Mainstream Media Meets Citizen Journalism:

In Search of a New Model

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CMS Senior Thesis

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Problem Statement

In 2002, I hopped on the blogging bandwagon and started my own web log (or blog) on the pretext that I could type much faster than I could write, and so it made more sense to type my thoughts out in order to keep up with myself. Of course, I could easily have kept a private diary in a Microsoft Word document, but the idea that putting my thoughts on the Internet would make them available to everyone and anyone intrigued me. While my blog began as a space for me to vent my frustrations and “record” the events that took place in my everyday life – a sort of archive in case I forgot, I soon realized that through my blog, I was able to share my views on current events or certain social issues with anyone who had Internet access. I was also able to point out issues or occurrences that I thought deserved more attention. There was something captivating about knowing that even a “nobody’s” opinion like mine could be heard. As Dan Gillmor writes, “the read/write Web was truly born again. We could all write, not just read, in ways never before possible. For the first time in history, at least in the developed world, anyone with a computer and Internet connection could own a press. Just about anyone could make the news.”¹ And just about anyone has. With the rise of citizen journalism, an increasing number of people are “getting their understanding of the world from random lunatics riffing in their underwear, rather than professional journalists with standards and passports.”²

This Communications and Media Studies senior project aims to explore the issue of citizen journalism: what does citizen journalism mean for the newspaper industry? Of all the different forms of mainstream media, the newspaper enjoys the longest history. Despite the invention of the radio and the television, and their advantage of being more vivid and attractive

¹ Dan Gillmor, We The Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People (California: O’Reilly Media, Inc., 2004), 24.
² Michael Kinsley, “Do Newspapers Have a Future?” TIME, 2 October 2006, 75.
in their telling of the same news, the newspaper managed to survive in those days by adapting and keeping up with the times. More recently, newspapers have also had to deal with the “explosion” of the Internet over the past few years. Although most newspaper companies have responded by putting their content online for users to access for free, some newspapers, such as the New York Times, have now put select content behind a subscription wall – one has to pay to access such content. This move by the New York Times has been lauded by some, and heavily criticized by others. Exactly how newspapers should harness the power of the Internet is one of the questions that this Communications and Media Studies senior project will attempt to answer.

Another issue facing newspapers today is that of citizen journalism. The rise of citizen journalism, whether it be the “informal” blogs offering someone’s take on the news, or more “formal,” organized platforms such as www.ohmynews.com, www.globalvoicesonline.org, and www.backfence.com, is changing the way in which society receives and transmits information. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press claims that “11 percent of Internet users – 14 million Americans – read blogs,” and that growth has been astounding – “in 2003, 2.5 million people blogged and in 2004, as many as 8.8 million people blogged.”\(^3\) According to measurement tool technorati.com, 15,000 new weblogs are created every day and new conversations are initiated every 3 seconds.\(^4\) Today, “citizens consume the content that citizens create.”\(^5\) But is citizen journalism affecting the way news is reported and received as much as it has been hyped to?

This is a huge area of concern that is especially worrying for journalists and the newspaper industry, as it foretells a time when newspapers may not even be necessary anymore.

\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Ibid.
It is obvious that people in the business of journalism are concerned: the theme of MIT’s Communications Forum this year was “Will Newspapers Survive?” and Harvard’s Shorenstein Center for Press, Politics and Public Policy celebrated its 20th anniversary with a series of panel discussions on topics including “Traditional News Media: Optimism, Pessimism and Realism” and “New Media and News: Peering Over the Horizon.” At the same time, the growth of citizen journalism also raises issues for citizens themselves. The use of the word “citizen” to describe their form of journalism carries with it connotations of participation in a democratic society. Does citizen journalism really have democratic potential and what does that mean for society? This Communications and Media Studies senior project will look into all of these issues surrounding citizen journalism.
Project Significance

Firstly, this project has great social and academic significance as it deals with a current phenomenon that is pertinent to our abilities to be well-informed citizens of a democratic society. Recent events such as the London train bombings in 2005 show how citizen journalism played an active role in shaping media coverage in the immediate aftermath. A smoky image of people being evacuated along a train tunnel minutes after the bombing was taken by Adam Stacey on his camera phone, and posted online on Alfie Dennen’s mobile blog within an hour of its occurrence. Over the next few hours, news organizations such as the BBC, CNN and the *New York Times* jumped on this picture and used it in their breaking news reports. This camera phone picture, taken by an ordinary Londoner at a place and time that was not accessible to the cameramen of mainstream media, has come to define the London train bombings, and demonstrates how the relationship between mass media and society is changing. The debate on the use and significance of citizen journalism is very vibrant right now, and I hope to join the conversation.

Secondly, this project also has political significance. Citizen journalism has become involved in the United States’ political scene, one recent example being the video of Senator George Allen using the racial slur “macaca” during a campaign stop spreading like wildfire through YouTube.com, stirring up enough controversy that finally cost Senator Allen his 2006 bid for re-election. As the 2008 elections approach, many candidates have recognized the power of citizen journalism and are beginning to harness it through posting videos online and recruiting...
political bloggers as part of their campaign. It will be exciting to see how much citizen journalism will affect the upcoming elections.

Third, this project is personally significant. As I am personally involved in using the Internet to get my voice heard, and have a deep-seated interest in the numerous issues surrounding this powerful tool, this project will help me see how my actions and interests fit into the bigger picture.

This project also took on another level of significance in light of the shooting that occurred at Virginia Tech on Monday, April 16th, 2007. In the hours that followed, it was the blogs of Virginia Tech students that provided eyewitness accounts of what had happened and a live count of the death toll. Unable to provide this news faster than the students themselves, the mainstream media turned to these blogs as their sources of information, often lagging behind the blogs in the death toll (ABC News was still reporting a death toll of 20 students when it had already reached 33 on blogs – which later turned out to be the correct number). A video of police running with their weapons drawn and gunshots being fired in the background, captured by a student with his cell phone camera, became the backdrop of all the mainstream media’s reporting. This incident, one of the first major ones since the birth of social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, resulted in a furor of activity that may also have had a harmful effect on the public sphere by providing un-vetted misinformation. While I am deeply moved by this incident and continue to pray for the students at Virginia Tech, I also recognize the significance that it has for the role of citizen journalism in the media industries.
Literature Review

In order to better understand the discussion of citizen journalism, I will first provide background information in certain key areas: the role of journalism, the rise of the Internet and the Internet as a form of mass media, a working definition of citizen journalism, examples of different forms of citizen journalism, and the current conversations on issues surrounding citizen journalism.

The Role of Journalism

The press, or journalism, is often referred to as the fourth estate – a necessary component that acts as the watchdog for a healthy democracy. This is a huge responsibility, indicative of the important and integral role that journalism plays in our society. According to Michael Schudson, journalism is “the business of a set of institutions that publicizes periodically (usually daily) information and commentary on contemporary affairs, normally presented as true and sincere, to a dispersed and anonymous audience so as to publicly include the audience in a discourse taken to be publicly important.”\(^8\) In this definition, we see that journalism is both a “business” and at the same time a practice that should serve the public interest – goals that seem to be mutually exclusive. Two models that are used to understand the media business – the market model and the public interest model – provide different frameworks within which to analyze and understand this tension between business interests and the public interest that exists in journalism.

Market Model vs. Public Interest Model

The Market Model is similar to the perfect competition or free market model that one would encounter in economics. It suggests that “society’s needs can best be met through a

relatively unregulated process of exchange based on the dynamics of supply and demand.” In other words, profit-seeking businesses will always be able to provide for the demands of consumers as long as there is free competition amongst producers. Hence, the media should not be regulated by the government. Instead, by being profit-seeking, it will best be able to meet the public’s needs. While this economics-focused model argues that having a free market promotes efficiency, responsiveness, flexibility and innovation within the media industry, it can also give rise to monopolies or homogenized competition, which are a disservice to the public.

Applying this framework to journalism provides an explanation for some recent trends. For example, news producers have both been responsive and flexible to the demands of their consumers, giving them more of what they want and less of what they do not want, and adapting to these demands quickly. However, these advantages of free markets have resulted in a sharp rise in the production of infotainment – a watered-down version of news programs, including more entertainment features than serious content. The need to remain competitive and increase viewership in the short run has led many news broadcasters to produce more infotainment and less “hard news.” Such news programs are unlikely to provide enough “information and commentary on contemporary affairs” to produce an informed citizenry.

Furthermore, in order to stay ahead of the competition, news producers have found it necessary to constantly provide news, whether it be on cable television with news around the clock, or through morning and evening editions of the same newspaper with “new” news later in the day. Due to the flexibility, efficiency and innovation of news producers in a free market, they have responded to consumer demands by providing a never-ending stream of news. Although it

10 Ibid., 18-21.
may appear to be a good development at first, the pressure on journalists to constantly produce new stories has resulted in a sub-par standard of reporting, with sources that are not thoroughly checked because of the time pressure to be the first to break the news.

More worrisome is the fact that mergers and acquisitions have taken place in the media industry resulting in the convergence of a few big media conglomerates controlling numerous sources of information. Unbeknownst to most of the population, when they switch from CBS to UPN, or from MTV to Nickelodeon, they are still watching content owned by Viacom. Even when they watch Paramount films and read books published by Simon & Schuster, they are still receiving content controlled by Viacom. Six media conglomerates – Viacom, Time Warner, General Electric, Vivendi, News Corp, and Disney – control ninety percent of what we see, hear, and read. That is scary to say the least. What happens to democracy when only a few powerful voices can be heard? In the strong words of Ronnie Dugger, “these few corporate monarchs set the pervading tones and agendas for us all. …Freedom of the press has been upside-downed into corporate control of the press… Freedom of the press, far from guaranteeing democracy – its purpose when the country was founded – now protects the corporations that are methodically debasing democracy.”

Unlike the Market Model, the Public Sphere Model, on the other hand, suggests that the free market does not satisfy all of society’s needs. Moreover, there are some societal needs that

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“simply cannot be met via the market’s supply and demand dynamic.”\textsuperscript{16} These needs, such as diversity and substance, are in the public interest, but because they have little economic value, are disregarded in a market system based on consumer purchasing power. Finally, the Public Sphere Model argues that “because it is vital to a robust democracy, media content cannot be treated as merely another product… profitability cannot be the sole indicator of a healthy media industry.”\textsuperscript{17} As such, this model acknowledges the role that the government can play in the media industry to ensure that public interests are met.

According to Croteau and Hoynes, analyzing the media through the public sphere framework reveals some shortcomings of the free market system. Firstly, the free market is not democratic – the company with the most money is entitled to more power and influence in the marketplace. Secondly, as a result of the undemocratic nature of the free market, inequality is perpetuated. The income inequality present in society is reflected in the media: as explained above, we tend only to hear the voices and opinions of the rich and powerful media conglomerates, while independent sources struggle to be heard. Third, the free market system does not have moral values, as everything is based on profitability. Lastly, the free market is unable to meet social or democratic needs.\textsuperscript{18} For example, the public media is “an invaluable resource that should be available to citizens regardless of their ability to pay,”\textsuperscript{19} but the forces of supply and demand do not allow for the provision of such public goods. Also, news created toward “grabbing and holding the attention of consumers by shocking or pandering to them”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 23-26.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 26.
does not serve to inform the public and allow them to participate in meaningful democratic discussion.

Evidently, the basic difference between the Market Model and the Public Sphere Model is the way in which they view people: the Market Model sees people as consumers whereas the Public Sphere Model sees people as citizens.21 While the Market Model depicts the reality of journalism these days, the Public Sphere Model illustrates an ideal of what journalism should look like: a system that is accessible to everyone, where there is a free flow of information, and where there is breadth and diversity in the ownership and control of media outlets.22 The development and rise of the Internet as a new form of mass media has brought journalism one step closer to this ideal.

The Rise of the Internet

Most of us today cannot remember the world without email, instant messaging and Google. Parents’ stories of growing up without computers sound sacrilegious to today’s Information Age individuals working in a knowledge-based economy. Although the Internet is relatively young, it has revolutionized mass communications in such a way that people now think of time as pre-Internet and post-Internet. In fact, the Internet started out as a military system and only became available to the public in 1995.23 However, in the short span of ten years, the growth of the Internet has been staggering. In December 1995, the Internet had 16 million users, or 0.4% of the world population. Just five years later, the number of users had skyrocketed to

21 Ibid., 22.
22 Ibid.
361 million, more than 22 times the original number.\textsuperscript{24} The latest statistics in December 2006 indicate that there are now 1.1 billion Internet users, making up 16.6\% of the world population.\textsuperscript{25} This rate of growth is unprecedented. According to some media analysts, “it took electricity 50 years to reach 50 million users in the United States, whereas it took radio 38 years, it took personal computers 16 years, it took television 13 years, and it took the Internet just 4 years.”\textsuperscript{26} Indeed, John Pavlik did not exaggerate when he hailed the Internet as “the first and perhaps most powerful medium of global interactive communications.”\textsuperscript{27}

Not only is the Internet revolutionary because of its global reach, it is also the one medium that has been able to integrate all other forms of communication. While the television combined only audio and video, the Internet embraces “all the capabilities of the older media (text, images, graphics, animation, audio, video, real-time delivery).”\textsuperscript{28} What is more, the Internet also enables “interactivity, on-demand access, user control, and customization.”\textsuperscript{29} The Internet has undeniably become a form of mass media. But that is not all. The Internet is still constantly growing and evolving as users explore its different facets and discover new ways of harnessing its communicative power.

\textit{The Rise of Blogging}

One of these new forms of communication is the web log, better known as the “blog.” A blog is an online journal of sorts, a personal space on the Internet that a blogger (someone who writes a blog) can fill with whatever content he/she pleases. Some Internet users have used their

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Rice and Katz, “New Media, Internet News,” 122.
\textsuperscript{27} John V. Pavlik, \textit{Journalism and New Media} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), xii.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
blogs to talk about their everyday lives, to provide insight into their line of work (work blogs), to talk about new gadgets and technological developments (tech blogs), to comment on politics—the list is virtually endless. According to one journalist, these blogs are “proliferating like stars in the sky.” 74.9 million stars, to be more exact—a result of the blogosphere (total blogs tracked) doubling every 5-7 months from 2004 to 2006. Although the recent doubling rate of blogs (tracked by Technorati) has slowed to 320 days—and this is slow only in comparison to its initial growth rate—it is more because of Technorati’s improved ability to filter out splogs (spam blogs). Technorati’s April 2007 “The State of the Live Web” report boldly claims that “the state of the Blogosphere is strong, and is maturing as an influential and important part of the web.”

While a good number of these blogs are personal rants, have low readership, or could even be dead, there are a number in each industry/field that have risen to the level of national prominence. For example, in the area of politics, blogs like Daily Kos (http://www.dailykos.com), a liberal blog, receive about 600,000 daily visits. Engadget (http://www.engadget.com), a tech blog, ranked number 19 in Technorati’s “Top 50 Blogs and Mainstream Media” ranking, with more than 20,000 inbound blog sources. Indeed, the blogging phenomenon has changed the information landscape. “They [blogs] were the first tool that made it easy—or at least easier—to publish on the Web.”

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32 Ibid.  
owns a press. No longer are individuals merely consumers, they are now also producers of information. This paradigm shift from consumer to consumer and producer has sparked an entire movement of user-generated content now known as Web 2.0.

Web 2.0

The combined December 25, 2006 and January 1, 2007 issue of TIME was titled “Person of the Year: You.” On the cover was a graphic of a computer showing a YouTube video being played. Reflective Mylar was used to create a mirror for the screen portion of the graphic because it “literally reflects the idea that you, not we, are transforming the information age.” This development from the Internet as simply another means through which producers could reach consumers to the Internet as a tool for consumer empowerment has been dubbed “Web 2.0.” In the age of Web 2.0, it is “not enough just to find that obscure old movie; now you can make your own film, distribute it worldwide and find out what people think almost instantly.” Not surprisingly, a plethora of websites has sprung up to jump on the Web 2.0 bandwagon.

Some noteworthy websites that promote the Web 2.0 mindset include:

- **Amazon.com** – its use of customer reviews, lists and guides (providing “if you liked this…”-style recommendations) has made shopping a communal experience;
- **Wikipedia** – a crowdsourcing model that shows that “the masses are as smart as the experts;”
- **YouTube** – the video hosting and sharing site that allows everyone to be director, producer and actor;

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39 Ibid., 61.
- **Digg** – a website that allows the crowd to become news editors by “digg”-ing stories that they like and “burying” those that they do not like;
- **Last.fm** – the self-proclaimed “social music revolution” that “learns what you like” in order to make personalized recommendations and connect users with similar tastes.⁴⁰

This list is certainly not exhaustive, with many more websites emerging to join their ranks every day.

Whether all this user-generated content can be considered citizen journalism is questionable as it depends on one’s definition of citizen journalism, which is by no means set in stone at this point. What is clear though, is that “from YouTube auteurs to bloggers to amateur photographers competing with the paparazzi, user-generated content is revolutionizing the media landscape” and is something that everyone, especially those in the media industries, needs to be aware of.

**Working Definition of Citizen Journalism**

Citizen journalism is one of many buzzwords that were born as a result of the development and rise of the Internet. Broadly speaking, it refers to a break down in the traditional relationship between the “monologue broadcaster” and the “grateful viewer.”⁴¹

Because of the globalization and empowerment that the Internet causes, “journalists now need to think about a global audience that not only reads what they write and report but can comment, provide perspective, and offer new insight into the complexities of an increasingly global society.”⁴² Much like how the clothing brand FUBU acquired the meaning “For Us, By Us” (referring to African Americans) in its attempt to make a statement against predominantly white-

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⁴² Pavlik, *Journalism and New Media*, 27.
owned sportswear companies exploiting African American culture for their clothing designs, citizen journalism has come to mean a type of journalism that is “of the people, by the people, as well as for the people;” a type of journalism that has its roots in a dissatisfaction with the quality of news coming from the media conglomerates.

However, many in the media industries agree that citizen journalism is somewhat of a misnomer. Journalism, according to Phil Primack, is a process “that centers on fact-based, balanced, edited and verified information, presented in a coherent and understandable way, to as broad an audience as possible.” It is a “science that requires some training and qualifications, certain ethical standards, and credibility.” Therefore, so defined, it is not possible for any random citizen to be a journalist, but it is, however, possible for any random citizen to practice journalism, provided that facts are checked, information is verified, and the information is broadcast – a given with the Internet.

Looking at the bigger picture, Bill Densmore claims that “the phrase “citizen journalism” is an imperfect attempt to describe a new class of observer and participant in the public sphere.” According to Densmore, before the Industrial Revolution things moved at a slower pace and citizens were able to engage in civic affairs locally and personally, thus there was little need for a journalist. But as the world population grew, globalization occurred, and business and communication took place at a faster pace, citizens were less able to personally experience everything that was going on around them; “and so the civic sphere began to depend upon proxies of the public to gather critical news – journalists.” However, over time, commercial

43 Kolodzy, Convergence Journalism, 218.
44 Phil Primack, interview by author, April 2007.
45 Brian Reich, interview by author, March 2007.
46 Bill Densmore, interview by author, April 2007.
47 Ibid.
interests have taken over these journalistic services, influencing the type of news that is reported and preventing “information necessary for the functioning of a democracy”\textsuperscript{48} to be broadcast. Citizen journalism is therefore the new development of citizens taking advantage of the low cost of entry, through the Internet, to once again observe and participate in the public sphere. It is a “form of social production”\textsuperscript{49} that is redefining the concept of community on the Internet.\textsuperscript{50} As such, the concept of citizen journalism is constantly changing and evolving every day.

In the seminal report “We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information,” citizen journalism is described as “a citizen or citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information.”\textsuperscript{51} This is the working definition of citizen journalism that will be used for the purposes of this thesis. To further elaborate on this definition, citizen journalism:

\begin{quote}
…can encompass blogs that represent commentary on the day’s events or blogs that serve as community news postings. It can involve a wiki, in which a news item or commentary is posted and anyone can add to or edit it. It can be a podcast reviewing favorite groups on a local music scene. It can be a collaborative effort between a reporter and experts to write and report a story, or it can entail a niche group of people, such as office workers or homeless activists, who publish news, information, and insights about their world.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Stephen Wilmarth, interview by author, April 2007.
\textsuperscript{50} Kolodzy, \textit{Convergence Journalism}, 221.
\textsuperscript{52} Kolodzy, \textit{Convergence Journalism}, 220.
\end{flushright}
While it may seem as if citizen journalism is creeping into every aspect of mainstream media to overthrow existing practices, it is important to realize that citizen journalism is not necessarily an attempt to take over the traditional news media, but to complement and supplement it.\textsuperscript{53} In fact, both forms of journalism will not be able to survive independently. This discussion will be pursued later in the thesis.

\textit{Types and Examples of Citizen Journalism}

To ensure a more complete understanding of the different forms that citizen journalism can take, this section of the literature review will showcase a few examples. The following examples are by no means better than others, but were selected more to clearly illustrate the different types of citizen journalism. The types of citizen journalism highlighted here are also not exhaustive. As this field is changing every day, not only is an exhaustive list virtually impossible to compile, it will also be out-of-date within minutes.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
Backfence.com, started by Mark Potts and Susan DeFife, revolves around the idea of, literally, a back fence – but in virtual reality. Before the age of computers, the back fence was the place where conversations between neighbors frequently took place, where information about the local community was exchanged. Now, people rarely have the time to stand at their back fences and talk to their neighbors. They may work long hours, have to shuttle the children around, or may simply want to multi-task. Not only does Backfence.com allow people to do all that they need to do while still keeping in touch with the goings-on in their neighborhood, it expands the conversation from one between next-door neighbors, to one between everyone in the entire community. Answers to questions such as “What's happening with the new development down
the street? Does anybody know a good house painter? What's the best place in town to find good Thai food? Who's going to be the new junior high school principal? Anybody got tips about good bike trails? When is the next PTA meeting? can all be found at Backfence.com, where all content is citizen-generated. In their words: “none of us knows as much as all of us.”

According to co-founder Susan DeFife, Backfence.com was started “to fill a gap left by metropolitan daily newspapers that were stretching to cover the ever-expanding metropolitan area.” What is exciting about Backfence.com is that although it began by catering to one neighborhood in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., its model of providing hyperlocal news has caught on and Backfence.com now operates in 13 different neighborhoods, including some in California and Illinois. The founders have also been able to make this venture economically viable by hosting local advertisements and online business listings, and have even recently received funding from investors.

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55 Ibid.  
56 Kolodzy, Convergence Journalism, 235.
International News – Globalvoicesonline.org

Global Voices Online is a non-profit citizen journalism project that was initiated by Harvard Law School’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society. The website aims to “aggregate, curate, and amplify” global conversations, drawing special attention to areas and people that are usually overlooked by the mainstream media. In order to ensure the credibility and legitimacy of the bloggers and the stories that they contribute to the website, Global Voices Online has an international team of volunteer authors, regional blogger-editors and translators that have either been invited to contribute or hired (editors). Because these people are natives of their country, they are able to understand the context and relevance of the overwhelming amount

57 Global Voices Team, Global Voices Online >> About, http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/about/.
of information that comes out of their country every day, to sieve through this information, make sense of it, and highlight what mainstream media is leaving out and bloggers are picking up.\textsuperscript{58}

The team at Global Voices Online recognizes that “the international English-language media ignores many things that are important to large numbers of the world’s citizens, …[and] aims to redress some of the inequities in media attention by leveraging the power of citizens’ media.”\textsuperscript{59} Part of their work towards this goal includes an Outreach program that helps people in oppressed areas to find their voice online, and the daily translation of their news content into seven different languages – perhaps more in the future.

**Online Newspaper – Ohmynews.com**

![Screenshot of OhmyNews (17 April, 2007)](ohmynews.png)

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
Seven years ago, before citizen journalism was a buzzword, Oh Yeon-ho of South Korea started OhmyNews, an experiment that he hoped would encourage “every citizen to be a reporter.”\textsuperscript{60} Seven years later, OhmyNews has become a poster child for citizen journalism. The original Korean version of OhmyNews began with 727 citizen reporters and 4 editors,\textsuperscript{61} and now boasts 41,000 citizen reporters.\textsuperscript{62} All articles are read by staff editors before being published online – “about 70 percent of the roughly 200 stories submitted each day”\textsuperscript{63} make the cut. In fact, according to Oh, “while citizens like to write their own articles, many also like to be edited by professional journalists.”\textsuperscript{64} With this in mind, Oh’s model has merged the benefits of citizen journalism, such as its diversity of voices, with the benefits of traditional journalism – its editing and vetting capacity. Furthermore, OhmyNews has an interesting economic aspect: contributors of top stories that make it to the front page are paid ten to twenty dollars, and “site users can pay a “tip” to a particular story’s citizen reporter if they like the story.”\textsuperscript{65} This could very well become a business model for citizen journalism in the future.

In 2003, this OhmyNews model of journalism was replicated in Denmark by Eric Larsen, creator of Flix.dk.\textsuperscript{66} Soon after, in 2004, an English version of OhmyNews – OhmyNews International – was launched. This expansion in outreach was followed by an expansion in content to include podcasts and video with citizen anchors. Most recently, OhmyNews Japan

\textsuperscript{61} Kolodzy, \textit{Convergence Journalism}, 231.
\textsuperscript{63} Gillmor, \textit{We the Media}, 127.
\textsuperscript{64} Kolodzy, \textit{Convergence Journalism}, 231.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 233.
\textsuperscript{66} Hauben, “Happy Seventh Birthday OhmyNews.”
debuted in 2006 with 1,000 citizen reporters.\textsuperscript{67} Oh may not have realized this back in 2000, but what he has started could very well be the basis for a new model of journalism. “The traditional paper says ‘I produce, you read’,” claims Oh, “but we say ‘we produce and we read and we change the world together.’”\textsuperscript{68}

**Collaborative News – Wikinews.org**

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{wikinews_screenshot.png}
\caption{Screenshot of Wikinews (17 April, 2007)}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{68} Yeon-ho Oh, quoted in Janet Kolodzy, Convergence Journalism: Writing and Reporting across the News Media (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 233.
Employing the same software technology of its better-known counterpart Wikipedia, Wikinews uses a wiki to enable anyone to revise or contribute content. As such, news stories can be built from a single sentence describing an event or observation, with contributors adding, removing, and/or improving on the content. It is everyone’s collaborative effort that creates the news stories on Wikinews. This form of “journalism” facilitated the reporting of incidents such as the London train bombing in 2005 and the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004. In both cases, “the beginnings of Wikinews articles appeared on the site within minutes of the events. Initial information was just a few sentences, but revisions were made every few minutes,” and in this manner, a news story was developed. The beauty of wiki technology is that even today, years after those two events, the articles can still be revised to further improve their accuracy or updated to reflect new information.

While it is inevitable that “John Seigenthalers” will occur now and then, Wikinews has gone to great lengths to ensure that the news published on its websites is as close to journalistic standards as possible. A Wikinews guide to writing an article begins by asking the question “Is your story news?,“ directing users to the Wikinews content guide where specific instructions are given: articles must be written from a neutral point of view, sources must be cited, and reporting must be original. And if any of these standards are not met, we will have to trust the 10,299 registered users (as of October 2006) to discover and revise.

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69 Kolodzy, Convergence Journalism, 235.
70 Ibid., 237.
71 In 2005, Brian Chase anonymously posted false information about John Siegenthaler, Sr. in a Wikipedia entry. This hoax was not discovered and corrected until four months later.
Vlog – Jetsetshow.com

In the beginning, there were blogs where people could scribble their thoughts online. Most were text-only. Then, as it became easier to upload and store photos on the Internet for free, people began inserting images in between their text and setting up photologs, or the pictorial version of a blog. Now, with YouTube – a free distribution channel allowing anyone and everyone to be producer, director and actor, we have the vlog (video blog). Jetset, one of many vlogs currently in cyberspace, is a Vloggie Award winner. Created by Zadi Diaz and Steve Woolf, it is a five-minute weekly installment about global teen culture, featuring correspondents...
in both the United States and Japan. Unlike other vlogs that feature people talking about their own lives, Jetset provides an informal and upbeat kind of “soft news.”

Combining the concepts of vlogs and podcasting, Justin Kan has coined the term “lifecasting” to describe his project, Justin.tv. Kan has a camera attached to his head 24/7 – in the bathroom, on a date, in the car, everywhere he goes – that delivers a live feed to Justin.tv. The only time the camera is taken off his head is when he goes to bed. Essentially, what this means is that by going to his website, we can see and experience the life of Justin Kan for ourselves. Although Justin.tv has only been broadcasting live for 30 days (as of April 18, 2007), it has already gained hundreds of loyal viewers. Using a business model based on product placement, “Kan’s ultimate goal is to build the site into a network of hundreds of lifecasters, each with their own channel, making it yet another competitor to traditional television.” While it is unclear if Kan’s “lifecasting” is citizen journalism per se, it will be interesting to see how it develops and if citizen journalists will adopt the concept.

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Initiated by New York University’s Jay Rosen in March 2007, AssignmentZero is an experiment in pro-am journalism. “Pro” refers to professional journalists who will guide, edit, set standards, oversee fact-checking and ultimately publish the final version of the story. “Am” refers to members of the public – citizen journalists – who will voluntarily contribute to the project on their own time if they feel so inclined. Pro-am journalism, inspired by Korea’s OhmyNews, is the collaborative effort of both professionals and citizen journalists to produce news stories. While this project is still in the experimental stage and its outcome is hard to predict, the hopes of a future model for journalism rest on its success. In the words of Rosen,

76 Jay Rosen, “Letter to All Participants,” Why We’re Doing This | AssignmentZero, http://zero.newassignment.net/about.
“AssignmentZero is a starting point, a base line. Who knows where we will end up. But if reporting in the open style ever comes into its own – at our site or someone else’s – that might very well change journalism and expand what’s humanly possible with the instrument of a free press.”

Many other examples of citizen journalism exist on the Internet, with that number increasing every day. The “case study” examples presented here illustrate the changing relationship between information and society. While in the past society lapped up whatever information the mainstream media presented to it, now society is playing an active role in aggregating, organizing, and even creating information. However, there are two sides to every coin. Citizen journalism has a lot of potential, but it is not perfect.

77 Ibid.
Method

Interviews

Considering the fact that citizen journalism directly affects the livelihood of journalists and those working in the various media industries, it was only logical that I should interview industry professionals to get a sense of the sentiments of those in the field. My list of people to interview started out with contacts provided by both of my thesis readers, as they knew suitable people through their line of work. Some of these contacts then in turn introduced me to other people that they knew who I could interview. This social network proved extremely useful and provided me with six interview candidates, including people in the media industries, professors of media and journalism, and bloggers. As most of these people are busy professionals, the interviews were conducted through email. After receiving their initial responses, I replied with follow-up questions to clarify certain issues or ask more about interesting ideas, thus creating the effect of having a conversation.

This semester, on top of my classes, I also did an internship at Cone, Inc., a marketing and public relations firm that is part of the Omnicom Group. My mentor at Cone, Inc. introduced me to their New Media Director, Brian Reich, who kindly agreed to be interviewed for my thesis. I also interviewed Glenda Manzi, who is teaching a course at Tufts, offered for the first time this semester, called “Television in the Age of YouTube.”

Interview Candidates

Bill Densmore is the director and editor of the Media Giraffe Project at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and the New England News Forum. He is also a director of the Action Coalition for Media Education. As a career journalist, he has written for The Associated Press,
the *Boston Globe*, *ComputerWorld Magazine*, and various trade publications. He also spent some time working in public radio.

**Aldon Hynes** is a blogger at [http://www.orient-lodge.com](http://www.orient-lodge.com). Before entering the blogosphere, he worked as an IT Executive on Wall Street. Now, he spends his time blogging, some of it professionally. He also speaks at conferences about blogging and works for campaigns that he believes in, such as Governor Dean’s 2003 presidential bid. In 2004, Hynes received credentials from the Democratic Party to cover the National Convention as a blogger.

**Jill Lang** currently teaches the course “Citizen Journalism and the Web” for University of Massachusetts-Amherst’s Certificate of Online Journalism. She has more than 20 years of experience in community journalism, which includes writing for the *Gloucester (Mass.) Daily Times*, the *Portland (Maine) Press Herald*, the *Maine Sunday Telegram*, and the *Rockland (Maine) Courier-Gazette*. Lang also spent the last seven years building a community journalism model – VillageSoup ([http://www.villagesoup.com](http://www.villagesoup.com)) – that merges a community online with a local weekly newspaper.

**Colin Maclay** is the Managing Director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School. He is also a fellow at the University of Washington’s Center for Internet Studies and Advisor to the World Computer Exchange. Especially interested in information and communication technologies (ICTs), he has worked in India, Latin America and at the international level on ICT policy, and aims to effectively integrate ICT with social and economic development.
**Glenda Manzi** teaches the course “Television in the Age of YouTube” at Tufts University. Before teaching at Tufts, she worked as Executive Producer for Botticelli Interactive, an Internet new media company. Her career also includes more than 25 years of experience in television, radio, newspapers, and Internet media. The majority of her career was spent working at WGBH-TV, Boston’s PBS affiliate, producing news and documentaries. Manzi is a three-time Emmy Award winner.

**Phil Primack** is a freelance writer and editor based in Medford, Massachusetts. His work covers politics, the economy and other public policy issues, and has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, *CommonWealth, Boston*, and the *Columbia Journalism Review*. He has been a policy advisor to elected officials such as former congressman Joseph P. Kennedy, II. Primack also teaches the course “Media Law and Ethics” at Tufts University.

**Brian Reich** currently works at Cone, Inc. as the New Media Director. Before working at Cone, Reich was involved in politics, serving as Vice President Gore’s Briefing Director in the White House, and consulting, running his own business. A self-professed new media-junkie, Reich writes and speaks regularly on issues involving the impact of the Internet and technology on politics, society and the media. He is the editor of Thinking About Media ([http://www.thinkingaboutmedia.com](http://www.thinkingaboutmedia.com)) and contributing editor to the Personal Democracy Forum ([http://www.personaldemocracy.com](http://www.personaldemocracy.com)).

**Stephen Wilmarth** is the co-founder and Director of Program Development at the Center for 21st Century Skills, where he works on designing and delivering programs that foster essential
academic, analytic, communicative and creative skills for high schools in Connecticut. He has taught in public and independent schools for five years. Wilmarth is also a technology entrepreneur, and has led seminars on e-business and strategy at various universities such as MIT’s Sloan School of Management and London Business School.

**Interview Questions**

- What do you consider citizen journalism to be?
- What do you think about the rise of citizen journalism? Why/Please elaborate.
- How has your company/what you do integrated citizen journalism into its products/services? If it hasn’t, why not?
- What do you see as some of the possible advantages of the citizen journalism movement?
- Do you think citizen journalism is a threat to the media industry? Why or why not?
- What effect has citizen journalism had on your daily work?
- Do you think the media industries should embrace citizen journalism? Why or why not?
- What has citizen journalism meant for newspapers? Television? News that appears on the Internet?
- What do you think about the claim that citizen journalism has democratic potential?
- What impact do you think citizen journalism will have on society at large?
- Because citizen journalism does not necessarily go through the same vetting process that mainstream journalism goes through, what do you think the public at large needs to understand about citizen journalism?

Depending on the responses I received, the interviews went in different directions. Some follow-up questions that I asked were:
- What are some problems that you see with citizen journalism?
- What do you think about the argument that the rise of citizen journalism has caused a fragmentation of society, with people only reading the news that interests them? Doesn’t this work against citizen journalism’s claim of enhancing democracy?
- What do you think about the argument that the blogosphere is self-correcting, that the power of the crowd is able to prevent misinformation from perpetuating?

I analyzed the results of these eight interviews alongside the literature that I found on the promises and problems of citizen journalism, its democratic potential, and the issue of vetting and fact-checking.

**Conferences**

I had the privilege of attending two conferences, which drew my attention to issues that media professionals themselves thought to be important and also shaped my conception of citizen journalism. The first was the MIT Communications Forum 2006, with the topic “Will Newspapers Survive?” I attended the session on “The Emergence of Citizens’ Media,” where I was introduced to the ideas of Dan Gillmor, the author of *We The Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*, a great book that truly embraced the concept of citizen journalism by posting drafts of chapters online for anyone to comment on, and then editing them with the feedback in mind.

The second conference I attended was part of the 20th anniversary celebration of Harvard University’s Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. The conference was titled “The Future of the News” and I attended two sessions: “Traditional News Media: Optimism, Pessimism and Realism” and “New Media and News: Peering Over the Horizon.” It was through this conference that I gained more insight into the business aspect of journalism and
was also able to observe an interesting debate between proponents of new media and those who were more skeptical.

Altogether, I believe that the combination of research, interviews and conferences provided me with a well-rounded and balanced foundation on which to build my arguments.
Results

Promises of Citizen Journalism

A relatively new movement facilitated by the rise of the Internet as a form of mass communications, my research and interviews have revealed various promising aspects of citizen journalism.

Firstly, one oft-mentioned advantage of citizen journalism is the diversity of voices and fresh perspectives it engenders in comparison to the mainstream media:

Our current media ecosystem is dominated by a monoculture… the monoculture of corporate media organizations with reporting done by people coming out of the journalism schools across the country, belonging to the same professional journalism societies, and covering the news very much *the same way as everyone else*. Citizen journalism is different. (Aldon Hynes, interview by author, March 2007)

It is different because everyone has a different perspective on the same issues, a different style of writing, a different background, a different voice. And now, with an almost-zero-cost distribution channel, everyone and anyone – not just journalists – can express themselves and share their views with others.

Related to the increased diversity of voices are the ideas that “more points of view can create a more informed debate,”\(^7\) thus strengthening democracy, and that the increased diversity itself democratizes the playing field of journalism. These issues regarding democracy will be further discussed later (see Democratic Potential of Citizen Journalism).

Secondly, citizen journalism is able to fill the gaps that mainstream media has left, intentionally or not. With “more eyes and ears in the community, helping to spot, or even report,

\(^7\) Jill Lang, interview by author, April 2007.
news,” citizen journalists help to cover the hyperlocal news that concerns their daily lives, but that the mainstream media does not have the resources to cover – and who better to report on what happens in the neighborhood than the residents themselves.

Financial difficulties have also led many news organizations to close their foreign bureaus and cut back on the number of news staff. American media companies slashed a total of 18,000 news media jobs in 2006 – an 88 percent increase over the previous year. Those are staggering numbers for any industry, but they are especially significant because the news media industry is in the business of keeping citizens informed. Reporting all around has suffered as a result, with coverage of international news taking the hardest blow. This is where citizen journalism can step in: websites like Global Voices Online and OhmyNews provide news from countries all around the world, reported by locals who understand the culture and context of the events they report on.

Citizen journalism is also able to fill the gap by providing information on issues that the mainstream media have intentionally chosen to avoid, perhaps due to possible conflicts of interest. With citizens willing to spend time and effort digging to the bottom of things, “a worthy story cannot easily be censored by omission.” One example is the Trent Lott affair in 2002. At Senator Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday party, Lott made remarks praising Thurmond’s policies of racial segregation. Although this story was no longer reported in the mainstream press within 48 hours, bloggers did not let it go. “Over time, more and more instances of the same

79 Ibid.
80 Glenda Manzi, interview by author, April 2007.
82 Bill Densmore, interview by author, April 2007.
“misspeaking” emerged. Finally, the story broke back into the mainstream press, forcing Lott to resign as senate majority leader. As can be seen, citizen journalism has the potential to cover areas that the mainstream media misses.

Another advantage of the citizen journalism movement that Jill Lang points out is its ability to motivate the mainstream media to improve: “editors and executives at Mainstream Media [now] have to think outside the box that is a newspaper page.” Indeed, more competition, according to the free market model, spurs organizations to produce products and services of a better quality, ultimately benefiting the general public. One such improvement is the shift towards convergence journalism – “a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications system, toward multiple ways of accessing media content” – that news organizations are currently making. In much the same way that citizen journalism benefits society, convergence journalism is touted to produce “more engaging reporting, more complete information, and news that better reflects the complexities and nuances of an increasingly diverse and pluralistic society.”

Not only can citizen journalism act as an incentive for the mainstream media to improve, it can also re-engage members of the public who no longer tune in to the mainstream media and are disconnected from society. According to Brian Reich, “people like to hear from voices they recognize,” therefore engaging the community in creating news may be a way to reconnect

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84 Jill Lang, interview by author, April 2007.
86 Pavlik, *Journalism and New Media*, 23.
87 Brian Reich, interview by author, March 2007.
people and reinvigorate interest in what is going on around them. This potential to re-engage citizens no doubt is consequential for citizen journalism’s democratic potential too.

Finally, the speed at which citizen journalism can deliver news is unprecedented. The London train bombings of 2005 and Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 are often cited as great examples of how people had the news on the Internet faster than any mainstream news organization:

Within minutes of the event in London, an article appeared in Wikipedia. Within hours, a community of citizen journalists [was] adding hundreds of entries, correcting misinformation, and generally creating an accurate portrayal of events in near-real time.

(Stephen Wilmarth, interview by author, April 2007)

But although such instant information is highly desired and valued in a world of instant noodles and instant messaging, the speed of reporting in citizen journalism is also problematic.

Problems with Citizen Journalism

While there is a lot of hype surrounding the promises of citizen journalism, there is just as much concern about some of the problems with citizen journalism, one of the main concerns being the issues of vetting, credibility and accuracy. Unfortunately, the same speed that brings us instant information also results in an inordinate amount of misinformation. This problem in turn spawns another one: “many of the major media companies, from newspapers to cable news outlets, are getting much of their top stories off the Internet from independent bloggers or through social networks.”

Because of many news organizations’ financial struggles, there is a race to see who can break the news first, thus attracting a higher reader/viewership and commanding a higher price for advertising space. More accurate and credible news is sacrificed in favor of speed. In these situations, “with the pressures of instantaneous net communications,

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88 Stephen Wilmarth, interview by author, April 2007.
and the proliferation of blogs, the tendency will be to lessen the levels of safeguards in order to get the story out there.” The debate surrounding vetting, credibility and accuracy is further discussed later (see Issues with Vetting, Credibility and Accuracy).

Another downside of citizen journalism is that “some use the power of their press better and more productively than others.” The problem lies in the “others,” who often propagate unsubstantiated gossip and rumor, [which] can elevate to a level perceived as “news,” and affect the public sphere in potentially harmful ways. The open nature of the Internet means that people can manipulate and misuse it for their own purposes. For example, Brian Chase played a prank on his colleague, who held John Seigenthaler, Sr. in high esteem, by editing Seigenthaler, Sr.’s biography on Wikipedia, adding sentences insinuating that Seigenthaler, Sr. may have played a role in the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy. Unfortunately, this was one instance where the vetting mechanism of the blogosphere failed, and the misinformation stayed on the Internet for more than four months, tarnishing Seigenthaler, Sr.’s reputation and also breeding unnecessary mistrust of citizen journalism.

Democratic Potential of Citizen Journalism

What are you talking about when you say ‘democratizing the media’? Is it using media to further democratic ends, to create an environment conducive to the democratic process through unity, empathy and civil discourse? Or does it mean handing over the means of production, which is the logic of public access?

In both my research and my interviews, I came across various interpretations of democracy in relation to citizen journalism. I have identified three main interpretations: citizen

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89 Phil Primack, interview by author, April 2007.
90 Jill Lang, interview by author, April 2007.
91 Bill Densmore, interview by author, April 2007.
journalism as a democratic means of expression, citizen journalism breeding a more informed citizenry thus leading to deliberative democracy, and citizen journalism strengthening democracy in terms of leading more people to vote.

The diversity of voices made available, and the ease with which these fresh perspectives can be shared using the Internet as a distribution channel, make citizen journalism an undeniably democratic means of expression:

In much the same way that punk rock embodied an “anyone-can-do-it” outlook, blogging puts the Web in the hands of its citizenry. It is an incurably democratic means of expression. Puny technical know-how is required. All you need is a computer… or the address of a good cybercafé… and something you believe worth saying.93 In other words, the Internet has leveled the playing field by providing a means of production and distribution that is available to almost anyone, allowing an equal, democratic opportunity for voices to be heard.

Looking at the second interpretation, some argue that “the strength of our democracy depends on an informed populace,”94 but citizens today are far from informed. Lessig makes the strong statement: “our democracy has atrophied.”95 He attributes this to the lack of a time, place and effort to enable citizen deliberation, or democratic deliberation.96 But citizen journalism has brought us a step closer to the ideal of democratic deliberation through its ability to inform – both in accessibility to information and in filling the gaps left by mainstream media – and its encouragement of critical thinking:

94 Aldon Hynes, interview by author, March 2007.
95 Lessig, Free Culture, 41.
96 Ibid., 42.
As more and more citizens express what they think, and defend it in writing, that will change the way people understand public issues. It is easy to be wrong and misguided in your head. It is harder when the product of your mind can be criticized by others. …The writing of ideas, arguments, and criticism improves democracy. ⁹⁷

The rise of citizen journalism has also encouraged citizens to be more involved in the deliberation of important issues. According to research done by the Media Giraffe Project, people who take on the role of citizen journalists are extremely concerned about fairness and accuracy, and about making a difference – “righting what’s wrong and… shining light on dark crevices of human behavior.” ⁹⁸ These findings are certainly promising for the future of democracy in the United States.

Yet at the same time, a very opposite effect seems to have arisen – a “ghettoization” or balkanization of society, in Hynes’ terms, where people only seek out information from sources that are most like themselves or that agree with their specific ideologies. ⁹⁹ Surveys show that people are using the Internet to find information that aligns with their interests instead of seeking “general enlightenment,” or to be better informed. ¹⁰⁰ This fragmentation of society is partly a result of the information overload that citizen journalism has perpetuated. Society at large may be “overwhelmed and [thus] whittle down its news and information choices to a very few outlets.” ¹⁰¹ It is also partly due to citizen journalism’s distribution medium. In the past one would have to sit through an entire news broadcast, whether or not all of it was of interest, or one would have to flip the pages of the newspaper, reading headlines along the way that may seem boring.

Citizen journalism, through its location on the Internet, allows people to now zoom in on specific

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⁹⁷ Ibid., 45.
⁹⁸ Bill Densmore, interview by author, April 2007.
⁹⁹ Aldon Hynes, interview by author, March 2007.
¹⁰¹ Jill Lang, interview by author, April 2007.
areas of interest, ignoring other potentially important information. As such, the development of citizen journalism may be doing democracy a disservice.

However, both Hynes and Lang remain hopeful:

No democracy is perfect. I can’t control the weather but I can put on a raincoat and boots to stay dry. …Some people (maybe most but do we really know?) will be selective. I have to hope that readers, whether selective or not, will discover a voice they hadn’t heard before or would never have heard if it weren’t for citizen journalism. …We have no choice but to have faith. One voice at a time, one reader at a time, and gradually you have a more informed community. (Jill Lang, interview by author, April 2007)

Hynes envisions a society that will have “connectors” who will bring information “across the boundaries between different communities,” thus connecting otherwise separate interest groups. In this manner, the fragmentation of society may be overcome. But whether or not these “connectors” will rise up remains to be seen.

The third interpretation of citizen journalism’s democratic potential is that if citizen journalism is breeding a more informed society, we will see more people becoming voters. But, according to Reich, the two issues are separate. Even if people invest more energy in being a part of the news, one cannot presume that this will drive interest in voting. Reich believes that “people need to see responsiveness in the government at the same rate as they see changes in the media” before they will be compelled to vote. Democracy, in this sense, is possible, but it will not be entirely because of citizen journalism. Instead, the bigger force at work is technology (see The Effect of Technology).

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102 Aldon Hynes, interview by author, March 2007.
103 Ibid.
104 Brian Reich, interview by author, March 2007.
105 Ibid.
Issues with Vetting, Credibility and Accuracy

“Authenticity of content, source verification, accuracy, and truth”\textsuperscript{106} are important issues in a medium where anyone with Internet access can produce information. Two distinct camps have evolved. On the one hand, there are those who argue that although citizen journalism has the benefit of speed, credibility and accuracy are compromised because “they employ standards which are far less rigorous than those of conventional news-gatherers.”\textsuperscript{107} The lack of journalistic norms like source verification has led to many Internet hoaxes spreading misinformation, and simply wrong news being reported because research was not done to certify the authenticity of its content. Phil Primack warns: “The information you’re consuming is only as good as its source. Know the sources, know the context, know the agenda (if any).”\textsuperscript{108}

On the other hand, many others argue that “although individual blogs have no warrant of accuracy, the blogosphere as a whole has a better error-correction machinery than the conventional media do.”\textsuperscript{109} The global nature of the Internet and the fluid feedback system that it allows, which is not only instantaneous but also has the flexibility of not needing to be continuous, allows citizen journalists to “quickly correct mistakes and get perspective from individuals – some of whom are experts on the issues at hand – from all across America and the world.”\textsuperscript{110} Returning to the earlier example of the London train bombing in 2005:

By the time most Americans were getting their news, the Wikipedia source was well developed, informative on a number of levels, and relatively accurate. No editor or organization oversaw the effort. All of the contributions were by volunteers, including the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{106} Pavlik, \textit{Journalism and New Media}, xi.
\textsuperscript{108} Phil Primack, interview by author, April 2007.
\end{footnotesize}
corrections to misinformation. No money was transacted in the process. (Stephen Wilmarth, interview by author, April 2007)

The fundamental difference between the two systems is that the mainstream media does its vetting and fact-checking pre-publication, whereas the blogosphere carries out those same processes post-publication. Eventually, Wilmarth believes “this organic system of journalism has the potential to create a natural editorial check of journalistic standards and quality that is fundamentally different (and superior to) the contrived, profit-based system of 20th century managerial corporatism in journalism.”¹¹¹ That said, which system produces better quality news reporting is still debatable, and there is still room for citizen journalism’s vetting system to grow and evolve.

What seems to be more important when dealing with the issues of vetting, credibility and accuracy, is a need for an increased level of media literacy. The public today needs to be equipped with skills that will enable them to understand what citizen journalism is and how it works, so that “they can parse data, [and] evaluate what things are and what they may (or may not) mean.”¹¹² They also need to understand the context in which citizen journalism is situated and be aware of its shortcomings:

People need to understand [that] the stuff is unfiltered; that it may be opinion; that it may be imperfect; that it is part of the larger picture and should be taken as part of the whole, not as a single, perfect picture of an issue or event. But that it does have value. (Jill Lang, interview by author, April 2007)

People today need to understand the new media landscape and how to navigate in it. These are essential skills that can be taught through media literacy programs.

¹¹¹ Stephen Wilmarth, interview by author, April 2007.
¹¹² Colin Maclay, interview by author, April 2007.
The Effect of Technology

Taking two steps back to look at the development of citizen journalism in a larger context, a number of my interviewees agreed that technology has truly been the driving force behind a stronger democracy. “Technology is a facilitator for moving information,” and the availability of information has in turn affected the fields of philanthropy, education, media, government (e.g. The Sunlight Foundation), and many more.\(^{113}\) With that in mind, it is clear that citizen journalism is, in fact, “an extension of the rise of a participatory culture enabled by new communication networks [technology].”\(^{114}\) As such, citizen journalism is inevitable, a part of the evolution of media.\(^{115}\) This realization shifts the conversation about citizen journalism from one debating its pros and cons, to one acknowledging that it is here to stay and figuring out the best way to embrace and integrate citizen journalism.

Old Model vs. New Model of Journalism

News will never go away. There will always be people who will want to report. But the formats and mechanisms by which people get their news have to change and adapt. (Brian Reich, interview by author, March 2007)

The old model of journalism is driven by “profits derived from [the] control of production and distribution processes.”\(^{116}\) It involves closed newsrooms with professional journalists gathering, vetting, and publishing information. It is a largely one-way discourse. It is struggling. With the cost of production and distribution now near zero, the mainstream media no longer has a monopoly over the printing press – the balance of power has shifted from news producers to news consumers. Mainstream media is losing a large sum of their advertising

\(^{113}\) Brian Reich, interview by author, March 2007.  
\(^{114}\) Stephen Wilmarth, interview by author, April 2007.  
\(^{115}\) Jill Lang, interview by author, April 2007.  
\(^{116}\) Stephen Wilmarth, interview by author, April 2007.
revenue to online venues such as Craig’s List\footnote{Aldon Hynes, interview by author, March 2007.} and is largely fighting a losing battle with citizen journalism.

Much fear within the mainstream media stems from the impression that citizen journalism is trying to take over the role of traditional journalists and will soon render them obsolete. Indeed, Reich argues that the concept of what news used to be is no longer true, and trying to fit citizen journalism into that old model may not work. We may even have to “blow up the old model.”\footnote{Brian Reich, interview by author, March 2007.} But this does \textit{not} mean that the new model of journalism will not have a place for mainstream media. “The power of participation comes not from destroying commercial culture but from writing over it, modding it, amending it, expanding it, adding greater diversity of perspective, and then recirculating it, feeding it back into the mainstream media.”\footnote{Jenkins, \textit{Convergence Culture}, 257.}

The mainstream media and citizen journalists \textit{do} have the potential to work together for their mutual benefit and for the greater common good. In fact, they should have a “symbiotic relationship, with each getting material for/from the other.”\footnote{Colin Maclay, interview by author, April 2007.} Phil Boas of \textit{The Masthead} claims that “the blogosphere actually needs mainstream media. We [mainstream media] provide most of the coverage that starts the conversation. And by carrying the conversation further than we do, the blogosphere makes mass media vital.”\footnote{Phil Boas, “Bloggers: The Light at the End of the Newspaper’s Tunnel,” in \textit{New Media}, ed. Albert Rolls (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 2006), originally from \textit{The Masthead}, 2005, 67.} Thus, the future that Boas envisions is an environment where both forms of journalism will bring out the best in each other:

They [citizen journalists] will challenge and cajole us to confront our biases and our mistakes. …They’ll be our competitors and our colleagues and they’ll force us to dig
deeper into issues, think harder about them. They’ll show us how to coalesce expertise on a breaking story and drill deeper for the more complete truth.\textsuperscript{122}

This future may not be too far away now. Projects exploring the possibility of pro-am collaboration such as AssignmentZero are already breaking new ground in the search for a new model of journalism that will work for both parties.

Pro-am collaboration illustrates how the role of the editor, and the expertise of traditional journalists in fact-checking and source verification will become even more important in a new model of journalism. Furthermore, Bill Densmore advocates an additional role that traditional journalists can play – the information valet. The duty of the information valet is to save the public from drowning in information.\textsuperscript{123} They will do so by reporting on the quality and reliability of news sources, pointing readers in the direction of credible and accurate news. Densmore argues that while the public’s trust in brands such as The Associated Press and The New York Times has developed over years of familiarity with their reporting, that same trust does not exist with new brands that are unknown and untested.\textsuperscript{124} As such, the information valet will provide a vital service as people navigate their way through “new” news. An example of a pioneer information valet is NewsTrust (http://newstrust.net).

There is also still a place for investigative reporting in this new model of journalism. Many news organizations have cut back on investigative reporting because it is “expensive, doesn’t always bear results, and may not get the reaction desired.”\textsuperscript{125} In economic terms, investigative reporting has a low return on investment. However, investigative reporting is also

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{123} Bill Densmore, interview by author, April 2007.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{125} Aldon Hynes, interview by author, March 2007.
the “hardest function of citizen journalism”\textsuperscript{126} because citizen journalists lack the resources to devote to investigation and the accessibility to certain areas of the government. Glenda Manzi strongly believes that a “good, strong, financially secure press is \textit{needed} for a stable democracy.”\textsuperscript{127} The newspaper industry can still provide an “incredible civic service”\textsuperscript{128} through its investigative reporting. Her hope is that a new model of journalism will ensure that both traditional journalists and citizen journalists are working with each other instead of taking revenue away from each other, thus allowing investigative reporting to receive the financial support that it needs.

One of the exciting and challenging aspects of designing a new model from two existing ones is the chance to address problems that both original models had. Moving towards pro-am collaboration keeps the promises of citizen journalism (which are also the problems with the mainstream media) such as the diversity of voices, its ability to fill the mainstream media’s gaps, and its democratic potential, while simultaneously addressing the problems with citizen journalism such as the lack of vetting and credibility, the existence of “black sheep,” and its inadequacy in investigative reporting.

\textit{Societal Impact of Citizen Journalism}

Citizen journalism has not only made waves in the media industries, but has also made an impact on society at large. One of its major impacts is the empowerment of individuals. Citizen journalism has allowed many people to realize that “they need not be only passive consumers, but can be active consumers and producers as well.”\textsuperscript{129} Moreover, their new capacity as a producer goes beyond just creating news to creating meaning, both for themselves and for

\textsuperscript{126} Colin Maclay, interview by author, April 2007.
\textsuperscript{127} Glenda Manzi, interview by author, April 2007.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} Colin Maclay, interview by author, April 2007.
society. Through the participatory democracy enabled by citizen journalism, “individual expressions can now have a meaningful effect on collective ideas and information.”

Citizen journalism may also have prompted a shift in societal relationships – between the public and the media industries, between the public and the government, and between individuals and groups within the public themselves. In time, we will be able to observe the effects of these shifts in power dynamics and hopefully, they will work towards strengthening America’s democracy.

\[130\] Stephen Wilmarth, interview by author, April 2007.
Conclusion

What this generation is going through are the birthing pains of a new architecture for the media industries. We are currently in a transitional period from the old structure of mainstream media to the new architecture, where all the “transformational activity creates a keen sense of instability as incumbents try to maintain the status quo, and under-informed segments of the population misinterpret events and experience difficulty in coping with vague, ambiguous outcomes.”\[^{131}\] Mistakes are bound to be made, but there will also be success stories, as society, the media industries, and the government try to work things out.

One attempt to navigate this new territory and establish some ground rules is the “Blogger’s Code of Conduct” that Tim O’Reilly has drafted. Some rules in the draft include: “We take responsibility for our own words and for the comments we allow on our blog,” “We won’t say anything online that we wouldn’t say in person,” and “We connect privately before we respond publicly.”\[^{132}\] O’Reilly also created a badge that says “Civility Enforced,” which bloggers can put on their site as an indication of their commitment to the Code. The initial reaction from the blogosphere has been mixed, with many bloggers speaking out against this suggested Code. I believe that going through this process is part and parcel of the current transitional period where people are still trying to figure out what these new developments mean to them and how much governing there should be.

Jeff Jarvis, one of the thought leaders in this field, has suggested that the new architecture of news is one where the news will come live from people’s cell phone cameras or other

\[^{131}\] Stephen Wilmarth, interview by author, April 2007.
recording devices, straight to the Internet and our living rooms. I am a little more conservative. My theory of the new architecture of news rests on the potential of pro-am collaboration. I believe that the news media industries need to integrate the best of the mainstream media – their editorial, fact-checking, investigative reporting skills – with the best of citizen journalism – its diversity of voices and perspectives, in order to survive in the changing media landscape. In my discussion with Glenda Manzi, we envisioned a future where there would be a few big national newspapers together with small, local newspapers, each focusing on different aspects of news. The national newspapers could work together with citizen experts through pro-am collaboration on investigative reporting and national news, while the small newspapers would stop trying to cover everything and focus instead on hyperlocal news, using citizen journalism to foster a sense of community and strengthen interpersonal bonds.

Together with the restructuring of the news industry, I strongly believe in the importance of increasing media literacy across the nation. While the Internet has made the creation of information as easy as the click of a button, it has also caused the deciphering of information to become even more complicated. Questions of what is newsworthy and what sources to trust need to be answered. Issues surrounding appropriate “netiquette” and the misuse of the Internet need to be addressed. I believe that incorporating media literacy classes and programs as early as elementary school will get our children to start thinking critically about the media that they consume and how they can be a part of the production process.

Activity on the Internet and in the mainstream media following the shooting at Virginia Tech on April 16th, 2007, provides a clear illustration of both the promises and problems of citizen journalism, and is further evidence that we are still in a transitional stage. Information

about the incident made available on students’ blogs and through video captured on a cell phone camera, what we have now come to call citizen journalism, enabled information to be disseminated quickly and provided viewers/readers with a first-hand account of what had happened. Assistant Managing Editor of the Roanoke newspaper, Michael Stowe, said that the blog approach was the best way to “move breaking news quickly.”134 This was something the mainstream media would not have been able to achieve, and reflects the prospects for citizen journalism.

At the same time, after the cell phone video had been looped on every news channel for the entire day, it made me question the value of that act of citizen journalism. That video, in my opinion, did little to add to the story of what had transpired, but seemed to be the one thing that the mainstream media jumped on to represent the incident. The problem, I realized, resided in the mainstream media’s need to provide 24/7 news coverage. When no new riveting footage was available, all they could do was loop the footage that they did have.

More disheartening was the grief that instant information on Facebook caused to some victims’ parents. In her attempts to find more information on the status of her missing friend, a high school student set up a group on Facebook that resulted in a heart-wrenching roller coaster ride. Within the following 14 hours, various people responded with bits of information that they believed to be true and thought would help. What ended up happening was the missing friend’s status changing from dead to at the hospital to in critical condition to neither at the hospital nor at the morgue and back to dead.135 No parent or friend should ever have to go through the emotional anguish that all this misinformation led to. It was the speed of communications

technologies and the aggregating of information through social networking sites like Facebook that resulted in these unverified acts of “citizen journalism.” Though I am sure that everyone who posted information had good intentions, the collective result was one that I could hardly bear.

Thankfully, this transitional stage is not here to stay, and I am eager to see how these issues are worked out and what the new architecture of the news media industries will look like.
Self-Reflective Statement

Although my major may have changed a number of times over the course of my career at Tufts, and my desire to go to graduate school definitely fluctuated every other semester, the one thing that remained constant throughout was the fact that I knew for sure that I would not write a thesis. But when senior year came around and I decided to seriously pursue my minor in Communications and Media Studies, I was somehow persuaded into doing a senior project. Even then, I entered the colloquium classes with the mindset that I could pull out at any time. Before I knew it, I was hooked. My search for topic ideas had led me to one that I was (secretly) personally involved in: blogging. It was the perfect topic, as I wanted to work on something new, something “cutting edge,” something that was current and that people could relate to. I had no idea what I got myself into.

Some initial research led me to broaden my topic to citizen journalism, because that was the bigger picture that blogging fit into. More research revealed that I had been wrong in my initial thinking. Citizen journalism was not exactly new or cutting edge – I found information on civic journalism and participatory journalism that was published decades ago. I also thought that because it was such a new phenomenon, there would not be much literature to go through. Instead, I suffered from information overload – there were tons of books published in the last few years about it, tons of magazine and newspaper articles, and megatons of information available on the Internet, but of course. Deciding when to stop clicking on hyperlinks to follow the conversation and when to stop reading and start writing was a huge challenge for me. I did not feel comfortable writing about something before fully understanding all the different aspects, but I came to realize that there was no way I would be able to ever grasp everything that is going on.
Working on this thesis has taught me more about myself and also helped me overcome some personal challenges. I learnt that my time management skills were not up to par when it came to a big project like this. It took me awhile to figure out how to break the thesis down into small, achievable components. This is a skill that I believe will serve me well as I graduate from Tufts, as work in the real world cannot be done the day before it is due. I also discovered critical and analytical thinking skills that I did not know I had. I started out with very little faith in my ability to come up with an argument or to analyze what was going on, but eventually realized that the more I mulled over the information that I accumulated and talked about it with others, the more I was able to develop my own argument. Lastly, I had to overcome my fear of talking to strangers (especially older, more knowledgeable ones) because I had to conduct interviews as part of my project. While I did try to hide behind the convenience of conducting my interviews over email, I had the opportunity to interview Brian Reich in person and Glenda Manzi over the phone. Those two experiences were definitely high points of the entire process. I felt like I learned a lot by being able to have an actual conversation with them, and it was not half as scary as I had anticipated.

There were times when I was so excited about my thesis that I would spend the entire day researching and talking to my friends about it. There were also times when I wondered why I had ever decided to do it. There were some dark times when I felt so overwhelmed and incapable, but there were also good times when thoughts and ideas flowed. All in all, I have spent some real quality time with Evan (I named my thesis), and I am glad that I now have a finished product to show for it!
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