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The Impact of User-Created Content on Traditional News

By

Aneesah McDonald

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing in the Department of
English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

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The Impact of User-Created Content on Traditional News

This paper discusses the current news industry dynamic as a result of dual participation by individuals as consumers and producers of news. The topics to be discussed include the role of Web 2.0 and social media in supporting a possible transition away from professionally produced news and the impact of these activities on modern day journalism. This paper will also attempt to account for consumer perception of User Created Content (UCC) compared to traditional media content, what these currently held perceptions might mean for the future of journalism, and for the evolution of the audience. Prior research, various survey results, case studies, and real life examples will be used to provide reasoning as to what may become the news cycle of the future.

What is known today as the mainstream press, or alternately, the mass media, encompasses a variety of disciplines whose objectives include providing a public service as well as providing paying advertisers with simultaneous opportunities to promote their goods and services to the same audience of consumers. The news production and profit cycle started long ago with the popularity of the first mass news medium, newspapers. Anna-Marie Jönsson and Henrik Örnebring note that, “newspapers have been navigating the potentially contradictory twin imperatives of performing a public function and achieving commercial success in a free market for well over 100 years” (128).

Milestones in the development of what is known collectively as the news media occurred decades apart with the addition of radio and television to the mass communication mix where each tool thrived simultaneously rather than cancelling the others out. Even today, newspapers continue to focus solely on news, while television and radio focus more on entertainment but are still important vehicles for news delivery. Because specific types of content are not inextricably linked to just one platform, as the internet has shown us, Henry Jenkins makes sure to differentiate between delivery technologies and the media crafts that use them.

Delivery systems are simply and only technologies; media are also cultural systems. Delivery technologies come and go all the time, but media persist as layers within an ever more complicated information and entertainment stratum. Printed words did not kill theater.

Television did not kill radio. Each old medium was forced to coexist with emerging media. (Jenkins ch. 1)

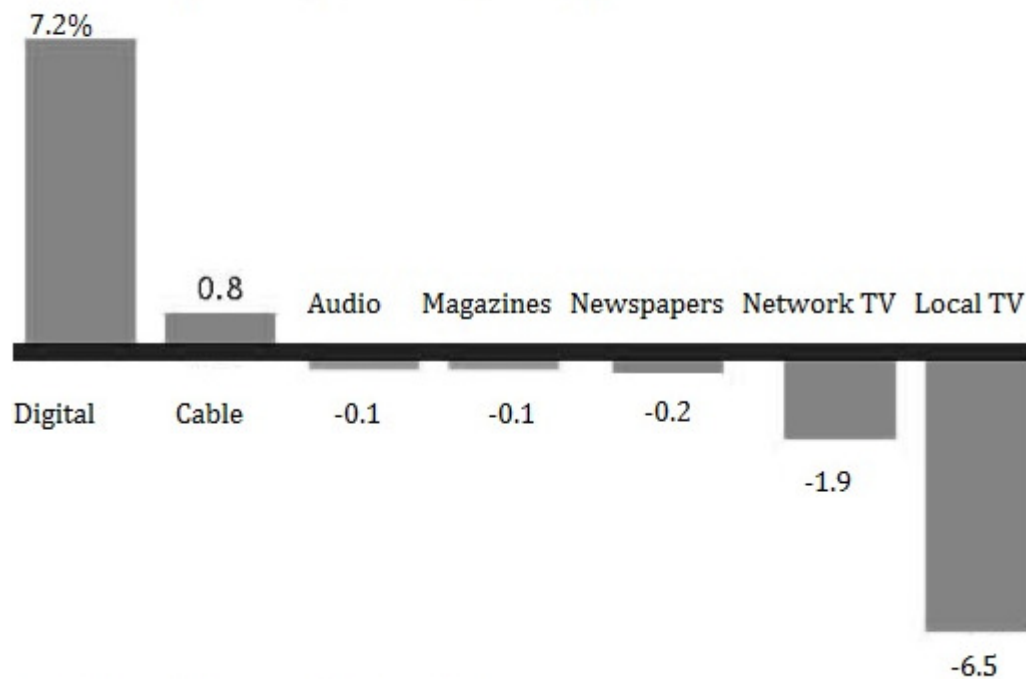
As online news sources continue to grow in popularity among news consumers, the functions of news writers and the newspapers for which they work are at risk of either being replaced or assimilated by Internet trends and technologies in reporting. Scott Kessler, an Internet equity analyst for Standard and Poor's summarizes what many view as the current state of the news media.

The Internet has changed everything, and most people who are sophisticated know that the notion of traditional news cycles and deadlines and focusing on stories as they are assigned to reporters — all of those things are out the window. (Shiver 53)

The data shown in Image 1 – Audience Key Findings, comes from the latest edition of the annual *State of the News Media* report compiled by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ). The graph illustrates the declining audience for traditional mass media forms between 2011 and 2012, compared to audience gains in digital media. The findings in this graph are based only on the 2011-2012 comparisons of audience behavior, but it is reflective of a larger trend that has been developing for years.

Image 1

Audience Key Findings, Percentage Change in Audience 2011 - 2012



Source: *2013 State of the News Media*

Barbie Zelizer observes that, “journalism is most often seen as an institution in decline. It tries to catch up with technology but is forced to do so within the organizational constraints of the newsroom and the institutional ecology it operates in” (54). The “institutional ecology” of which Zelizer speaks refers to the ethical, economic, and practical considerations (e.g. strict deadlines, space or time constraints created by working around

advertisements) by which the traditional journalist is bound. Even though the field of journalism is not classified as a certified trade or specialized profession, college disciplines, professional ethics, and occupational guidelines have emerged around it.

The generally accepted approach to being acknowledged as a professional journalist is to obtain post-secondary education and training in one of the media disciplines and to continually build a portfolio that demonstrates skill in applying media principles and strategies. In addition, journalism communities such as the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), The Poynter Institute, and individual media establishments all provide codes of ethics that professional journalists are expected to adhere to in assuming the title of professional reporter. A common aspect that is included in many of these ethical outlines is that journalists regard themselves as public servants whose main goal is to operate according to the best interests of society. Non-journalists who provide content online may do so with no altruistic objectives in mind. James Webster notes that, "the new content providers hope their offerings will inform, enlighten, or make a profit. Beyond that, they might also seek benefits to reputation or simple notoriety" (598).

Flavian and Gurrea make note of the advantages that the internet holds over traditional mediums. The internet and its myriad of applications enable individuals to participate in multi-media environments that:

Together configure a complete journalistic product. The internet combines the three basic advantages of radio, press, and television.

This new medium presents the immediacy of the radio, the wide and deep information offered by the press and the impact of the images in television. (326)

What this means for the news industry is a source of debate among media professionals and observers. While many have already claimed the inevitable demise of the news media, others call into question the sustainability of a news dissemination structure that is not structured and that does not adhere to any known standards. Simply put, it is not the capacity of new media vehicles that are in question, but the capacity of the consumers who use them, as Heinonen argues:

Consumers' online behavior is developing at a fast rate. Consumers are taking part in a variety of activities ranging from consuming content, participating in discussions, and sharing knowledge with other consumers to contributing to other consumers' activities. This active consumer behavior is changing the media and marketing landscape. (356)

The *2013 State of the News Media* report notes that thirty-seven percent of social media users have contributed to the creation of news, provided commentary on news topics, or shared in the dissemination of news via social media (Mitchell, Olmstead and Saseen). The aforementioned report identifies trends that impact the media's performance and a full section is dedicated to the digital impact on news including the trending popularity of social media as a promotional tool for online content. The 2013 report also revealed a progressively upward movement in the number of people who obtain news through social media. Specifically, a comparison of the 2010 and 2012 State of the News Media reports attest to the growing trend of consumer participation in news. The comparison revealed the following patterns.

Audiences now consume more news through social media than they did before. A June 2012 Pew Research Center study found that 19% of Americans saw news or news headlines on a social network “yesterday,” more than double the 9% who’d done so in 2010. The acceleration is not just among the young. Roughly 34% of those aged 18 to 24 said they saw news on a social networking site yesterday, up from 12% in 2010, and so did 30% of 30-to-39-year olds, up from 19% in 2010. (Mitchell, Olmstead and Saseen)

People who would ordinarily not concern themselves with news are surrounded by it regardless of their natural proclivities. Smartphones and other electronic devices with Internet capability make it possible to obtain news on the go. Where people once had to carve out time to “catch up” with the news, avoidance of the news would be a more challenging task for today’s consumer. Anyone with a social media profile is intentionally or unintentionally exposed to news headlines, offered hyperlinks to news content, or at the very least, is a passive observer of the exchanges of their peers regarding specific news content.

The capacity for Internet readers, writers, and other participants to influence and not just report on the news is met with trepidation by some, such as Andrew Keen, author of *The Cult of the Amateur*. Keen compares the burgeoning accessibility and participation of average people in the traditional news space to T.H. Huxley's scenario of infinite monkeys, which offers that an infinite number of monkeys hitting typewriter keys at random will almost surely type a given text, even the complete works of William Shakespeare. He

applies that theory to the modern era and amends it to address concerns brought about by the ability of anyone to create and share content:

Today's technology hooks all those monkeys up with all those typewriters. Except in our Web 2.0 world, the typewriters aren't quite typewriters, but rather Internet users. And instead of creating masterpieces, these millions and millions of exuberant monkeys - many with no more talent in the creative arts than our primate cousins - are creating an endless digital forest of mediocrity. For today's amateur monkeys can use their networked computers to publish everything from uninformed political commentary, to unseemly home videos, to embarrassingly amateurish music, to unreadable poems, reviews, essays, and novels. (introduction)

Questions of news quality, credibility, and the potential to influence the masses are central among the concerns of Keen and others to the emergence of the open media trend. Because, the traditional media and emerging media dynamic is blurring lines and redefining the previously accepted concept of the news cycle, the definitions provided below clarify the manner in which important terms used in this paper are meant to be understood.

Traditional Media

In the book, *The Evolution of Media*, Michael Noll describes communication media as a one-way process in which content is sent from one source to many recipients, such as by radio or television. Since the content of broadcast communication is usually intended for many recipients who form a large (or mass)

audience, such communication is also called mass communication. Radio, television, newspapers, and magazines are all part of the mass communication industry - also known as mass media, or more simply, as the media (15).

Throughout this paper, the news dissemination process outlined in Noll's definition will serve as the basic meaning whenever the term traditional media is used. Alternate terms that may be used as substitutes for traditional media references include news industry, mass media, news media, and mainstream media or press. The title of journalist will be used to reference individuals whose academic training and professional experience fall within the practices and routines of the traditional media.

User Created Content (UCC)

Any subject matter that is developed and disseminated through some form of Internet participation could be defined as user-created content. However, all end products of such interaction cannot be defined as news. For the purpose of this paper, the definition provided by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) best encompasses the types of social media usage and citizen reporting activities that offer a challenge to traditional forms of media. The three characteristics that should be met in defining user-generated content (UGC) according to the OECD standard include a "publication requirement, creative effort, and creation outside of professional routines and practices" (Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent 7).

Because UCC is the more widely used acronym for this activity, UCC will be used going forward when referring collectively to material that otherwise meets the OECD standards. The typical references to UCC throughout this paper will include news sharing

and commentary via social networking sites including Facebook and Twitter, hosting and commenting on blogs, and participation in writing communities such as Digg, Reddit, and so on. UCC practitioners may also be alternately referred to as content creators, or citizen journalists.

Audience

The definition dilemma that results from the ongoing transition of the audience will be discussed at length in this paper. Jönsson and Örnebring designate the three levels of audience involvement in UCC according to the activities most associated with each.

Throughout this paper, the terms audience, public, or consumer may be used interchangeably to refer to low level participants. The terms medium-level and high-level participants will be referred to as content providers or citizen journalists. Table 2 – User-generated content features, low to high participation details the characteristics that define each user type.

Table 1

User-Generated Content Features, Low to High Participation

Level of participation	Features
Low: audience members as consumers	Personalization features: RSS feeds; "Daily Me" customization "Aggregated opinion" features: Grading/marking; Polls
Medium: audience members as prosumers	Comment function linked to other content (articles, blogs); Contact emails; Q&A's; Have your say's; Other actively solicited content (texts, images, videos etc.)
High: audience members as producers	Forums/Discussion boards; Chat rooms; Wikis; Reader's blogs/V-blogs; Reader's articles; Reader's images/videos; Reader's podcasts; Other not directly solicited content.

Source: Jönsson and Örnebring 131

The theories of audience displacement effect, complementarity, and convergence will also be discussed as possible long-term outcomes of the often predicted shift in the news media. The displacement theory holds that time spent on new media reduces the time spent on traditional media and will ultimately result in the elimination of the older platforms. The complementarity theory asserts that consumer media choices are dependent on content rather than on the source of the content. In this content focused model, consumers make no significant distinction between bloggers and news columnists, or news reporters and contributors to sites like *The Examiner* and *Yahoo News*. It proposes that consumers will be guided to topics in fulfillment of particular interests as well as to fulfill other self-gratification needs. The Convergence theory is similar to the complementarity theory, but it offers a less cooperative view. The Convergence theory holds that the evolution of the consumer as well as the opportunities and the technologies will together foster a dynamic tension that may never be resolved. As with complementarity, consumers it is anticipated that a more evolved consumer will make connections between media technologies and sources in an attempt at finding the right balance of technologies and sources that will best serve their needs.

Journalism's own history demonstrates a willingness to integrate and utilize new technologies. However, the modern journalism dilemma is not only about technologies. It is more so about the potential overhaul of the industry as a result of advanced technology and its widespread availability. The way forward, according to researchers, is to find ways to effectively integrate citizen and traditional journalism formats. This paper will conclude with highlights of real-life media integration models that may stand the test of time.

The Present News Dynamic

Traditional media, through its gatekeeping function has managed the flow and presentation of news to the general public for centuries. In their roles as agents of public communication, news organizations survey and research events in society and the world at large, eventually passing those deemed: “news-worthy” on to consumers in neat, topically arranged packages. Specifically, the mass media is challenged with the task of presenting unbiased, well-researched, and professionally refined content that can be understood by people of diverse backgrounds. This method of news surveillance and selection are characteristic of the news industry’s gatekeeping and agenda-setting functions. Axel Bruns weighs the pros and cons of using this well established model.

While ideally a useful mechanism for condensing the total sum of all current events down to what can be intelligently covered using available resources in a standard newspaper or broadcast bulletin, such gatekeeping is necessarily also subject to the unconscious and implicit biases of journalistic staff, or even to explicit interference by editors and proprietors as they impose their own political, social, or commercial agendas. (Bruns 3)

To offset the potential for the negative types of influences described by Bruns, news organizations typically have codes of ethics that professional journalists are required to follow. For example, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) code of ethics was adopted in 1996 and is voluntarily adhered to by its members. A summary of the code of ethics provided on the organization’s website outlines the principles that members are expected to fulfill in the carrying out of their functions:

The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues.

Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. (Society of Professional Journalists)

Despite the aforementioned guidelines aimed at keeping journalists honest and neutral, the industry has long been challenged by sectors of the news audience who question the consistency of the media in applying this model. Early on, bloggers and social media enthusiasts took the lead in exposing journalist errors and acts of outright deceit. And while the aggression is not as palpable, they still do. Fraudulent reporters that plagiarize and invent stories would find it harder to perpetrate these kinds of deceit in this era of digital media. Journalist lapses in upholding professional standards have become more apparent to news audiences as the age of information technology and the accessibility to information that was once considered privileged, is as readily available to the layperson as it is to the journalist. Joseph Rago, author of the article "Blog Mob," says that bloggers believe themselves to be a truthful alternative to the mass media. "Bloggers saw themselves as an independent counterweight to the legacy mainstream media. They believed that the establishment had been corrupted by bias and groupthink"(4). Bruns adds that "citizen journalism today provides an answer to the ancient question of *quis custodiet ipsos custodiet*, 'who watches the watchers'" (9).

The outspoken disapproval of traditional media performance by sectors of the public has contributed to a reality in which newspapers are experiencing dwindling

readerships, declining sales, and a loss of advertising market share to digital media technology. It is not just the alleged ineffectiveness of mass media professionals to carry out their calls of duty that are being heavily criticized, but the institution itself. Bruns contends that the journalism profession has actually managed to approximate its ideals fairly well. The issue, he adds, is that “in the emerging information age, many of the original motivations for the industrial gatekeeping regime no longer apply” (4). The news industry’s agenda setting/gatekeeping model has come under scrutiny as anti-democratic. Daniel Burtic explains the rising disillusionment toward this model.

One of the tasks of mass media is to establish the public agenda, but the famous "dog" that safeguards democracy has lost much of its power and today it seems to have become an instrument used by various groups of interest. (34)

In light of the public’s declining trust in traditional media outlets and their out-of-date methodologies, consumer produced news content may seem the perfect response to a news cycle purportedly in distress. With Web 2.0 as the fast moving vehicle for UCC, the 2007 OECD Report on User Created Content analyzes the specific advantages that encourage and enable people to participate in UCC. These drivers include technological, social, economic, legal, and institutional factors. All of these work in some way to alleviate the cumbersome barriers that once discouraged consumer input and feedback. Table 2¹ organizes the information taken from the OECD report into a format that more clearly

¹ The information in this table is taken from Box 1, Examples of drivers of user-created content. Vickery, Graham and Sacha Wunsch-Vincent. "Working Party on the Information Economy." Organization for Economic Co-operation, 2007. 1-74. Print.

accounts for the contributing roles of each driver in effecting the changes that are redefining the media landscape.

Table 2

Examples of Drivers of User-Created Content

Technological Drivers	Social Drivers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased broadband availability. • Increased hard drive capacity and processing speeds coupled with lower costs. • Rise of technologies to create, distribute, and share content. • Provision of simpler software tools for creating, editing, and remixing. • Decrease in cost and increase in consumer technology devices for audio, photo and video. • Rise of non-professional and professional UCC sites as outlets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift to younger age groups (digital natives) with substantial ICT skills², and willing to engage online (i.e. sharing content, recommending and rating content, etc.) and with less hesitation to reveal personal information online. • Desire to create and express oneself and need for more interactivity than on traditional media platforms such as TV. • Development of communities and collaborative projects. • Spread of these social drivers throughout older age groups and to fulfill certain societal functions (social engagement, politics and education).
Economic Drivers	Legal and Institutional Drivers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower costs and increased availability of tools for the creation of UCC (e.g. creating, editing, hosting content and lower entry barriers). • Increased possibilities to finance related ventures and UCC sites through venture capital and other investment possibilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rise of schemes which provide more flexible access to creative works and the right to create derivative works (e.g. flexible licensing and copyright schemes such as the Creative Commons license). • Rise of end-user licensing agreements which grant copyright to users for their content.

(Vickery and Wunsch Vincent 14)

² ICT – Information and Communication Technology

Table 3³ – Mass Communication Media vs. Social Media offers a similar side-by-side comparison of traditional and social media technologies and capabilities. The table underscores what many agree are the inherent advantages of new media in the areas of content development and distribution.

Table 3

Mass Communication vs. Social Media

Media Distribution	Mass Communications Media (20 th Century)	Social Media (21 st Century)
Media Production	Large-scale distribution; high barriers to entry for new entrants	Internet dramatically reduces barriers to entry based on distribution.
Media Content	Complex division of labor; critical role of media content gatekeepers and professionals.	Greater empowerment of user/audiences enabled through interactivity and greater choice of media outlets.
Producer/Consumer	Tendency towards standardized mass appeal content to maximize audience share – limited scope for market segmentation based on product differentiation.	“Long-tail” economics make much wider range of media content potentially profitable; demassification and segmentation of media content markets.

(Flew 3-4)

The table basically confirms that anyone with access to the internet has the potential to become a content creator and supplier.

Proponents of citizen journalism believe that it has the capacity to positively influence the news industry in several ways.

³ The information provided in this table is an exact duplication of the information provided in Terry Flew’s Table 1, from a presentation entitled Democracy, Participation and Convergent Media: CaseStudies in Contemporary Online News Journalism in Australia (3-4).

Positive terms include the views that citizen journalism tends to: (1) democratize journalism, so that the gatekeeping and agenda-setting tasks of deciding “what’s news” are spread wider than those complicit in selling audiences to advertisers; (2) pluralize voices in the public sphere by providing more ways for dissenting voices and views to be heard; and (3) enable deployment of new in situ technologies to drive change among the pre-existing traditional media. (Cokley and Tilley 5)

Also referred to as “grassroots” media, citizen journalism is seen as a bottom-up approach to reporting that offers a more precise reflection of what the masses believe to be important in society. Any individual with access to the internet has the potential to source and utilize the right mix of social media applications to earn recognition as a trusted news source and with that, the ability to reach an inestimable number of people. Moreover, as Webster points out:

One of the more remarkable features of social media is their ability to quickly bring otherwise obscure stories and images to public attention. These stories and images are spread through social networks powered by digital technologies, and are variously described as cascades, contagions, or, sometimes, viral marketing. (603)

While ease of use and potential reach are counted among the advantages of the citizen/social media news model, detractors of citizen journalism believe that the stated advantages will cheapen the news industry by undermining some of the legacy and

safeguards that have developed over the years. Many believe that citizen journalism will reduce the overall worth of journalism, resulting in the negative outcomes provided below.

(1) devalue the ethical and commercial worth of the term “journalist” and with it the specialized information processing skills; (2) erode the overall quality of available information by promoting a “mirror ball effect” in which a dazzling cacophony of competing raw sources overwhelms less colorful output from skilled information gatherers and disseminators; and (3) undermine society by enabling unchallenged and unchecked access by false “citizen” voices such as malignant commercial interests of criminals who use fraud and spin.
(Cokley and Tilley 5)

Concerns abound regarding the quality, credibility, and intentions of the consumers who double as creators of media content. Andrew Keen points out that opening up these channels of communication which allows individuals to define their own roles within it, may be more harmful than helpful to the process of democratizing journalism. He offers that citizen journalists acting as their own gatekeepers and their own agenda setters should be treated even more skeptically than the mainstream press.

In the digital world's never-ending stream of unfiltered, user-generated content, things are indeed often not what they seem. Without editors, fact-checkers, administrators, or regulators to monitor what is being posted, we have no one to vouch for the reliability or credibility of the content we read and see ... There are no gatekeepers to filter truth from fiction, genuine content from

advertising, legitimate information from errors or outright deceit.

(ch.3)

Noting that citizen journalists are not as empowered or as autonomous as many assume, Jönsson and Örnebring conclude that, issues of untrustworthiness are not likely to have a wide-scale impact. They insist that “users are mostly empowered to create popular culture-oriented content and personal/everyday content rather than news/informational content” (140). Furthermore, they argue that:

UGC provision for popular culture content types is generally more extensive and tied to specific content types in the area of “infotainment” like Travel and Monitoring. It is also much more open to all kinds of user-generated material. When it comes to video clips for example, popular culture material (along with everyday life-oriented material) is much more common than news/information oriented material. The most popular clips are the ones of children and pets. (138)

The coverage of niche topics by citizen journalism “serves to provide more in-depth and more insightful coverage of areas traditionally neglected by mainstream media.” (Bruns 10) He also reasons that the “neglect” of these areas by the mainstream press is due to the fact that traditional media is more likely to dedicate resources toward stories that will appeal to a broader audience, rather than to smaller groups of specially targeted individuals.

Citizen journalism has been able to assume leadership in such fields as they have been all but vacated by mainstream journalism, often for

economic reasons: for the news industry, it is simply not viable to dedicate journalistic staff to areas which may only very occasionally produce stories that are of interest to more than a committed niche audience. (10-11)

Bloggerati, Twitterati, by Mary Cross, ponders the possibility that citizen journalism could one day replace traditional media. The citizen media accomplishments that she outlines in the book are offered as evidence that citizen journalism is a competent and effective force in covering hard news stories.

The media of the counterculture have already beaten established journalists to the punch on some big stories. The first responses and news of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in March 2011 were on Twitter (hashtag #hitsunami), not cable news networks. A monster earthquake in Chile knocked out every means of communication except cell phones, on which Twittering citizens sent cries for help and reports of the disaster. Similarly, in Haiti, cell phone tweets emerged first from the rubble of the earthquake there. The “miracle on the Hudson” landing of a bird-stalled jet airplane in the Hudson River in January 2009 was first reported on Twitter, then so new nobody had even heard of it six months earlier. *Twitterati* also sounded the first alarms about a low-flying 747 Air Force One plane tailed by fighter jets over Lower Manhattan in the spring of 2009 as panicked office workers fearing another 9/11 fled skyscrapers in New Jersey and New York City. (Cross 68)

Cross's list of citizen journalism successes is not exhaustive of course, but it does show that citizen journalism is not content with being relegated to the soft news section of the internet. It also supports Terry Flew's assertion that citizen journalism is useful mainly in crisis reporting. "One lesson from citizen journalism projects is that it needs to have a starting point, whether it is based around an event, an issue, a community or a movement" (21).

Several entrepreneurial innovations have demonstrated this point. For example, in the summer of 2007, the *Huffington Post* in conjunction with Jay Rosen (New York University) launched a website soliciting the public to participate in daily coverage of the Presidential Elections. To distinguish its amateur contributors from professional reporters who were embedded on the respective campaign buses, the website was called *offthebus.net*. The Off the Bus campaign coverage included 1700 writers among the 12,000 total people who contributed in some other way. The mainstream media followed suit and partnered with several different social media outlets to provide collaborative coverage of the election. For two debates, CNN partnered with YouTube to obtain debate question submissions from the public. Myspace and MSNBC held a competition to select two users respectively, to send as contributors to the Democratic and Republican conventions.

In addition to coalescing around specific topics, the eagerness and ability of citizen journalists to produce mainstream content is evident by the scores of non-journalists who contribute to independent news sites. Websites like *Yahoo News* and *The Examiner* recruit citizens to cover traditional "beats" or to suggest new, very specific areas for which they then serve as writer and editor. *The Patch* similarly recruits citizens to provide hyper-local news coverage of whatever is going on within their communities. With the objective of

rising to the top, these citizen reporters are further tasked with establishing communities around their topics by also creating blogs, interacting with readers in the comments section, and promoting their articles via social media applications.

Websites such as Digg and Reddit allow the work of individuals to be voted on and pushed to prominence within their own sites, and if popular enough, improved rankings within internet search engines. Facebook and Twitter are also popular sites that allow content providers and others to share content and to re-direct traffic to sites like Reddit, which in turn, results in more votes and higher search engine rankings. Caspian Kang likens the media environment of today, to a video game in which all contributors aim to achieve “high scores” or re-tweets, likes, and shares across social media.

It helps to envision modern journalism as a kind of video game. If you're part of the Internet media, everything you put out into the world comes with its own scoring system. Tweets are counted by retweets and favorites, stories are scored by page views and Facebook likes. A writer's reach and influence is visible right there, in the number of his followers and the number of “influencers” who subscribe to his or her feed. (Kang 12)

This system of sharing and scoring is an example of grassroots media at work. Crowdsourcing is informally understood as a process where one user initiates a task and invites other users to perform specific functions toward the overall completion of the task. Johanna Vehkoo notes that this generally accepted view of crowdsourcing is ineffective as it simply invites “reader comments and images as an addition to news” (6). Because crowdsourcing is powered by web technology, she

believes that it has the ability “to connect people in new, interactive ways” (6) like bringing breaking news and updates to the attention of the public.

Reddit Involvement in Major News Stories

Reddit users, called Redditors, provide examples of the best and worst-case use of the crowdsourcing function. In the case of the Aurora Colorado Theater mass shooting, Redditors supplied a comprehensive list of resources detailing the timeline and supplemental issues surrounding the shooting. In that instance, first-hand and second-hand accounts of the shooting and knowledge of the shooter, James Holmes, proved to be factual and useful in providing complete and extensive coverage of the story.

On the other hand, unconfirmed postings and speculation, can serve to trivialize events and skew public opinion as users try to earn votes and gain personal attention. In the case of Reddit and the Boston Marathon bombing, Redditors similarly contributed to the breaking news; however, this resulted in mis-identifying one of the suspects. A *New York Times* article, “Should Reddit Be Blamed for the Spreading of a Smear,” traces how the actions of Reddit users combined with the absence of journalistic controls defamed missing teenager, Sunil Tripathi, and led to the harassment of his family. Minutes after the first photos of the Boston Marathon bombing suspects were made public, a user on Reddit, posted side-by-side pictures comparing the facial features of Sunil Tripathi with that of the suspect who would later be identified as Dzhokhar Tsarnev. In addition to the comparison images, the user analyzed several “coincidences” to imply that they might be the same person.

Starting with the one seemingly well supported speculation, other Reddit users added similar speculative comments to the forum dedicated to the topic, and soon enough, the suggestion was widely circulated on the internet. The article notes that by 3:00 am the next day, shortly after the loaded suggestion was made on Reddit, “in dark corners of the internet, it was widely accepted that Sunil Tripathi was Suspect No. 2, and Reddit had got there first” (Kang 3).

Motivated by the type of competition that is encouraged by news aggregator sites like Reddit, and the possibility of gaining recognition as the person who broke the news in the case of the Boston Bombing suspect, participants were otherwise hard-pressed to explain their actions. Cross makes note of the attention-seeking tendencies that social networking and social media seems to encourage among users.

People seem to love the opportunity that social media give them to display their connections and followers. More than offering everybody their Warholian 15 minutes of fame, these sites and blogs offer users the chance to ensconce themselves within a network as a go-to personality or guru. It’s the high school popularity contest transmogrified to online algorithm. You can jack up your rank on Google (known as PageRank, named after Google cofounder Larry Page) just by embedding plenty of links in your blog, or lure followers and fans to your Twitter and Facebook accounts by controversial remarks. (Cross 123)

The use of such sensational tactics in order to amass followers lends support to the view that the news may be regressing toward the days of Yellow Journalism, where salacious headlines were often times supported by poorly produced content.

Tabloidization of the news presents entertainment style news to the news consumer, providing a story repeatedly focused on entertainment rather than public interest issues. With this repeated focus on entertainment-focused, tabloid- style news, the news consumer will likely understand entertainment-focused news to be important thus placing a greater emphasis on these issues, resulting in increased saliency to these issues. (Brander 17)

In competitive news markets driven by UGT, citizen journalists have the advantage of being more opinionated, more colorful in their word choice, and likely more enticing to news seekers. News articles in the mainstream press attempt to answer questions of who, what, when, where, why, and how. Articles by online journalists are under no obligation to answer any of these questions which journalists consider essential to the telling of a story. The quest for larger audiences, some believe, may result in media professionals engaging in news-gathering techniques that fail industry verification standards and result in the production of low-quality articles that the industry has attempted to avoid through the years.

Evolution of the Mass Media Audience

UCC makes it increasingly difficult to define the audience, not only in contrast to producers, but it also challenges long-held definitions of the audience. Commonly understood definitions account for the audience as a homogenous group of “people

at the end of the production chain: readers, viewers, and listeners” (Kelly 1).

Although numerous terms have been coined to capture the multiplicity of opportunities for audience participation in the news cycle, there is no single term that embodies the hybrid roles of audience, commenter, and contributor. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect in the emerging media challenge.

“The theory of the passive audience was not merely a phase in the history of mass communication theory. It lives on in many of our assumptions and fears about the effects of mass communication.” (Biocca 56) Several theories have since attempted to redefine the audience and their changing roles within the mass communication mix. The battle over the definition of the audience as active or passive is summarized by Biocca:

Over the last 40 years of theory and research, a kind of theoretical tug-of-war has emerged. On one end of the rope we find the active audience: individualistic, "impervious to influence," rational, and selective. On the other end, we have the passive audience: conformist, gullible, anomic, vulnerable, victims. (51)

More recent theories attempt to account for the more active behaviors and opportunities that are available to modern consumers. Philip Napoli believes that rather than developing and abandoning definitions of the audience, it would be helpful to instead recognize the term ‘audience’ as a malleable concept and not a fixed definition. Viewing the audience in this way will be useful in tracking it as an evolutionary process rather than account for changes after the fact. Napoli explains some of the difficulties encountered when the audience is viewed in a static way. “Any efforts to bring predictability and

rationality to the process of producing audiences must draw upon a sophisticated understanding of the essentially uncontrollable, yet somewhat predictable, behavior of media audiences” (30).

One of the early theories of mass media audience that is still applicable to today’s media climate is the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT): this theory was introduced in the 1970s by Elihu Katz, and it disputed the idea of the mass media audience as a passive group. The mass media audience, according to UGT, is a group that actively seeks specific media and specific content to achieve certain results or gratifications that satisfy their personal needs:

The principal power then rests with the audience, where individuals define their needs and take control of the media-seeking process in an attempt to gratify those needs. Such an approach suggests that media are relegated to serving the audience and thereby competing among one another for attention. (Mersey 37-38)

The popularity of UCC has already resulted in a reality where news providers, including professionals, try to accommodate the types of content that consumers find popular. Members of the media, for example, participated in the misidentification of the marathon bombing suspect.

The case of the Unicorn Meat

The bottom-up approach of catering to consumer news demand compared to the agenda-setting approach is exemplified in the academic paper, “Online versus Traditional Media in Publishing Pranks: The Case of the Unicorn Meat.” The report is based on the examination of an April Fools Day prank in which a fabricated product described as

unicorn meat was announced via an internet press release, allegedly by the National Pork Board (NPB). Using the board's famous slogan, the pranksters, Think Geek, promoted unicorn meat as "the other white meat." The initial prank did not make headlines or even pique interest around the web until the pranksters posted a mocking apology and a copy of the twelve-page Cease and Desist letter that they received on behalf of the NPB.

The NPB's overzealous legal response to the prank became the story, or more accurately, material for amusing headlines and humorous treatments. The story went viral on the internet but was still barely covered in the traditional press (Veil, Chen and Wang). The disparity in deciding on the publication worthiness of this piece underscores the differences in the selection process between institutionalized media, where many factors are taken into consideration, and the emerging press where there are usually no limitations, not even on space.

While news stories covering such topics as Unicorn Meat and pranks are sure to fulfill the entertainment gratification for many, the quest for vetted hard news becomes more difficult. The fact that news items of opposing genres are routinely located in the same space on the internet infers a similar value of importance. Pressure is then placed on the consumer to be a more discerning of the content and quality of the news that they read, share, and create. The following discussions on audience perceptions of news credibility and quality will utilize information from previously conducted research to assess the abilities of consumers to sufficiently sort through the plethora of content in search of usable material that meet their gratification needs. Each study quoted will include details on the purpose, methodology, and results of each.

Audience Perceptions on News Credibility and Quality

In the news industry, credibility speaks to the ability of news providers to produce accurate and honest information to the public. Some research suggests that since readers are “unaware of the steps journalists take to create accurate, well-attributed stories, such as using multiple sources and verifying information. . . the public is not aware when these professional norms are absent from stories produced by citizens” (Baker-Netzley and Hemmerman 5). A sampling of research reveals that consumers are mostly unaware of professional journalism norms and hence, do not apply them in consideration of UCC. Despite this, research by Chung Joo Chung, Yoonjae Nam, and Michael Stefanone conducted research that divided online news providers into three types: mainstream, independent, and index-type (e.g. *Google* news and *Yahoo* news). Results showed that in terms of credibility, internet news sites with no affiliation to traditional media outlets received the highest credibility ratings since "traditional dimensions of credibility remain influential" (1). Independent sites such as the Drudge Report scored lowest.

The content of online versions of mainstream news sources like *usatoday.com* and *nytimes.com* are essentially reproduced from content found in their printed counterparts. Here, news sources are generally stated clearly and reports are written by specialized journalists. . . . In particular, low credibility perceptions for independent news sources seem to be due to not only the origin of online news sources, but also their characteristics. (11)

A study conducted by Sarah Baker-Netzley and Mark Hemmer corroborated that on issues of trust, consumers show a preference for online sources with offline affiliations. However, with regard to credibility, the results were mixed.

Hypothesis

Baker-Netzley and Hemmer hypothesized, that “participants will assign higher credibility levels to a news article written by a professional journalist than they will to an article written by a citizen” (5).

Method and Details

Each of the 229 participants was provided with the same professionally written article “about the US Embassy in Uganda and its relationship with the east African nation” as well as a short survey (5). One version of the article was claimed to have been written by a citizen journalist and the other by a professional journalist. The questionnaire was administered to several sections of a general education public speaking course at a private Midwestern university in February 2011.

After reading their respective versions of the article, general education students were asked to rate it on a number of items using an eleven point Likert scale. The average age of participants was 19.7, sixty percent were women, and forty-three percent were men. Eighty one percent of the participants were white, three percent did not self- identify and the remaining sixteen percent were of diverse origins. The response options included the answers “fair/unfair, biased/unbiased, accurate/inaccurate, doesn’t tell the whole story/tells the whole story, cannot be trusted/can be trusted, balanced/imbanced and well researched/not well researched” (6). Responses were assigned numeric grades of 1-10, where higher codes for each equated to higher credibility ratings.

Results

Findings showed that the credibility ratings for traditional media and UCC were almost evenly split. The “citizen” article was rated as 6.5 and the professionally written article was rated as 6.15. The study also revealed that there is no apparent correlation between credibility and trust. Traditional news sources received a significantly higher rating of 6.39 on the measure of trust compared to 5.88 for UCC content.

Research similarly suggests that in the absence of concrete guidelines for measuring news quality, the content produced by citizen journalists is measured by values and norms that have been established by news industry practitioners. Research findings reported in this paper, reveal that many consumers believe that much of the information that is presented as news is valid since news standards are not widely known by consumers, including those who produce content, as Logan and Sutter point out:

Consumers cannot easily observe the quality of news . . . News organizations may not supply news which meets journalist's definition of high quality if news consumers do not value the aspects of quality valued by journalists. Scientists, engineers, and artists often care greatly about attributes of products or art which matter little to consumers. (101)

Professional news stories aim for clarity, succinctness, and accuracy. The product dimensions that represent high quality news can be categorized into style and presentation, as these are often the key differences between the content produced by professionally trained writers and content providers. With regard to the factors that contribute to style, Ivor Shapiro notes:

Topics associated with this faculty include written and spoken clarity; ease of reading, viewing, or navigation; engagement, interactivity and significance; word choices, image choices, packaging and structure.

Also addressed under this heading would be questions of voice, tone, point of view, conversationality, profanity and colloquialisms, and the purpose and use of quotations and dialogue, including standards for attribution. (157)

Presentation meanwhile speaks to the overall arrangement of the content. In professionally prepared content, editorial controls eliminate grammatical and informational inaccuracies, and provides assistance in creating visually stimulating end products that account for white space and eye-flow. Shapiro notes that topics pertaining to presentation include aspects that go into “producing, packaging, and collating works of journalism” (157).

They include the relationship of form to content, packaging and labeling; placement, design and layout; the separation of fact and opinion (if any); a publication’s range of subjects and genres; and the difference between grabbiness and sensationalism. Other issues might include harm-avoidance; legal constraints; and the actual impact of a work on its audience. (157)

Results of a study conducted by Flavian and Gurrea showed that consumers do, in fact, consider writing style to be “a very important attribute of traditional news” but not in digital news (330).

In order to assess the extent to which industry and consumer opinions on news quality between the two correlate or disagree, Brian Logan and Daniel Sutter studied the circulation rates of recent Pulitzer Prize winning newspapers to determine whether a correlation existed. “Pulitzer Prizes are a measure of quality as judged by journalists which consumers can easily observe and thus, provide an opportunity to determine whether news consumers value what journalists consider high quality journalism” (101). Even when allowing for the economic, demographic, and media characteristics of the newspaper markets, results confirmed that newspapers that had recently won Pulitzer Prizes had higher daily and Sunday circulations.

The results of the studies discussed in the preceding paragraphs suggest that readers are fairly concerned with issues of credibility and quality but are likely not educated on how to independently recognize clues that identify credibility and quality. The results further imply that credibility and quality are not high among the uses and gratifications that readers seek to obtain from the news they consume, and by extension, the news they share or create. However, research continually supports the fact that the search for news content is often among the primary reasons people search the internet. Flavian and Gurrea identify the four motivations as to why people read the news, and how their motivations influence their media choice. The results of the study are presented in Table 4, Readers Motivation for Specific News Types. The columns identify four media uses, their associations to specific media choices, and the last column provides a more detailed explanation of the types of content that fit into each category.

Table 4
Readers Motivations for Specific News Types

Motivation	Traditional or Digital	Explanations
Search for specific information (SSI)	Digital	Many of the readers interviewed affirmed that they sought specific data of special personal interest in the newspaper, such as stock prices, sports results, and so on.
Search for updated news (SUN)	Digital	Another reason for reading a daily newspaper is the desire to keep abreast of breaking news (ie the latest events) or to follow current affairs.
Leisure - Entertainment (LEIS)	Traditional	Many of interviewees said that they would frequently begin reading current information in the newspaper to pass time or entertain themselves. Thus, reading the news takes up a part of the reader's leisure time, while they acquire knowledge of current affairs.
Habit (HAB)	Traditional	There is a significant segment of newspaper readers motivated by a habit acquired over time and generally associated with a given time of day, when they will read or leaf through the newspaper almost systematically.

The fact that users in the aforementioned study have different expectations and motivations for digital and online content supports the coexistence of both media forms and their contributors.

Displacement and Complementarity Audience Effects

New media has the potential to either displace or complement existing media forms. In other words, the internet and the forms of mass communication that it inspires can either completely replace what is currently available or it can be integrated into the current mass media system as an additional resource. To determine which of the two theories will prevail, a comparison of the functionality and usefulness of the traditional press as compared to the emerging press will be discussed in the pages to follow. Previous

case studies, including their methodologies and outcomes will be cited in consideration of both theories.

The premise behind displacement theory is a logical one. It takes practical factors of time and the functionality of the specific medium into consideration, and it asserts that the old media runs the risk of becoming obsolete as the result of time or functional displacement effects. Jay Newell, Joseph Pilotta, and John Thomas explain that “changes in media consumption are simply a rebalancing of a societal equilibrium in which media choices are modified over time” (132). Time displacement takes place when there is an increase in the amount of time spent on new media compared to time spent on old media technologies. It presumes that the average person has a limited amount of time in which to engage in media consumption. As a result of this limited time for media engagement, an increase in the popularity of one medium is assumed to be at the expense of other available media.

Functional displacement occurs as the new medium becomes increasingly more important than the older medium in fulfilling a need. It also takes the medium itself into account and determines whether the older medium has staying power in light of the advancements and features of the new medium. Together, traditional media offers a well-rounded system of delivery that makes up for its limitations as separate entities, but it still falls short of the convenience and functionality offered by the multi-media platform of the Internet. Functional displacement presupposes that the medium with the more superior functions, usually the newer medium, will render the older methods useless.

Newell, Pilotta, and Thomas conducted an analysis over the course of four years to assess whether long-term media consumption patterns reveal signs of displacement or

something else. The two research questions were posed as starting points for this effort are listed below.

Research Questions

RQ1: Is the long-term trend in media consumption better described as one of displacement or saturation?

RQ2: Do new media replace incumbent media?

Details and Method

The study was conducted in 2008 and involved twelve to fifteen thousand participants who were statistically matched to resemble the age and gender ratios recorded in the 2000 U.S. decennial census. Media consumption was recorded using dichotomous responses of media use or non-media use during specified hours of the day which were referenced in the study as *dayparts*. The dayparts were blocked off according to media industry categorizations such as “morning drive time (6 a.m. – 10 a.m.), midday (10 a.m. – noon), afternoon (noon – 4:30 p.m.),” and so on, accounting for a full twenty-four hours (133). The forms of media that were tracked included television, broadcast radio, newspapers, magazines, internet and email.

Results

The result of this study countered the displacement effect and was inconclusive on the alternate theory of saturation.

First, the overall consumption of advertiser-supported mass media increased over the 4-year period. Second, the magnitude of change in advertiser-supported media tended to be small with incumbent media showing the smallest increases and decreases (Internet and email)

showing the largest. Third, traditional advertiser supported media maintained or increased usage during key revenue-making dayparts, such as morning drive for broadcast radio and primetime television. Finally, the rate of change was different for increases versus decreases, with increases in the use of new media occurring more rapidly than decreases in use of incumbent media (134).

Additional research shows that modern consumers are not subscribing to the displacement theory. Instead, consumers are multi-tasking in what is described as the “second screen” phenomena. This is where users engage in multiple media activities such as watching television while also on the internet, possibly researching the same content that is being featured on the news program. In the case of mobile device owners, users are increasing the amount of time spent on news activities rather than substituting them. The results of a joint PEJ and Economist Group study further challenge the displacement effect theories. It reveals that since getting their tablets, thirty-one percent of those surveyed spend more time with news, thirty-one percent also turn to new sources for news, and forty-three percent are adding to the news they consume (Mitchell, Olmstead and Saseen).

The aforementioned statistics appear to be more in keeping with the theory of complementarity. The complementarity theory assert that individuals in search of specific content or some form of gratification, such as those discussed earlier, will use any available medium to support their needs. An expanded explanation of the complementarity theory offers that the various mediums will serve as supplements, rather than substitutes for each other, as long as each one fulfills a different gratification for the user.

Mohan Dutta-Bergman points out that the traditional media and new media do not have an either/or relationship since the gratification and gratification opportunities of each are sometimes starkly different.

It is worth pointing out that the consumption of news in an online environment is especially different from traditional mass-media style news consumption because of the differences in modalities of these media types. Unlike traditional media, the Internet involves multiple communication modes that operate simultaneously. It also evokes interpersonal activity. As a consequence, the overlap between the gratifications and gratifications opportunities offered by online and traditional news is likely to be low, leading to greater opportunities for media complementarity between new and traditional media (47-48).

To test the relationship between personal gratifications and news behaviors, Dutta-Bergman proposed several hypotheses aimed at uncovering whether Internet users with specialized news interests were additionally open to the continued use of traditional media in pursuit of their specific news interest. The news types included in the study were political news, sport news, business and finance news, science and health news, international affairs news, local government news, and entertainment news. The total seven hypotheses alternated between the different news types.

Research Question

Users of (*insert news type*) news are more likely to consume (*insert news type news*) news on traditional media than nonusers.

Details and Method

The research questions were posed via a phone survey of respondents across the continental United States. On a 1 to 4, (very likely to not very likely) Likert scale, respondents were asked the following questions: "how closely do you follow this type of news either in the newspaper, on television, or on radio" (Dutta-Bergman, 51)? News consumption of online media was measured by a "dichotomous yes/no response to the question, 'do you sometimes go online to get . . .'" (Dutta-Bergman, 51)?

Results

Across all followers with a specialized interest in news, it was revealed that online users also sought out traditional news sources to satiate their need for supplemental content.

Based on contemporary media in which people actively search out specific material across multiple mediums, complementarity seems to be a likely and more desirable outcome. A drawback to the complementarity theory is that it places consumers at risk for polarization. Users in search of gratification, reinforcement, or community building can easily become immersed in the fragmented online networks that connect them with content they desire and with individuals who support their worldviews. Webster describes this tendency in more detail:

These information regimes intervene in the business of interpersonal communication. Users are, for the most part, willing to participate in these data gathering and reporting exercises, which alert them to what others find noteworthy and give users the opportunity to influence many more people than would otherwise be the case. The

content that becomes salient within a group, gaining notoriety and attention, is likely to resonate with the norms and predispositions that characterize the network (Webster, 604).

In addition, complementarity only accounts for consumer activities and assumes that traditional media will still exist but does not clarify the capacity in which it will exist.

The convergence theory, on the other hand, accounts for both the merging of technologies and the advancement of the audience as knowledgeable consumers. The convergence theory does not think in terms of an endpoint, but as a possibly continuous state of flux in which users must rely on their own skills of discernment to meet their needs. *Convergence Culture: Where New and Old Media Collide*, author Henry Jenkins, credits political scientist Sola Pool with accurately predicting the current media condition in which old and new media operate in “dynamic tension” with each other.

As Pool predicted, we are in an age of media transition, one marked by tactical decisions and unintended consequences, mixed signals and competing interests, and most all, unclear directions and unpredictable outcomes.” (Jenkins ch. 1)

For example, in the ongoing debate on the credibility of blogs versus traditional media, convergence does not anticipate an absolute answer to which of the two is more credible. Instead, the responsibility is put on consumers to use their own knowledge and judgment to assess the merits of the information obtained from all sources in order to reach their own conclusions, as explained by Jenkins:

In such a context, the bloggers will be jousting with mainstream journalists story by story, sometimes getting it right, sometimes

getting it wrong, but always forcing a segment of the public to question dominant representations. One can't count on either side to always provide the public with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Yet, the adversarial relationship between these two forces holds the opportunity to correct many mistakes. (Jenkins ch. 6)

Professional journalists have eagerly incorporated some Web 2.0 technologies into their occupational practices because of the functional gratifications that some of these applications provide. Journalists survey Twitter and Facebook in search of story ideas, to generate news leads, to obtain updates, and to locate sources. They rely on their social media profiles to grow their networks of potential sources and tipsters. News professionals also supplement the content of their articles and other issues in the news by blogging their personal views and opinions, or by using image sharing sites to provide additional photos and links to videos on the same topic. The same search algorithms and information mining techniques that are utilized by UCC sites in pulling together background material are also used in traditional journalism to sort through online public records and profiles. In addition to newsgathering benefits, journalists can also distribute and promote their content in the same ways as any other content provider.

As Kelly notes, "the press borrows or appropriates forms it believes will strengthen its product, attract an audience or allow it to compete with newer types of media already using those techniques," (22). While professional journalists have been able to use social media technology in ways that complement their work, content providers are unable to similarly utilize media processes to their advantage. By virtue of their profession, members of the press enjoy access to information and officials that content providers do not. Media

professionals also have budgets and resources to aid in research. In most cases, content providers do not.

However, the news industry as a whole is responding at a much slower pace to the inclusion of content creators in activities that have traditionally belonged to the mass media. The very basis of UCC, bottom- up reporting, is not compatible with institutionalized journalism. Occupation protocols, copyright and ownership and public accountability are among the other journalism institutions with which UCC raises concerns. The integration of the more loosely crafted UCC content in mainstream media would require the relaxing of longstanding traditions that the media, and others, believe to be its strength. In spite of the stated difficulties in merging traditional media with UCC, some news organizations have taken a proactive approach to merging the two.

Almost every news organization has an online presence via their websites, and they all participate to some degree in using social media tools and UCC. However, news organizations such as Forbes, who have been early adopters of digital technology and contributors, are seeing the benefits of more aggressive collaborations. Forbes.com staffers include veteran journalists who are of the traditional mold, “digital natives,” and selected contributors who are all treated as content creators. All are charged with utilizing digital technology and social media to promote their work, and all charged with upholding traditional ethical standards while doing so. As a result of this openness to new media technologies and trends, Forbes.com is recording record visits to its website site and to its newsstands.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), like Forbes and others, has an Audience Development Team that seeks out opportunities to integrate user content into its

lineup. The BBC dedicates an entire team to authenticating user submissions and providing assistance in creating quality content that is in keeping with the credibility, quality, and legal guidelines to which many organizations fear falling victims. Materials that cannot be authenticated are labeled accordingly so that they are not perceived as BBC content. Cable News Network (CNN) employs similar labeling techniques with the iReport submissions that they receive. CNN provides a list of assignments actively seeking video submissions from users. Submissions that have been vetted and used on air are tagged as iReport “On CNN” which distinguishes it from the other thousands of submissions that are received.

As these cases demonstrate, it is indeed possible to responsibly integrate digital technology and UCC into mainstream media. As also evidenced by these examples, it is also in the best interests of mainstream news organizations to proceed with due diligence and caution in incorporating UCC into their organization’s content.

Conclusion

The news industry is nearing closer to the paradigm shift that has been speculated on for decades. While the traditional methods of the news industry include such features such as operating on a schedule to distribute edited information to a passive audience, the news industry of the future will exclude many of these traditional traits. Some of the celebrated end products of the news revolution include the transition of the audience from recipients to recipients/contributors, an increase in news delivery from scheduled periodic occurrences to real time breaking news and updates, and from the provision of editor mediated content to providing non-mediated content. Because much of the aforementioned transitions are already well into effect, the goal of this paper was to explore the ways in which citizen media has already impacted traditional media, and to discuss the role of the audience in defining the future media landscape.

The research acquired in the process of writing this paper reveals that the transition to the new media establishment is far from a seamless process. The current media climate is such that news organizations and journalists are finding it difficult to establish their roles in an evolving news cycle, while internet users are maximizing the internet's potential to rise to fame as self-styled journalists. The proliferation of self-publishing tools, social media sharing applications, aggregators, and websites built on the business of enlisting citizen contributors are major factors of UCC success. Meanwhile, audience members at all levels are not as discerning as they could be with regard to the news they contribute to and obtain from the internet.

The research and discussions included in this paper support the following conclusions: (1) Citizen Journalism does challenge to the preeminence of established

journalism. (2) The news audience does not differentiate between information obtained from news professionals and other sources. (3) Displacement is the least likely outcome of the audience effect theories discussed. Because it adequately accounts for evolution of the audience and technologies, convergence is the most likely audience effect.

The findings reveal much about the current patterns, mindset, and the ability of the audience in helping to realize the next phase in the news cycle and it also provides insight as to which of the alternate mass communication theories will serve as the conduit for this change. One positive finding that is sure to bode well for the future of journalism, regardless of the eventual outcome, is that the news audience still values credibility and accuracy in news reporting above all else. However, on the issue of audience ability to differentiate between information that is truly reliable, additional findings illuminate the fact that there are currently some areas that the audience will first need to overcome in order to move more responsibly toward the new order.

These findings suggest that audience members at all levels are: (1) generally unconcerned and unknowledgeable on issues surrounding news quality and veracity of information, (2) are trusting of any information that is presented as news, (3) and are also more easily influenced by peer journalism.

It bears to reason that consumers are simply not on guard up as far as discriminating between the various media sources that are available to them. Instances of poor news sourcing and blatantly incorrect information are not so prevalent that it overrides the far more frequent successes of citizen journalism. The increasing saturation of news from all sources might one day serve as the catalyst for consumers to develop a

discerning eye toward the information they consume, and the qualifications of those report on the information.

Convergence

Of the proposed realities that might come of the current mainstream/traditional media entanglement, convergence seems to be the most likely. In researching this topic, the concepts of displacement, complementarity, and convergence have repeatedly appeared as possible outcomes to the traditional versus citizen media quandary.

Displacement theory suggests that over time the use of new media technologies will inevitably result in the older ones becoming obsolete. However, variety has never proven to be a shortcoming as far as the news media is concerned. Historically, the media has integrated new technologies into what is now referred to as the mass media. While the entertainment content of each is decidedly different due to platform constraints, news reporting remains an essential part of all media platforms. It does not take into account social variables that may modify a person's selection toward one medium or the other. For example, most people can access the internet during the day via mobile devices and their work PCs, but not radio or television. The accessibility of the internet does not speak to personal preferences when these other mediums are available. A 2012 report conducted by the Pew Research Center and the Economist Group help counter the displacement theory.

The theory of complementarity holds that consumers are content driven and will seek to obtain the information that they are looking for from any available source. This means that traditional media and citizen media will continue to operate as two separate entities. Since niche content is very much the domain of citizen journalists, it keeps the

news audience in its current position of having to sort through an abundance of available material. This often leaves the audience unable to decipher the quality of the information.

Although consumers seem to display a general apathy towards incorporating and appreciating journalistic standards many news organizations are incorporating social media technologies and forming alliances with specific blogs and websites that are highly utilized by UCC. This method of co-existence holds benefits for both parties. The news website is exposed to the UCCs many followers and the UCC benefits from being affiliated with a credible news organization. Studies cited in this paper have shown that rather than untrained journalists aspiring to be perceived as a professional reporter, or newsrooms taking a more casual approach to reporting,

Limitations and Suggestions for further research

Due to limited resources, no original research was conducted on the specific topic of this paper. The content was derived from prior research and case studies that were conducted on sub-topics that were covered as a part of this paper. Additional research should be conducted on the potential negative impacts of such high availabilities of content for the average consumer. Information in this paper imply that the audience is unwittingly prepared to give up high quality, thoroughly vetted content in favor of popular material. Hence studies and surveys that specifically assess the audience awareness of journalism standards could help in better analyzing outcomes to questions similar to those posed in this paper.

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