

PREPARING FOR AN AGE OF PARTICIPATORY NEWS

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In a time of declining public trust in news, loss of advertising revenue, and an increasingly participatory, self-expressive and digital media culture, journalism is in the process of rethinking and reinventing itself. In this paper, the authors explore how journalism is preparing itself for an age of participatory news: a time where (some of) the news is gathered, selected, edited and communicated by professionals and amateurs, and by producers and consumers alike. Using materials from case studies of emerging participatory news practices in the Netherlands, Germany, Australia and the United States, the authors conclude with some preliminary recommendations for further research and theorize early explanations for the success or failure of participatory journalism.

KEYWORDS citizen's media; digital culture; journalism practice; journalism studies; journalism theory; participatory media

Preparing for an Age of Participatory News

The rise of what has been described variously as public/civic/communitarian (Black, 1997), people's (Merrill et al., 2001), open source (Deuze, 2001), participatory (Bowman and Willis, 2002) journalism, or (most generically) citizen journalism provides a new challenge to a news industry which in many developed nations faces significant permanent problems. Readership for newspapers and viewership of television news are declining, especially among younger generations (for the United States see Mindich, 2005; for the Netherlands see Costera Meijer, 2006). The other market news companies serve—advertisers—are also retreating from the field of journalism, gradually shifting their attention to online or non-news channels (Leckenby, 2005). These long-term structural trends coincide with two co-determinant developments affecting journalists: a changing nature of work towards increasingly contingent, non-standard and otherwise “atypical” employment (International Federation of Journalists, 2006); and a steady outsourcing of production work to “producers” (Bruns, 2005): the consumer-turned-producer or, as Rosen states, “the people formerly known as the audience.”¹

In this paper we investigate the emergence of citizen journalism in four countries—Australia, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States—as a phenomenon that we consider an example of both top-down (industry-driven) customer-relationship management efforts and labor cost-cutting measures, as well as of bottom-up processes of individual and collective self-expression in the context of a postmaterialist (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005), participatory (Bucy and Gregson, 2001), and exceedingly digital culture (Deuze, 2006). Participatory news, citizen media, or what Jarvis (2006) defines as *networked* journalism “takes into account the collaborative nature of journalism now: professionals and amateurs working together to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old

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boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, perspectives. It recognizes the complex relationships that will make news. And it focuses on the process more than the product."² In earlier work, *network journalism* has been defined as a convergence between the core competences and functions of journalists and the civic potential of online interactive communication (Bardoel and Deuze, 2001). Bardoel and Deuze predicted a new form of journalism that would embrace a cross-media functionality—publishing news across multiple media platforms—as well as an interactive relationship with audiences—acknowledging the lowered threshold for citizens to enter the public sphere. Ultimately, digital and networked journalism in whatever shape or form must be seen as a praxis that is not exclusively tied to salaried work or professional institutions anymore. Or, as former Reuters editor-in-chief Geert Linnebank stated at a conference in March 2007: “Now everyone can be a reporter, commentator or a film director—the days of owning and controlling these processes are over.”³ Throughout this paper we will use the term participatory journalism, as we feel this allows us the widest possible freedom to consider any and all practices and cases within the range of more or less journalistic or “newsy” initiatives mushrooming online.

Participatory Journalism

Participatory journalism is any kind of newswork at the hands of professionals and amateurs, of journalists and citizens, and of users and producers benchmarked by what Benkler calls commons-based peer production: “the networked environment makes possible a new modality of organizing production: radically decentralized, collaborative, and nonproprietary; based on sharing resources and outputs among widely distributed, loosely connected individuals who cooperate with each other without relying on either market signals or managerial commands” (2006, p. 60). Uricchio (2004, p. 86) describes the key to understanding the new media ecosystem as based on networked technologies that are P2P (“peer-to-peer”) in organization and collaborative in principle. As such, an embrace of this networked environment by journalism challenges news organizations to extend the level of their direct engagement with audiences as participants in the processes of gathering, selecting, editing, producing, and communicating news.

Participatory journalism websites initially appeared in direct response to what were perceived as significant shortcomings in mainstream news media coverage—this is true for the rise of *Indymedia* as a means of covering the protests surrounding the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle (see e.g. Meikle, 2002), for the development of *OhmyNews* as an alternative to the highly conservative mainstream press in South Korea (Kahney, 2003), as well as for the myriad of news-related blogs in the wider blogosphere, most of which provide an open platform for their operators’ and visitors’ commentary on events in the news—which tends not to be available in such form through the outlets of professional/commercial news organizations (Bruns, 2006).

Recent years have seen a further fine-tuning of the various models under which such sites are produced, employing various degrees of balance between enabling the open and direct participation of citizen journalist contributors in publicizing and discussing the news, and some level of editorial oversight by the operators or communities of participatory journalism sites. Indeed, the common use of “citizen journalism” as a blanket term for such news publishing models to some extent obscures the significant differences in approach between the various participatory news websites currently in

operation. In spite of the involvement of citizens as contributors, some such sites retain a degree of conventional editorial control over what is eventually published, while others publish all submitted content immediately, or allow registered users to vote on what passes through the publication's gates; similarly, some sites harness their communities as content contributors mainly at the response and discussion stage, while others rely more immediately on users as contributors of original stories (Deuze, 2003). The sites of the world-wide Independent Media Center (*Indymedia*) network, for example, largely continue to prefer an entirely open approach and immediately publish all submitted stories to their newswires, while *OhmyNews* combines a growing army of tens of thousands of citizen contributors with a small team of professional content editors who ensure the quality of the published product. Each model has proven successful in specific contexts, and it therefore remains important to study such approaches in some depth in order to identify their strengths and limitations (see Bruns, 2005, for a classification of models for collaborative online news production).

In online journalism as it is produced by professional/commercial news organizations, initiatives to implement interactive features are increasing—but journalists find it difficult to navigate the challenges this brings to established notions of professional identity and gatekeeping (Chung, 2007). Additionally, although people may express a general preference for more interactivity on news websites, when confronted with increasingly elaborate interactive options users seem confused, and indeed are less likely to be able to effectively digest or follow the news on offer (Bucy, 2004). It must be clear, then, that a more interactive, dialogical or participatory style of newswork is currently very much “under construction”; that it occurs in its most advanced forms on Net-native and generally non-mainstream online platforms; and that more or less traditional makers and users of news are cautiously embracing its potential—which embrace is not without problems both for the producers and consumers involved.

The twin or two-tiered developments of participatory news are part of a convergence process: a convergence between top-down and bottom-up journalism. Such convergence is driven both by commercial pressures on existing news organizations to arrest their decline in audience numbers, and by the sedimentation of participatory journalism projects as serious alternatives to the established news industry. A third element to this equation is the emergence of news websites that operate in a “third space”, somewhere intermediating between top-down and bottom-up news ventures. Jenkins (2004) puts such initiatives in a broader context of an emerging convergence culture, signaling attempts by various media industries to blur the boundaries between users and producers of content in the creative process. Convergence culture serves both as a mechanism to increase revenue and further the agenda of industry, while at the same time enables people—in terms of their identities as producers and consumers, professionals as well as amateurs—to enact some kind of agency regarding the omnipresent messages and commodities of this industry.

Convergence culture-based participatory news sites tend to emerge from institutions and organizations with a strong public service agenda or a strong connection to clearly defined local or interest communities, or are set up by commercial news organizations which see a thorough embrace of participatory journalism models as a clear competitive advantage in a shrinking market for journalistic work. Examples of such sites may include *NowPublic*, which acts as a platform for the aggregation and discussion of international news reports, the hub of *Backfence* communities in the United States

serving as a DIY (“Do-It-Yourself”) platform of local news, the British *BBC Action Network*, where local communities are encouraged to submit and discuss information of public interest under the banner—within the brand—of the nation’s public broadcaster, or the Dutch site *Headlines*, sponsored by public broadcast news organization NOS, inviting especially younger people to contribute to the news by uploading their own written, audio or video reports. In each instance a professional media organization (top-down) partners with or deliberately taps into the emerging participatory media culture online (bottom-up) in order to produce some kind of co-creative, commons-based news platform.

Conceptual Approach

While a great deal of research into mainstream online journalism or oppositional alternative news models for collaborative or participatory journalism is readily available, the more recent hybrid forms of news sites which combine elements of participatory journalism with frameworks borrowed from or initiated by mainstream news media are yet to be studied in great detail (Neuberger, 2006; Nip, 2006). This essay serves as an initial step towards such enquiries; it examines four intermediary sites in functionally equivalent media cultures—the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, and Australia—in order to outline the differences and similarities in the models these sites have chosen to adopt in pursuit of their aims. As the work of Inglehart and Welzel (2005, p. 155) suggests, the populations of these four countries also top the scales of global self-expression values—together with the Scandinavian countries, New Zealand, Canada, Switzerland, Iceland and Great Britain—making them a fertile and representative ground to identify emerging practices in the area of participatory mediamaking.

The sites chosen here were selected largely because of the distinctive operational approaches they employ; at least some of them (the Australian *On Line Opinion* and the German *Opinio*) have also risen to some degree of national recognition for the unique brand of quality citizen journalism and public intellectual debate which they provide. Our approach looks at successes and failures in order to identify contributing factors for such outcomes, whereas we make an effort to define what one could regard as signifying success or failure. Furthermore, we outline the parallels and distinctions between individual operational models.

Case Studies

The four cases in this paper were selected by the authors in their respective countries of residence (or origin) as useful, prominent and diverse examples of activities in between traditional first-tier and new second-tier news media. In every case, the approach to participatory journalism is a hybrid between institutional or commercial support and community engagement. Further, although in all cases the Internet plays a significant role, in several instances other media—cell phone, newspaper, and magazine—are also involved. The sites furthermore target a range of demographics: the young, the disenfranchised, pundits and politicians, middle-class families. We consider these cases exemplary, and assume that by putting the characteristics and (relatively short) histories of these initiatives side by side in an initial comparison, we can draw some inferences that help us to specify further hypotheses and research questions regarding the changes and challenges involved in re-connecting journalism with the citizenry it is supposed to serve

articulated with the affordances of a participatory media culture. These case studies are based on (scholarly, trade and Web-based) literature reviews and in expert interviews. Aspects of investigation were: the degree of user participation, the role of the professional journalists, the motivation of suppliers and participants, conflicts between editors and users, and the perceived success or failure of the projects.

The US-based *Bluffton Today* complements and connects with the local newspaper, adding a citizen-produced dimension to journalistic coverage, and in the process furthering the cultural convergence between producer and consumer. The Dutch *Skoeps* site is an extension of a newspaper publisher (PCM) and a commercial broadcaster (Talpa), and sponsored by Vodafone. The site asks users to upload their own pictures and videos of newsworthy events. The organizations involved make money by reselling user-generated materials to third parties with 50:50 deals. The German online magazine *Opinio* has to date shied away from political discussion and instead focuses on lifestyle issues. *Opinio* is an Internet offshoot of the *Rheinische Post* newspaper which fills a magazine and a weekly newspaper page with the user-generated content from the website. By contrast, the Australian *On Line Opinion* (run by the non-profit organization National Forum) tackles politics head-on, and provides a space for public intellectualism which connects journalists, politicians, academics, and “average” citizens in a rich mix of political debate—but here, questions remain over whether in the process the site becomes simply yet another platform for the usual suspects: pundits who are already over-represented in political debates.

“Transparency and Dialogue”: The American Bluffton Today

Bluffton Today is a combination of a free daily newspaper (launched April 4, 2005) and a community news website (which went online April 1, 2005), both published by the Morris Publishing Group (MPG). MPG was founded in 2001 and publishes 27 daily, 12 non-daily and numerous free community newspapers in the United States. The company launched a second, similar initiative titled *MyClaySun* on February 15, 2007 in Clay County, Florida, consisting of a “blogs-for-all website” coupled with a four-day newspaper with a distribution of around 30,000.⁴ The tabloid-size newspaper *Bluffton Today* had an initial circulation of 16,500 and is distributed free to every home in the greater Bluffton, South Carolina area in the United States. Bluffton is a fast-growing affluent community with over 10,000 households on the Atlantic coast of South Carolina. What makes the paper and site a prime example of a true hybrid between professional and amateur participatory news is its deliberate choice to have (slightly edited) user-generated content as its prime source of news and information. According to Morris analyst Steve Yelvington (2005), *Bluffton Today* is an “experiment in citizen journalism, a complete inversion of the typical online newspaper model”, as staffers as well as registered community members get a blog, a photo gallery, read/write access to a shared public community calendar, a community cookbook, and an application that supports podcasting and the uploading of video clips. Regarding the paper, readers’ online comments on stories that appear in the print edition are edited and printed in the hard copy of next day’s newspaper.

Discussing his company’s choices in an online convergence newsletter, Ken Rickard (2005), manager of product strategy for Morris DigitalWorks, explicitly notes how *Bluffton Today* is an example of cultural rather than technological convergence: “The goals of *Bluffton Today* are quite simple: to become a part of the daily conversation in Bluffton. The

paper needs to build trust, solicit feedback and help develop a sense of shared community. The motto of the Web site, then, is 'It's what people are talking about.' And that's where the convergence comes from. The Web site is entirely created by the residents of Bluffton; those who work for the newspaper and those who do not." Here Rickard ties convergence to the cultural phenomenon of blurring the boundaries between "producers" and "users" of content. During the first months, the site and paper were in "beta", which is software development jargon for operating in a test phase. Writing one month after the launch of the site and paper, Rickard goes on to explain how this ongoing testing and tweaking has garnered a crucial insight for the company: "the early results have been very promising. The most notable result has been largely unintended: there exists a level of transparency and dialogue about the creation of the newspaper that engenders a real sense of trust in the community."

For the purposes of this case study, it is important to note here how convergence culture seems to instill increased levels of transparency in the media system, where producers and consumers of content can "see" each other at work, as they both play each other's roles. In this context, Yelvington is quoted in an interview at the *Online Journalism Review* (of September 7, 2005) as saying how he believes that people are "living in this cable TV world of the outside observer instead of acting as participants. We're trying to make people come out of their gates and become players. We want a participative culture to evolve."

Participation seems to be key for understanding the success of both the industry initiative and the community's response. The news as reported on the *Bluffton Today* site mainly covers typical topics of local and particular interest: the opening of a new public school, declining (or increasing) church attendance, parades and other community events, a regional sports team. Occasionally, discussions on certain news topics—the election of a black (or white) school principal for example—can get quite heated, and thus serve to add a critical edge to the coverage. On the other hand, most of the community blogs and user-submitted audio or video are quite mainstreamed. The website is largely self-policed, with the editors calling on participants to "be a good citizen and exhibit community leadership qualities . . . Act as you would like your neighbors to act."⁵ Indeed, the site reports that it only professionally edits stories that are repurposed for the newspaper. In a post on his weblog of July 6, 2006, Yelvington takes note of the fundamental discussions among the journalists about their role in all of this: "As they nurtured the idea that eventually became *Bluffton Today*, my friends in our newspaper division spent many months wrestling with basic questions about content, tone and especially civic processes. They didn't come up with a label, and they certainly didn't call it citizen journalism. But they did come up with a catchphrase: A community in conversation with itself."⁶ In doing so, they mirror an ideal voiced by the late James Carey: that in a democracy journalism is or should be all about amplifying the conversation society has with itself.

"Eyewitness News": The Dutch Skoeps

A "skoep" is a Dutch phonetic translation of the English term "scoop", which in a journalistic sense means to get the story first—before the other news organizations, at least. The site went live in October 2006 and presents itself as "The first Dutch online and mobile visual platform for national and regional news."⁷ At the time of writing—March 2007—*Skoeps* claims to have over 1000 registered reporters, and the site reports well over

100,000 unique visitors per month. Registered users—so-called “Skoepers”—can submit their original pictures or videoclips by (registering and) uploading on to the website, or by sending it directly from their cell phone (using MMS) to the server. *Skoeps.nl* additionally collaborates with the School for Journalism in Utrecht—where freshmen get sent out into the country with camera-equipped cell phones to shoot video for the site. According to the site, the inspiration for this multimedia citizen journalism site came from the murder of Dutch film director Theo van Gogh (November 2004) and the public transport bomb attacks in London (July 2005), where the first crucial images came from eye witnesses using their mobile phones to alert each other and the traditional news media about the events as they happened. In doing so, *Skoeps* also takes its cue from its British namesake *Scoopt*, an online news agency that sells user-submitted photos and video to professional news media and shares in the revenue these sales generate. Kyle McRae, one of the people behind *Scoopt*, explains their perspective on participatory news as follows on his weblog:

many publishers see citizen journalism as an opportunity—that is, an opportunity to get stuff for free. Professional photographers and writers get paid for their work, but many publishers (and web sites) see citizen journalism as a way to get good quality stuff without paying a penny. We think that’s unfair: if your stuff is good enough to print, it’s good enough to pay for.⁸

The *Skoeps* site, public statements or press materials make no mention of *Scoopt*, however.

The *Skoeps* site has an editorial team consisting of five people who monitor and sometimes refuse or delete submissions. Their decision-making process is to some extent made transparent on a weblog (skoeps.blogspot.com), where they also post instruction manuals for potential contributors—apparently, a lot of video material gets rejected because many people do not use their cell phone camera properly. As per March 2007, users can also moderate the site’s content. This decision was made, according to the site’s creator Michael Nederlof, in a presentation at a Dutch conference (our translation): “It became too much. We now have an editor during the day and at night journalism students kept watch over the site.”⁹

Next to the blog, the editors also operate a social networking site dedicated to *Skoeps* (skoeps.hyves.net) located at *Hyves* in the category “Activities & Hobbies”. *Hyves* is the Dutch equivalent of *MySpace* or *Cyworld*. At the time of writing, the group had 103 members, and the site contained a few (critical) messages by users, as well as a selection of photos and video clips of user-submitted content. On several Dutch websites calls for “Skoeps-reporters” are placed, asking people to submit their personal information and fill out a detailed questionnaire about their motivation to become part of the site.

In interviews with Dutch news media¹⁰ Nederlof expressed his wish to create a loyal community of hundreds of *Skoeps*-reporters nationwide, who would supply the site with a minimum of two “hard” or “soft” news items per week. These reporters would be entitled to half of the money generated by selling images and videoclips to third parties (such as newspapers, news agencies, and online news sites), and furthermore would receive a cell phone subscription (with Vodafone), a press pass, and *Skoeps* business cards. In its first few months, the site was primarily known in the Netherlands for its successful “vipspotting”: people uploading pictures of (Dutch) celebrities seen in supermarkets, restaurants, and elsewhere in public. In recent months, this gave way to more general reporting of lifestyle-

issues, crime, and other public events. An interesting sidenote must be made regarding the concurrent emergence of a rather critical community of early *Skoeps*-adopters at the open word-of-mouth marketing website Buzzers.nl—a community of about 1500 “buzzers” deliberately created to beta-test the site in its initial stages, or so reported the weblog or “Buzzlog” on the site.¹¹

Most of the submitted pictures and videoclips cover human-interest items, such as a visit of Santa Claus to the Dutch soldiers in Afghanistan, the concert of a popular band, or the birthday of some Dutch royalty. Every single image or clip includes comment and rating options, adding additional interactive functionality to the site. In a direct reference to sites such as YouTube and as a testament to the distinctly commercial identity and motives of the site’s investors, users are also allowed to upload existing, professionally produced videos—but only if these are original TV advertisements.

“Authentic Life Stories”: The German *Opinio*

Across the border in Germany, there are several news projects that involve user participation. In the German media the website *Opinio* run by *Rheinische Post* has received a lot of attention. This daily newspaper, published in Düsseldorf, is one of the regional dailies with the highest circulation figures in Germany. Besides *Opinio* there are two other websites on which people can write their own stories: the website *jetzt.de* of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and the online edition of the magazine *Neon*. These three sites share the tendency to skip subjects like the economy or politics, preferring to focus on users’ everyday living and leisure-time activities. The “Readers Edition” of the *Netzeitung*, which started in June 2006, has more traditional and “hard” news ambitions.

The *Rheinische Post*, one of the first newspapers to go online in Germany, started the website *Opinio* in December 2004, on which users write for users exclusively. Since February 2005, it also published the print magazine “Opinio” (*Opinio*, 2005). The magazine was a supplement to the *Rheinische Post* and other newspapers of its publisher and contained selected articles from the website. The publication frequency of the printed magazine was first converted from fortnightly to monthly to reduce costs and was finally shut down in June 2006. Since the autumn of 2005, the *Rheinische Post* publishes a weekly special section in the newspaper with articles from *Opinio*. The target group of *Opinio* is people between 30 and 39 years, who rarely read the printed newspaper.

A (non-representative) Web-based survey at the *Opinio* website in April/May 2006 (total of 355 respondents) showed that 39 percent of the visitors used the site daily or at least several times a week (Hess, 2005). About one-third of the *Opinio* users already published articles or photos on the sites. Answers to an open-ended question showed that users appreciated *Opinio* in many cases because readers can write articles themselves and are given the opportunity to get in contact with the authors and to exchange views. They also valued the diversity of topics, the personal character and the authenticity of the stories published. The quality of the articles and topics was rarely mentioned. In a further (non-representative) survey (total of 517 respondents), the readers of the printed magazine “Opinio” indicated almost the same points. But only they ranked highly the quality of articles and subjects—not the users of the *Opinio* website. This difference may reflect that the content of the printed magazine was the result of a more intense editorial process.

The former project manager Torsten Casimir said (in an interview in February 2006¹²) that another aim of *Opinio* was to reach new advertisers. But to date *Opinio* has not been

too successful in this regard. The number of authors, however, has increased steadily. In March 2007 there were about 2800 registered authors, which at that time had submitted about 26,000 articles. Little is known about their socio-demographic characteristics, however. According to Casimir, the core of the community numbers some 60–70 authors who are writing on a daily basis. Among those, there are many teachers, housewives and unemployed graduates. They have developed a community feeling which also finds its expression in participation at meetings, for example at *Opinio* parties. Among the most widely read authors are a hobby satirist and a single mother who is writing a kind of public diary. But the vast majority of the authors are writing only occasionally.

What motivates people to contribute to a participatory newspaper website such as *Opinio*? Casimir assumes that, on the one hand, the reputable environment, and on the other hand, the promise of “print publicity” with a high circulation, motivate users. A survey shows that about two-thirds of the authors of the website exclusively write for *Opinio*. Here they found their home on the Internet.

Registration is necessary to participate as an author. The staff of *Opinio* have the right to cancel articles and to eliminate participants in any case where the rules are violated. Until February 2006 the staff had rarely had to interfere. The number of participants who had to be excluded from *Opinio* remained a single-figure number. The community governs conflicts mostly on its own. In February 2006, the *Opinio* staff numbered one editor who was a regular employee, as well as several freelancers. Staff members propose subjects: they mostly ask for reports on personal experiences, advice for everyday life, and photos. And they select and edit (fact checking, shortening in most cases) the best and most read *Opinio* articles for the printed magazine “Opinio” and the weekly page in the *Rheinische Post*.

The German left-alternative daily *Die Tageszeitung* criticized *Opinio* because of its lifestyle mixture of subjects and the lack of political discussions (Schader, 2005). The sections of *Opinio* (like dating & parties, traveling & excursion, sports & leisure time, love & partnership, body & health) show that the main focus is on the private sector of life. *Opinio* does not complement the newspaper with subjects in the “hard news” sections, but “with experiences, with authentic stories—that’s new” (Casimir, interview, 2006). The aim of the website seems not to be citizen journalism so much as a concern to gain new readers and advertisers.

A significant conflict between users and between users and editorial staff occurred during January 2006. One of the most widely read authors, publishing under the pseudonym “kiyan”, started a discussion about the future of *Opinio* which continued for several days. In his article “OPINIO innovativ?” kiyan (2006) criticized the stagnancy of the website and the low quality of many contributions. He asked for a more restrictive policy on the part of staff members and a more intensive debate about quality between users. The subsequent discussion addressed the growing complexity of *Opinio*, an effect of the rising number of authors. Staff was blamed for increasing the number of authors haphazardly, with no regard for the quality of their contributions. One author surmised that one reason for criticism was a latent competition between older and younger authors. The discussion culminated in the question of whether interventions for the improvement of articles should be interpreted as “censorship” or “quality management”. Some users asked for more transparency of and participation in the work of staff. Above all, the decision which articles are chosen for publication in the printed magazine was discussed controversially. Conflicts about questions like these seem to be typical for community websites at least in the early stage. They express

the tension between the two tiers mentioned, between openness for the people and professional perceptions of quality content.

Even though *Opinio* does not cover its own costs yet, the project is not at risk. The *Rheinische Post* earned a great deal of additional reputation through its publication of *Opinio*. A large number of publishing houses from Germany, Austria and the Netherlands have shown interest in the project. A clear sign of acknowledgement is the European Newspaper Award of 2006, which *Opinio* received in the category "Innovations".

"Provoking Debate": The Australian On Line Opinion

Compared to the international counterparts we have discussed above, which are clear attempts by commercial journalistic entities to embrace the productive potential of participatory journalism, the Australian-based non-profit news and current events site *On Line Opinion* is perhaps most similar to the US website *MediaChannel* as it both covers the news in its own right, and acts as a watchdog and corrective to the mainstream media. However, *MediaChannel* combines the efforts of a small in-house staff with material sourced from its vast network of over 1000 affiliate news sites (including a number of *Indymedia* sites), from whom articles are drawn in a kind of internal gatewatching process (see Bruns, 2005). *On Line Opinion*, on the other hand, focuses mostly on original writing by staffers and invited commentators—who frequently include journalists from the Canberra press gallery, as well as government and opposition politicians, academics, and other noteworthy public figures. Such high-profile involvement demonstrates that the site plays an important role in Australian political discussion, even though it may not or not yet have achieved widespread public recognition beyond political elites.

Such content is further combined with unsolicited article submissions from visitors to the site, responses by readers that are attached, blog-style, as commentary to articles, discussion forums, an e-mail list, and further staff blogs. As a result, *On Line Opinion* provides a middle ground for an exchange and deliberation between those in power (or hoping to come to power), those reporting on the powerful, and those affected by their policies. This is in keeping with the publication's stated goal of providing "a forum for public social and political debate about current Australian issues. We publish articles to stimulate a public discourse on a range of topics. It is not the editors' intention to dominate these pages—these articles are gathered from a variety of independent sources and are published in the belief that ideas are the essence of progress and that issues and opinions should be addressed, not suppressed" (*On Line Opinion*, 2006). Editors further stress their emphasis on providing a complement to the mainstream as well as alternative media: "we welcome any rational contribution to what has become a robust public debate not available in any other media or forum" (*On Line Opinion*, 2006).

At present, the Australian political scene is characterized by a significant degree of polarization between the long-serving conservative federal government and its Labor opposition, and conversely between the unanimously Labor-run state and territory governments and their conservative oppositions, as well as by a persistent sense of bias towards one or the other political persuasion in the mainstream news media. In this context, then, *On Line Opinion* is particularly notable for its bipartisan stance—its contributors include commentators from both the left and right, and the debates carried out in its forums, though occasionally as riddled with personal invective and political rhetoric as those in many other discussion groups, nonetheless frequently feature an open

engagement between participants of differing political and ideological background. Indeed, as *On Line Opinion* editor and publisher Graham Young (2006) believes, “the forceful expression of opposites is more likely to lead to the uncovering of truth than the rote recital of mantras of common faiths.”

Although by ways other than they may have imagined, then, *On Line Opinion* flattens the hierarchy of both expert sources and dominant news frames. This is for example supported by the mode in which articles are presented on *On Line Opinion*'s front page, which merely lists topics and authors without highlighting whether authors are government ministers, senators, members of parliament, journalists, expert commentators, academics, or “mere” members of the public. Thus, opinions and knowledge expressed on the site articulate the experiences of the participants. Or, as Young puts it, “every idea has a place in the public debate and has a right to be expressed” (Young, 2006).

However, the extent to which sites such as *On Line Opinion* can realize a truly deliberative journalism continues to remain limited both by the operational parameters of the site, as well as by the extent to which its participants are willing and able to embrace this new form of journalism. To begin with, like *MediaChannel* (and similar also to the technology news gatewatcher site *Slashdot*), *On Line Opinion* is not open news: it does not offer a platform for the publication of their views to all comers, but instead retains a clear editorial presence. And even while Young (2006) states emphatically that “*On Line Opinion* believes evangelically that speech must be as close to absolutely free as possible,” the very fact that stories for *On Line Opinion* are selected from all incoming submissions cannot but introduce at least a small amount of bias towards certain articles and topics. As Young (2006) also writes, “what we do is publish pieces of opinion from people in the community who know and understand what is happening”—and so there remains a relatively traditional journalistic selection process for newsworthy events here. This contrasts for example with the open news approach of sites such as *Indymedia*, where all incoming stories are posted automatically, the open publishing model of the *Wikipedia*, where users are able to create new entries on topics of interest to them instantaneously, or the steps towards open editing in sites such as *KuroShin* and *Plastic*, where submitted stories are processed and published by community consensus.

But as we have noted above, sites such as *On Line Opinion*, which bridge the gap between mainstream and alternative, and thus perhaps between (top-down) editorially controlled and (bottom-up) open news media, are to some extent perhaps forced to reflect this intermediary position in their editorial practices. At least in present form *On Line Opinion* is edited enough to ensure the participation of high-level public figures who would otherwise perhaps shy away from open publishing sites, while simultaneously being open enough to participants to attract strong discussion and deliberation on the topics covered on the site. What is of more concern for the effort to encourage broad public participation and deliberation, however, is the level of meaningful participation in public debate that may be possible for the “average” citizen. While *On Line Opinion* openly invites contributors—Young (2006) writes that “we are . . . continually looking for new voices and fresh points of view, so *previous experience is not necessary*” (emphasis in original)—people must still be able to express their views in a clear and engaging fashion, and this may limit public debate to the usual suspects. If Young (2006) calls for contributors to “have a combination of one or more of the following characteristics: Expertise in their field; Influence in their field; Writing skills; Interesting, even iconoclastic, ideas; The ability to provoke debate,” then, there is a danger that those attracted by and

matching these criteria are largely members of those social groups who are already over-represented in public debate, perhaps already participate on *On Line Opinion*, and could at any rate also find a pathway into other media forms for their work.

This dilemma is by no means limited to, or even caused by, *On Line Opinion*: similar criticisms have been leveled at publications ranging from the mainstream media (where journalists are sometimes said to represent the views only of those whose position in and outlook on life matches their own) through to blogs (where the blogosphere has been described as an echo chamber repeating commonly-held views *ad infinitum*). The challenge for all news media aiming to embrace a more deliberative style of journalism, then, is to attract a broader range of participants in the deliberation—and while they still have a long way to go, blogs, open news, and semi-open news publications like *On Line Opinion* do already contribute to this process by providing at the very least the tools, and increasingly also the incentive, for more contributors to join the debate.

Discussion

In their strengths and limitations, the case studies presented here indicate a variety of approaches to participatory news with which commercial and non-profit media organizations are currently experimenting (further case studies would reveal a wealth of additional variations on the overall theme). As Outing (2005) suggests, “citizen journalism isn’t one simple concept that can be applied universally by all news organizations. It’s much more complex, with many potential variations . . . from dipping a toe into the waters of participatory journalism to embracing citizen reporting with your organization’s full involvement.” It is important to study these different approaches in some detail—both as an object of study in their own right, in the context of social software and so-called “Web 2.0” phenomena, and as pathways towards future configurations for culturally convergent models of journalism.

News organizations do not necessarily engage the citizen on a more or less equal footing because the professionals involved are universally convinced that the breakdown between users and producers of news provides society with better information—often a clear commercial motive is at work: the pursuit of additional sources of revenue (*Skoeps* and *Scoopt*), the potential to sell targeted advertising across online and offline media (*Bluffton Today*), and the winning back of otherwise non-reading newspaper audiences (*Opinio*). *On Line Opinion* is an exception, although the site is sponsored by a host of traditional public institutions whose motives are at the very least not entirely altruistic. The overarching ideals that are embodied in each of the sites discussed here do in combination point to a trend towards a more participatory reconceptualization of news and information production and dissemination.

What is most important about these sites is that they provide clear and workable alternatives to the traditional separation of journalists, their sources, and the public. These are not utopian ideals (or, to some, dystopian horror scenarios). Instead, we have found practicable and (monetary, communal or intellectual) revenue-generating models for the production of news outside of or across the boundaries of the established news industry. At the same time, this convergence of industrial and participatory journalism cultures does not occur in a uniform, painless process—nor does it occur in a vacuum. Coping with the emergence of hybrid producer–user forms of newswork is easier for some than for others, and tends to clash with entrenched notions of professionalism, objectivity, and carefully

cultivated arrogance regarding the competences (or talent) of “the audience” to know what is good for them (Deuze, 2005). As the case studies above suggest to us, their areas of engagement are sometimes clearly demarcated—citizen participation may be sought mainly in “soft news” areas, while “hard news”, and especially politics, is still regarded as too controversial to be opened to the involvement of news users as “producers”. It is also noteworthy that in sites where this limitation is not enforced, “soft” news still appears to dominate, suggesting that many people contribute to participatory journalism websites out of a frustration with the rather uniform, institutional, and gendered (as it privileges conflict, threats and problems) focus of traditional, mainstream “hard” news: they may come to citizen journalism not to correct the “hard” news of the mainstream itself, but to *correct for* mainstream journalism’s bias *towards* “hard” news itself by adding a greater amount of “soft” news. This observation may yield further empirical work on the gatewatching mechanisms of the communities and professionals involved.

It is perhaps also telling that one of the cases we had originally selected for this paper, the citizen journalism community site *Nieuwslokaal.net* of Dutch regional newspaper *Dagblad van het Noorden*, closed down before we could get started on gathering data on the site. Henk Blanken, adjunct editor of the newspaper, tells us about this experiment: “it started small and died small. The project will merge with a larger project for local news sites that we plan to start with all newspapers of our publisher.”¹³ Blanken claims that the project did not fail, but rather served as a way for the news organization to learn important lessons about citizen journalism, suggesting that a key for success in the community which his newspaper covers lies in detailed citizen coverage of small issues. If such statements are more than positive spin attached to a failed experiment, they indicate that more and more news organizations are indeed experimenting with the opportunities available through a mainstream news–citizen journalism convergence—in that case, it is important that more journalism researchers examine both successful and failed projects in this field.

Ultimately, convergence culture in journalism relies on the readiness of both sides of the equation: participants must bring and/or build an understanding of how to operate in a news “produsage” environment just as much as journalists must develop a sense of how to reinvent themselves as co-creators of culture. Indeed, journalists as the traditional regulators and moderators of public discourse should particularly focus on solving the conflict between open access and the quality of communication (Neuberger, 2006). Further, it also seems incumbent on both sides to ensure that this convergence process is not limited to isolated sectors and groups only, as this—far from bridging the rift between citizens and journalists—would serve mainly to create new divisions between those who participate in convergent citizen journalism environments, and those who do not. As work on digital divide issues additionally suggests: access to the Internet and all it has to offer is neither random nor dynamic, and indeed tends to reinforce existing institutional arrangements and social inequalities (Dutton, 2004; Norris, 2002). These kinds of reproduced systems of exclusion and reconfigurations of access must be critically acknowledged by scholars studying online news before making claims about the participatory or democratic nature of a site.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, we noted the many problems currently faced by the news industry. We cannot frame participatory journalism in its pure bottom-up form as an entirely satisfactory answer to the decline of the news industry's marketability or credibility, nor is it likely to facilitate the survival of news formats outside of the online realm. For all its success, citizen journalism remains dependent to a significant extent on mainstream news organizations, whose output it debates, critiques, recombines, and debunks by harnessing large and distributed communities of users. At the same time, increasingly mainstream news is taking note of what the citizen journalists are saying, and uses content generated by users as an alternative to vox-pops, opinion polls, or in some cases indeed as a partial replacement of editorial work. Whether the practitioners in either tier of news publishing are enthusiast participants in the process or not, the process of increasing hybridization and convergence between the bottom-up and top-down models of newswork is already in full swing around the world. The fact that the sites which we have considered here manage to survive and, in some cases, to flourish in an already overcrowded attention economy, and furthermore seem to generate relevant news for (and discussion among) the communities they serve, suggests that professionally enhanced participatory journalism has legitimacy as a form of news production in its own right—well beyond the apparent ambition of some news barons to harvest bottom-up news as a cheaper alternative to the content produced by costly in-house staff. This also shows how participatory ideals are not necessarily anathema to commercial aspirations, and vice versa—which example of journalism as a creative industry (Hartley, 2005) offers challenging new ways to theorize and study the profession and its role in a global cultural economy.

From these admittedly cursory glances it seems evident that the professionals involved in all of these cases have had (and are still having) a rough ride. Participatory ideals do not mesh well with set notions of professional distance in journalism; notions which tend to exclude rather than to include. Indeed, in the information age modern societies can ill afford a status quo which leaves large sections of the citizenry disenfranchised from participation in processes of journalistic and political deliberation. On the other hand, the professionalization of journalism is one of the few markers it can wield to defend its unique position in contemporary democracy. Perhaps at issue is whether to see journalism as it works today as a profession that is "finished", or as a trade that is continually evolving and therefore is ready to invest itself in its own development. Beyond such arguments one should note that interesting initiatives online in and of themselves do not hold the key to journalism's future—which perspective amounts to a doubtful technological determinism. In closing, it seems that many of the issues we signaled as potential problems for participatory news—the tensions related to control between providing quality content and encouraging public connectivity, legitimate commercial goals of news institutions and creative or editorial freedom of journalists (whether employed or volunteering)—can be resolved in a hybrid model, but in different ways. Many of the checks and balances of the sites we investigated can be identified because the site creators chose to be transparent in their work and methods. The delicate balance between transparency and systems of control therefore seems to hold the key to understanding co-creative yet professionally accountable forms of participatory news, and future research may benefit from articulating its premises firmly in this observation.

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NOTES

1. Jay Rosen coined this term in a post to his PressThink weblog on June 27, 2006; see http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html.
2. Quote from the influential Buzzmachine weblog of Jeff Jarvis on July 5, 2006; see <http://www.buzzmachine.com/2006/07/05/networked-journalism>.
3. Patrick Smith (March 22, 2007), Linnebank: 'Old media' must re-evaluate role, in *Press Gazette UK*; http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/article/220307/geert_linnebank_changing_media_summit_newspapers.
4. Source: <http://yelvington.com/node/218>.
5. Source: <http://www.bluffontoday.com/about.html>.
6. Source: http://yelvington.com/20060706/citizen_journalism_whats_in_a_name.
7. Translation from press release, source: <http://www.skoeps.nl/downloads/20061005%20Persbericht%20SKOEPS.pdf>.
8. Source: <http://www.scoopt.com/blog/2005/10/journalists-talk-about-citizen.html>.
9. Source: <http://www.molblog.nl/media/4747>.
10. A search with the Dutch version of Google News generates articles: <http://news.google.com/news?hl=nl&ned=nl&q=skoeps&btnG=Nieuws+zoeken>.
11. Source: http://www.buzzer.nl/buzzlog/weblog_item.php?id=115.
12. Semi-structured oral interview with Torsten Casimir, February 1, 2006.
13. Informal e-mail interview with Henk Blanken, November 23, 2006.

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