Online, however, it is not necessarily the case that elite news outlets will remain dominant. Given the greater diversity of information online, and the fact that online audiences are much more fragmented, it may be the case that no outlet follows the cue of any other outlet.[3]

To study this question, researchers have added counts of hyperlinks between sites to their traditional analyses of content. Hyperlinks from one site to another represent a grant of authority (Kleinberg, 1997). In linking to site *q*, site *p* says, in effect, "what *q* has written about topic X is of such interest that I wish my audience to read it as well." The more such links site *q* accumulates from other sites, the more one may say that site *q* influences discussion of the topic within that particular network.

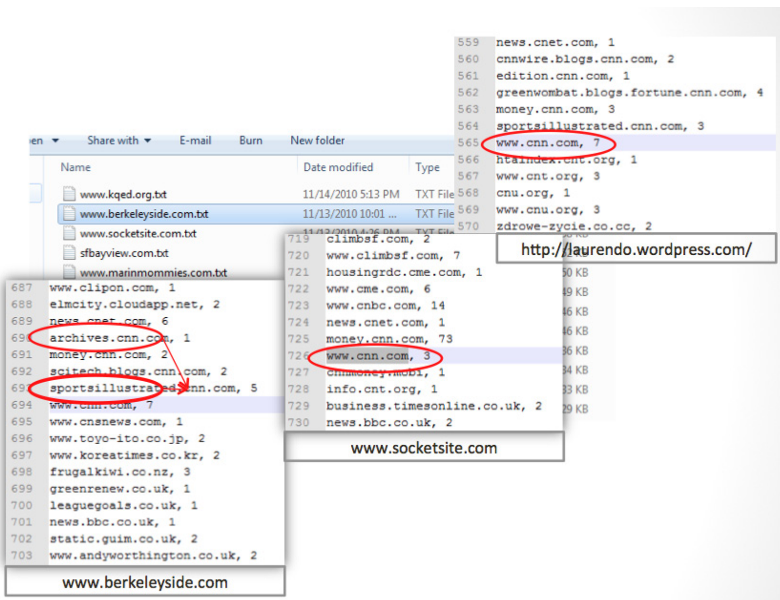
The strategy of counting hyperlinks naturally raises a sampling issue: how many and which sites should a researcher include in her count of links? Interestingly, most researchers have followed the traditional "most elite outlet" strategy of sampling. Dmitrova et. al. (2003) for instance, chose 15 news sites cited by the professional journal, *Columbia Journalism Review*, as "best newspapers." Meraz (2009) chose to include the "most popular" political blogs as identified by three major blog aggregators. Reese et. al. (2007) adopt the same strategy, choosing the six "most popular" political blogs according to the aggregator Technorati's rankings. Similarly, in his analysis of global news flows Himelboim (2010) chose to include the top media organizations in each country as identified by the BBC "Country Profiles," and Karlsson and Stromback (2009) used the Guardian.co.uk and Aftonbladet.se to study various methodologies for online content analysis.

To our mind, this strategy makes an assumption that should, instead, remain a question: is "most popular" the same as "most influential?" Are sites that attract the most links necessarily the most influential, or, might it be the case that, in an online environment, influence depends on something more (or other) than popularity?

To address this question, we conducted a network analysis of an entire regional news system. We chose the San Francisco Bay Area because it is a fertile field for online news. A region that includes nine counties and roughly 7 million people, the Bay Area is a recognized leader in online innovation. Given its high broadband penetration, sophisticated user base, and high concentration of online publishing experiments, it represents as good an example as any of a rapidly changing regional news system.

To identify the broadest range of news-related sites as we could, we adopted a two-pronged sampling method. First, we used a snowball method in which we identified the sites of every major news outlet in the region, and followed links to other sites linked to on their home page. We then followed links from these sites to other sites, and so on until our results began to repeat. Second, we also conducted Google searches of key terms to discover additional sites. Upon visiting these sites, we applied our snowball method as described above. In total, this strategy produced a sample of 170 sites. Of the 170 sites with which we began, 56 did not allow our software to crawl their pages. This was mostly due to technical reasons with how the site was built in HTML. After examining these sites, we determined that most were very small and contained relatively few pages. Therefore, their absence from the sample was unlikely to affect our overall results. Our final sample, then, was composed of 114 sites (see Appendix A for a complete list). They include everything from traditional news outlets to one-person neighborhood blogs. For purposes of this study, we labeled these sites as “seed sites.” Sites were considered “news” sites if they were updated at least weekly and focused primarily on issues of public interest.

To record hyperlinks, we used a modified version of the WebSPHINX crawler software program. A crawler catalogs each hyperlink it finds on every page of a site. At the end of this process, we were left with a picture of the number and direction of links from every site in the sample to every other site. These data compose the corpus for our study. We put the data into a table, and analyzed patterns in the linking practices across sites.



Importantly, this method of taking a global snapshot of an entire regional news system allows us to refrain from making assumptions about which sites are most likely to be popular or influential. It may be that the most popular sites achieve this status by relinquishing certain kinds of influence. In fact, that is precisely what our data suggest.

Results

As a whole, the extant research finds that traditional media exercise a strong influence on online news. Traditional news media tend to link to one another much more than to any other kind of site (Deuze, 2003; Dmitrova et. al., 2003; Tremayne, 2005). Independent bloggers tend to rely on traditional news sites for stories and information (Cornfield et. al., 2005; Farrell & Drezner, 2008; Herring, et. al., 2004; Meraz, 2008). News aggregators like Google and Yahoo! follow the news agenda of major news organizations (Yu & Aikat, 2006). Even news media in peripheral countries tend to link to news and information produced by news media in core countries (Himelboim, 2010).

Table 1. Sites Attracting the Most Links From Other Sites

Site	# of In-Bound Links
Mercurynews.com (MediaNews Group)	57,944
Siliconvalley.com (MediaNews Group)	32,765
Insidebayarea.com (MediaNews Group)	28,299
Sfcurbed.com (Curbed.com)	25,699
Sf.eater.com (Curbed.com)	22,480
Sfgate.com (Hearst)	16,600
Alamanacnews.com (Embarcadero Media Publishing)	14,316
Contracostatimes.com (MediaNews Group)	12,970
Total	211,073

Our study of the Bay Area news system confirms this finding. The 114 sites in our study produced 246,737 total in-bound links. In-bound links are “links to” one site from another site. Just nine of the 114 sites in our sample attracted 85% of these links, or 211,073 of the total, (see Table 1). The *San Jose Mercury News* is the number one site “linked to” in this news system. This newspaper is owned by MediaNews Group, which also owns Siliconvalley.com, *The Oakland Tribune* (insidebayarea.com), and the *Contra Costa Times*, all of which also appear on this list of most “linked to” sites. Sf.curbed.com and Sf.eater.com are owned by curbed.com, a New York-based media company specializing in real estate and food websites. Rounding out our list, Sfgate.com is the online portal of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and alamanacnews.com is the online site of a group of community newspapers owned by the Embarcadero Media Publishing Company. In other words, except for sf.eater and sf.curbed, traditional media companies own the most “linked to” sites in the region, and the largest of these companies dominate the list.

Table 2. Sites Linking the Most to Other Sites

Site	# of In-Bound Links
Sf.eater.com (Curbed.com)	39,180
Contracostatimes.com (MediaNews Group)	37,178
Mercurynews.com (MediaNews Group)	34,270
Sf.curbed.com (Curbed.com)	31,840
Insidebayarea.com (MediaNews Group)	30,140
Ibabuzz.com (MediaNews Group)	27,806
Paloaltoonline.com (Embarcadero Media Publishing)	14,319
Total	214,733

The pattern of "linking from" one site to another, or out-bound links, is slightly more concentrated. The top seven sites account for 87%, or 214,733, of the total number of out-bound links. And the list of sites doing the most linking out to other sites is very similar to the list of sites attracting the most links: three news sites of the Bay Area News Group, Sf.eater.com and Sf.curbed.com, and Palo Alto Online (a website of the Embarcadero Media Publishing Company), all appear on this list. The only new site, Ibabuzz.com, is a sports website focused on the Oakland Raiders that is (of course) also owned by Bay Area News Group, which is owned by MediaNews Group.

If we use these data to generate basic measures of network "centrality," we find that traditional media sites are by far the most popular sites in the Bay Area news system. For instance, in a calculation of Eigenvector centrality, which measures the degree to which a node is connected to other nodes that are central to a network, the top five sites are, in order: sfgate.com = 1.0; mercurynews.com = .76; abclocal.go.com = .63; insidebayarea.com = 6.2; contracostatimes.com = .58. Similarly, the five sites that are most "between" other sites, that is, that other sites are most likely to use as go-betweens to get to other sites, are: ibabuzz.com (1681.63); sfgate.com (1581.07); Sf.curbed.com (1175.88); and, kqed.org (946.94). Kqed.org is the online platform for the KQED public radio station. Aside from this site (more on it and other similar sites in a moment), the numbers tell the same tale: traditional media organizations own the most popular sites, by far, in this news system.

Traditional media organizations own the most popular sites, by far, in this news system.

There are various ways one might explain this level of concentration. Traditionally, the ability to dominate a news agenda has been principally determined by a combination of access (to sources and resources) and reach (to audiences). More elite news outlets tend to reach larger audiences. The advertising revenue generated by these large audiences allows them to hire more reporters, and to place these reporters closer to the institutions that drive the public agenda. Greater access and reach give elite news outlets more ability to determine the stories and issues that will circulate through a news system. This was true in the age of mass media, and it may be important in the age of online media as well. Though there are now 100+ news-oriented sites operating in the Bay Area, most are very small, with limited resources and reach, and they may necessarily have to depend on traditional news media for most of the information flow in the network.

Preferential-attachment theory may also explain the relative concentration of information flows in this network. First proposed by Barábasi and Albert (1999), this theory explains the self-organizing character of certain kinds of complex networks. When a network is “scale-free,” meaning that the costs to one node of connecting to another are low, a certain dynamic takes root. First, the earliest nodes in a network tend naturally to have more connections, and their connections to others grow faster as the network enlarges. Thus, for instance, mercurynews.com, which began in the early 1990s, is one of the earliest online news sites in the Bay Area. It has simply had more time to make and attract even more links, giving it a natural advantage in the network. If this were the only principle at work, however, then the earliest sites would always have an advantage, and so always make and attract the most connections. The presence on our list of a site like Sf.eater, which only appeared in the last few years, indicates that this is not the only dynamic at work. Barabási and Albert add to their first principle a second: a new node in a network is more likely to link to the most popular nodes, if only to efficiently gain access to other nodes. In this way, nodes will “preferentially attach” to the most popular nodes in a network, which means that the more popular a node is at T_1, the more likely it is to be even more popular at T_2, T_3, and so on. Overall, Barábasi and Albert conclude, scale free networks are likely to exhibit “power law traits” in which 20% or fewer of nodes are likely to account for 80% or more of information flows (e.g., Barábasi, 2003; Watts, 2003). As one such scale-free network, the web has been shown to contain these traits (e.g., Fragoso, 2011; Meiss, et. al., 2008). The Bay Area news system may simply be another example of these principles at work.

No doubt these theories explain some of the dynamics at work, and we might have relied on them to explain the networking patterns in this news system. Then we calculated a measure of “closeness centrality” for the network. “Closeness centrality” tells us how near a site is to other sites in a network. Table 3 lists the 10 “closest” sites in the Bay Area news system. As the reader can see, this list looks almost nothing like the others. It is led by Almanacnews.com and Danvilleexpress.com, sites owned by the Embarcadero Media Company, and includes siliconvalley.com, which is owned by the Bay Area News Group. But it also includes two Patch sites, a black newspaper site (sfbayview.com), two community newspapers (pacificsun.com and claycord.com), and the blog site of a non-profit community development organization (community rejuvenation.blogspot.com). The major media site closest to other sites is the *Mercury News* site, which comes in at #54 on our list. This raised a question for us: how can it be that major media outlets are the most popular sites in a news system (as defined by most measures of network centrality), but are not very near other sites?

Table 3. Closest Sites in the Bay Area News System

Site	**Measure of "Closeness Centrality"**
Alamanacnews.com	4.009
Danvilleexpress.com	4.00
Halfmoonbay.patch.com	3.91
Belmont-ca.patch.com	3.91
Sfbayview.com	3.78
Pacificsun.com	3.76
Communityrejuvenation.blogspot.com	3.6
Claycord.com	3.51
Siliconvalley.com	3.4
Pleasantonweekly.com	3.32

This question led us to examine more closely the linking practices of the major media sites. When we did so, we found that the linking patterns in this network are artificially skewed by strategies adopted by these companies. When we pull out the Bay Area News Group, for instance, we find that these sites mostly link to and from one another. Mercurynews.com links to siliconvalley.com; siliconvalley.com links to insidebayarea.com; insidebayarea.com links to contracostatimes.com, and so on. In fact, over 95% of the links "to" and "from" these sites come from one another. Because the sites are very large, containing thousands of pages, they generate an enormous number of links, and so strongly skew the numbers of the overall network. In reality, however, they are strongly insulated from the rest of the network. Figure 1 visualizes this clustering effect. Every line represents a link from one site to another. The bold, arrowed lines represent especially strong relationships between the Bay Area News Group sites.

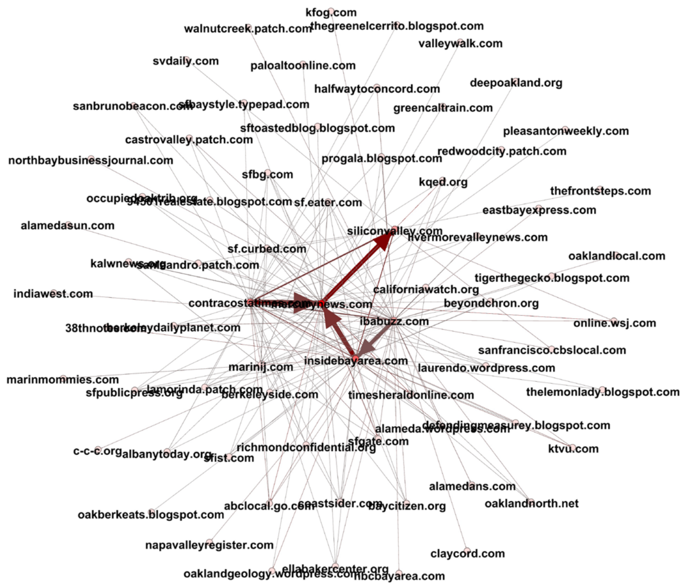


Figure 1. Bay Area News Group Cluster

The same pattern holds for Sfgate.com, the site of *The San Francisco Chronicle*. Our data show that Sfgate.com linked out to other sites 436,407 times. But 70% of these links are to sites owned by the *Chronicle*: imgs.sfgate.com, local.sfgate.com, subscriber-services.com, marketplace.sfgate.com, blog.sfgate.com, localcrimenews. com, and sfgate.kaango.com. Indeed, Sfgate.com links out only to 10 seed sites that are not owned by its parent company. A larger number of seed sites – 55 in all – link to sfgate. com. In total, SFGate only attracted 16,600 links from other sites or 6% of the overall number of links made in the network. As Figure 2 shows, the only sites external to Sfgate.com with which it has a strong relationship are Sf.eater.com and Sf.curbeded. com–sites owned by an online media company specializing in the topics of food and real estate.

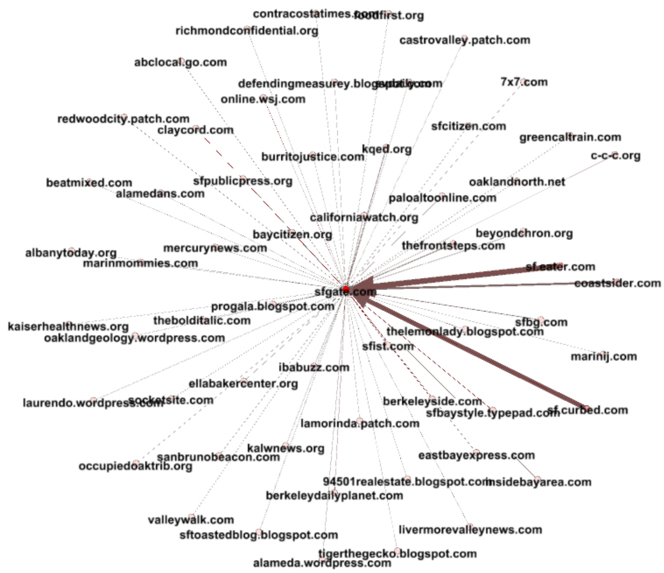


Figure 2. Sfgate.com Cluster

In sum, major media companies generate most of the links “to” and “from” their own sites. Why do they do this? We have found little in the popular literature on the digital strategies of these companies (Ingram, 2011; Searls, 2011; Shih, 2011; Stray, 2010) and we have yet to speak to the people responsible for developing them. It seems clear, however, that these linking practices are motivated at least in part by commercial imperatives. The architects of sfgate.com want to keep users on the site, clicking from internal page to internal page to internal page, in the hope of elevating user traffic numbers, because higher traffic numbers translate into higher rates that can be charged to advertisers. The same is true for sites owned by the Bay Area News Group. The more the company can keep a user inside the News Group, the higher the traffic numbers generated, and so the higher the ad rates that can be charged.

As a consequence of such practices, sfgate.com is far less consequential for the network than its footprint would imply. For instance, berkeleyside.com is an independent news site created by three veteran journalists. With a staff of seven, it is very small, and so cannot hope to cover a city the size of Berkeley in any depth. Therefore, it relies on its partners for help, which include KQED, the Bay Citizen, and the *Chronicle*. In fact, according to our data, berkeleyside.com linked to *Chronicle* content on 73 different occasions. However, a review of berkeleyside’s site indicates that *Chronicle* stories mostly appear under the heading, “Berkeley Wire,” an aggregation of the day’s news from many regional news outlets. Moreover, most of these are daily, event-driven stories, like one about the Chancellor of the University of California's 70th birthday, or another about a local murder. In other words, berkeleyside.com reporters followed up on no *Chronicle* stories, and no *Chronicle* stories influenced berkeleyside.com's reporting on any issue. At most, the *Chronicle* appears to be an alternative source for readily available content.

The *Chronicle's* strategy of intentionally NOT serving as a regional hub for public affairs journalism is consistent with the commercialization approach urban dailies have pursued for the past several decades. When urban dailies were bought up in large numbers by corporate chains in the 1980s and 1990s, they began to do several things at once: use market research to pinpoint more precisely consumer interests and needs; use computer technology to squeeze efficiencies out of reporters and editors; and, reorganize newspapers to make them more graphically-oriented, and more user-friendly (e.g., Downie & Kaiser, 2002; Fallows, 1996; Roberts & Kunkel, 2002; Squires, 1993; Underwood, 1993). This strategy led to newspapers with fewer reporters producing hard news about government and public policy, and more producing soft news about consumer practices, entertainment, and sports. The same dynamic appears to be at work for the online portals of these companies: fewer reporters producing public affairs journalism, and correspondingly more attention to driving user traffic.

Discussion

As we mentioned above, in a mass mediated environment, elite news outlets generally set news agendas because they have greater access to sources of information and journalistic resources, and broader reach with audiences (Lopez-Escobar et. al., 1998; Reese and Danielian, 1989; Roberts & McCombs, 1994). They have, in other words, the best stories from the best sources and the greatest ability to push these stories through the news system. Online, the ingredients for the same sort of influence are different. In the first instance, access to sources of information is more diffuse. Many more people – and not all of them journalists – have access to information that might drive a news agenda. Journalistic resources are also more widely diffused. A solitary journalist working with relatively inexpensive tools can produce the same sorts of stories as were once the sole province of reporters working in traditional newsrooms. Reaching large audiences also happens differently online. Due to the networked structure of the medium, it is not possible to broadcast content to an undifferentiated mass audience. Instead, content online flows in a viral manner, from hub to hub and thence to broader communities of people. It is important, therefore, for producers to establish relationships with these hubs if they wish to broaden the reach of their content (Solis, 2012).

The documentary "Kony2012" is an example of how this process works. The group that produced the documentary, Invisible Children, had been making films about the use of children as soldiers in Uganda since 2003. But in just a four-day period in March 2012, 40 million people viewed this particular documentary on YouTube. In so doing, the issue became a significant part of the news agenda. How did Invisible Children achieve this feat? The first thing to say is that its success would have been impossible in a mass mediated context in which mainstream professional news organizations exercise a strong gatekeeping function on the information flowing through their communities. But in a networked age, Invisible Children could combine its access to unique sources of information with inexpensive production tools to perform a feat of journalism that rivals that of any newsroom. However, even this was not enough. Invisible Children had been producing such movies since 2003. What changed in 2012? In the ensuring years, Invisible Children systematically built relationships online. It created a twitter feed that attracted over 300,000 followers, and a Facebook page that added another 2 million fans. It also built relationships with media celebrities such as Kim Kardashian, Ryan Seacrest, and Justin Bieber, who served as hubs to reach millions more people (e.g., Goodman & Preston, 2012; Steel, 2012). Content + Access + Relationships made it possible for Invisible Children to set a news agenda so powerful that it prodded reporters to ask press secretary Jay Carney about the issue during a White House press briefing (March 8, 2012).

If regional news outlets like the *San Jose Mercury News* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* retain access and resources, their linking practices suggest that they are less than motivated to build the sort of relationships that might make them powerful agenda setters. Their unwillingness to play this role may mean that regional news agendas will never be so cohesive as when McCombs and Shaw conducted their original agenda setting study in 1960s Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Then again, it may mean that an opportunity now exists for other organizations to step into the breach. Many organizations might do so, but which seem especially well suited to do so?

> ***California Watch has more reciprocal relationships with other sites in the news system than any other site.***

Our data suggest that a non-profit news network like one that has formed between the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR), California Watch and the Bay Citizen is best positioned to fill this void. A non-profit investigative journalism enterprise, CIR has been in business for 35 years. In that time, it has published a magazine and collaborated with major news outlets (such as “60 Minutes” and the *Los Angeles Times*) to produce award-winning investigative journalism. In 2009, CIR created California Watch, an online news site that is self-described as the “largest group of journalists dedicated to investigative reporting in the state.” California Watch employs 20 reporters, five editors, and eight development/engagement staff. Most of these journalists have had long careers working for such publications as the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, and the *Sacramento Bee*. In March 2012, CIR incorporated the Bay Citizen, an independent online news site that began operation in 2010. In an announcement on the Bay Citizen website, Robert Rosenthal, CIR’s executive director, imagined the three sites working in tandem with one another: CIR will cover national issues; California Watch will report on state issues; and the Bay Citizen will investigate regional issues.

This network certainly has access to sources and resources that rival any daily newspaper in the region. In fact, the combined investigative journalism experience of the three organizations is as great as any newsroom in the state, save perhaps the *Los Angeles Times*. Moreover, if their linking practices are any indication, they have established deep relationships across the news system. Together, California Watch and Bay Citizen link out to 33 of the 114 “seed sites” in our sample, or three times more sites than sfgate.com. Despite containing one third the number of pages, California Watch alone links to twice as many sites as sfgate.com. In fact, if we take inbound/outbound links together, and we exempt the traditional sites (which are mostly linking to one another) California Watch has more reciprocal relationships with other sites in the news system than any other site. Such linking practices are an indication that this network is intent on exercising influence in the news system. It partners with other organizations, links to their content, and, by producing relevant content of its own, attracts a good number of links itself. Moreover, with its strict focus on “hard news” investigations, the network has a greater chance of pushing issues onto the news agenda than sites like sfgate.com, which focus mostly on daily and “soft” news.

Conclusion

In subsequent research, we will work to test whether, and the extent to which non-profit networks are able to drive issues onto the news agenda of the broader system. We will expand our examination of what it means to have influence in a networked news environment and seek to identify variables that connect with democratic values. We hope to develop an understanding of the dynamics of the regional news ecosystem in the San Francisco Bay area that will allow us to begin comparing it with regional news systems in other parts of the U.S. and the world. Besides using an agenda-setting frame, we believe that network analysis may lead to the development of new theories and insights regarding the changing dynamics of a networked news system as distinct from, or in addition to, a mass media news ecosystem.

The weakened agenda-setting role of traditional media in regional news systems is not due to anything intrinsic to networked environments.

Whether or not these networks become more influential, one thing seems clear: The weakened agenda-setting role of traditional media in regional news systems is not due to anything intrinsic to networked environments. Rather, our data indicate that the choices of the major media organizations in the system bear some responsibility for this consequence. Understanding the choices and trade-offs that are being made by commercial and non-profit media organizations in the Bay area will allow editors and producers to shape more deliberate and explicit goals regarding the structure of their digital products. Should a news organization want to build or maintain influence in the region, understanding how such influence is earned and established in a networked communications environment is critical to future success.

Endnotes

1. This observation has also been made by writers Solis and Webber (2012) in their work on the effects of emerging media, most recently in their report “The Rise of Digital Influence.”

2. Solis and Webber (2012) note this strategy is common to many types of businesses that pursue traffic, page counts, likes and followers at the expense of core relationships.

3. It may also be the case that sophisticated use of social media will drive the news agenda under certain conditions, and that increasing use of mobile technology and other devices will complicate methodologies for studying agenda setting.

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