



## COVER SHEET

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Bruns, Axel (2006) Wikinews: The Next Generation of Online News? *Scan Journal* 3(1).

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## Wikinews: The Next Generation of Alternative Online News?

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### Introduction: Towards Multiperspectival, Deliberative News Reporting

If there still remained doubts about the continuing importance of and interest in news in what have been said to be increasingly apathetic and entertainment-driven Western societies, they can be seen to have been dispelled to some extent by the rise of alternative online news in dedicated news Websites from *Indymedia* to *Slashdot*, and the frequent discussions of newsworthy local, national, and global events in the wider blogosphere. Indeed, it might be necessary to distinguish between news and journalism here: if there has been a growing disenchantment with news reporting in the mainstream media, then this is not so much due to a diminishing interest in news as such, but has much more to do with the popular realisation of the shortcomings of professional journalism especially in an increasingly agglomerated commercial environment. As Douglas Rushkoff notes, “as the mainstream mediaspace, particularly in the United States, becomes increasingly centralised and profit-driven, its ability to offer a multiplicity of perspectives on affairs of global importance is diminished” (2004: 17).

The provision of such alternative, multiple perspectives on news and current events, then, is what the new generation of user-driven online news Websites and blogs excel in. Many of them, indeed, take up a quite deliberately chosen position as a corrective to the mainstream news: rather than focussing on the production of comprehensive news services in their own right, they fill the gaps left by professional journalism – both in the overall newsworld, where sites such as *Indymedia* add stories which are routinely overlooked or ignored by mainstream news services, and in individual stories, where news sites and blogs add further perspectives on news and current events which had not been represented in newspapers and news broadcasts.

Much of the work of alternative online news sites can be described as a form of remote commentary or annotation of what is covered in the mainstream news. In doing so, alternative online news frequently practices what can be described as *gatewatching* (see Bruns 2005a), as opposed to traditional journalistic gatekeeping: where in an age of easy publication and distribution of content over the Net no one news organisation has the power any more to choose what news is ‘fit to print’ and what news is discarded, and where therefore the ‘gates’ of publication have multiplied beyond all control, such alternative online news publishers *watch* the gates of as many other news (and newsworthy) organisations, and analyse, evaluate, and discuss the information which passes through them.

Increasingly, the work of gatewatchers can also be seen to filter back into the traditional news media, completing a feedback loop, so that, as Bowman & Willis describe it, “what is emerging is a new media ecosystem ..., where online communities discuss and extend the stories created by mainstream media. These communities ... produce participatory journalism, grassroots reporting, annotative reporting, commentary and fact-checking, which the mainstream media feed upon, developing them as a pool of tips, sources and story ideas” (2004: 13). Indeed, along with the slow progress of blogs and online discussion fora into news sites such as *BBC Online* this may be a first sign of gatewatching practices making their way into traditional journalistic practices.

This is not to say that all that alternative online news media do is punditry and commentary. Some degree of first-hand, original reporting of news and current events does exist in these sites, perhaps most notably on the *Indymedia* network. Tendencies towards such first-hand coverage are especially pronounced in the context of breaking news, including especially natural disasters such as the New Orleans floods and Boxing Day tsunami as well as terrorist attacks from London to New York. "With the ability to publish words and pictures even via their cell phone, citizens have the potential to observe and report more immediately than traditional media outlets do" (Bowman & Willis 2004: 47), and moblogging and *Flickr* services have made this even easier in recent times. Again, however, there is a tendency here to fill in the gaps left open in mainstream news coverage – and while such gaps may be large at the start as events begin to unfold, over time alternative online news reporting often returns again to a greater focus on commentary and discussion (perhaps supported by some continuing first-hand reporting) rather than continuing to compete with commercial news services head-on. (Once again, the use of camera phone images by sites such as *BBC Online* in its coverage of the London bombings also indicates the foray of such citizen reportage into the mainstream news, completing the circle.)

Overall, then, it is fair to describe the new alternative online news services, spanning from dedicated news sites like *Indymedia* to the "random acts of journalism" (Lasica 2003: 73) committed by news bloggers, as a second tier of journalism which acts as a corrective to the first, commercial tier. This echoes a model for the news media which was first developed by journalism scholar Herbert Gans in the 1970s in response to the significant shortcomings in professional (U.S.) journalism which could be identified even then: in Gans's vision for a future news mediasphere, the existing

central (or first-tier) media would be complemented by a second tier of pre-existing and new national media, each reporting on news to specific, fairly homogeneous audiences. ... Their news organisations would have to be small [for reasons of cost]. They would devote themselves primarily to reanalysing and reinterpreting news gathered by the central media – and the wire services – for their audiences, adding their own commentary and backing these up with as much original reporting ... as would be financially feasible. (Gans 1980: 318)

Gans's major frustration at the time was to envision a way in which such a two-tier system could be implemented in a news mediasphere relying on print and broadcast media forms – today, the availability of Internet-based media smashes that bottleneck. His new model was motivated by a clear understanding of the significant shortcomings of the gatekeeping model in news media forms which are governed by the requirements of low bandwidth (that is, limited column space in print or limited air time in broadcast media) – perhaps necessarily, in such media forms, gatekeeping is deployed to limit the range of perspectives on and interpretations of the news which can be covered effectively. To overcome such limitations, Gans proposed a move towards multiperspectival news – "a conception of alternative news" (1980: 313) which would more accurately represent a wide range of opinions and viewpoints by incorporating views beyond those of politicians, leaders, and experts. As he put it in a more recent update on the concept, "ideally, multiperspectival news encompasses fact and opinion reflecting all possible perspectives. In practice, it means making a place in the news for presently unrepresented viewpoints, unreported facts, and unrepresented, or rarely reported, parts of the population. To put it another way, multiperspectival news is the bottoms-up corrective for the mostly top-down perspectives of the news media" (2003: 103).

The gatewatching and subsequent news analysis and commentary practiced by a large number of alternative online news sites today can be seen as the realisation of this concept of multiperspectival news. Perhaps inevitably, through the communal gatewatching, commentary and discussion which occurs in these spaces such sites also move journalism away from a production/consumption model of news coverage, where journalists can operate in isolation from

their audiences (and indeed sometimes pride themselves on this fact), towards one of direct engagement and collaboration – they approach what Heikkilä & Kunelius describe as *deliberative journalism*, which “would underscore the variety of ways to frame an issue. It would assume that opinions – not to mention majorities and minorities – do not precede public deliberation, that thoughts and opinions do not precede their articulation in public, but that they start to emerge when the frames are publicly shared” (2002: n.pag.). Or, as blogger and journalist Dan Gillmor puts it, “if contemporary American journalism is a lecture, what it is evolving into is something that incorporates a conversation and seminar. This is about decentralisation” (2003: 79).

News coverage in such alternative online news sites, then, is dialogic; it forms part of an ongoing conversation and multiperspectival exchange of viewpoints within and across sites (the latter can be seen especially in the decentralised debates on news and current events which occur on a multitude of interlinked sites across the blogosphere). Inevitably, it is continual and unending, undermining the unspoken journalistic myth that a news story can be ‘written up’, presenting a complete, finished picture – by contrast, alternative online news is inherently unfinished (on this idea also see Eno in Kelly 1995, and Meikle 2002). While this never-finished nature of reporting in alternative online news may be inconvenient for audiences used to receiving bite-sized, self-contained news packages sandwiched between commercial breaks, there can be no doubt that in its complexity it offers a more accurate representation of the news.

### Features of Alternative Online News

While the move towards gatewatching and the presentation of multiperspectival news are common features of alternative online news sites, then, some significant distinctions in individual site models can be observed. We will soon shift focus to one of the latest additions to this second tier of news reporting, *Wikinews*, but first it will be useful to review some of the more established approaches to alternative news coverage (for a more extended discussion, see Bruns 2005a).

Overall, it is notable that most alternative online news sites rely heavily on their user communities for their coverage of news and current events. In contrast to a traditional producer/consumer dichotomy, on most of these sites users are able to participate directly as producers of content (whether by submitting or editing news stories – often based on gatewatched content – or by providing extensive commentary and discussion) – they become user-producers or, as we might call them, *producers* (Bruns 2005b). Frequently, the producer communities which form around such news sites are built around shared interests, tastes, or other attributes, and therefore “in addition to the local and national emphasis of most news reported in print and broadcast media, online news also appears to present a micro-local focus, featuring content of interest to small communities of users defined either by common interests or geographic location or both” (Boczkowski 2004: n.pag.). Whether sharing an identity as technology enthusiasts (as in the *Slashdot* community) or as political activists (as in the *Indymedia* network), even in spite of remaining individual differences this higher level of social cohesion helps foster a collaborative and committed environment.

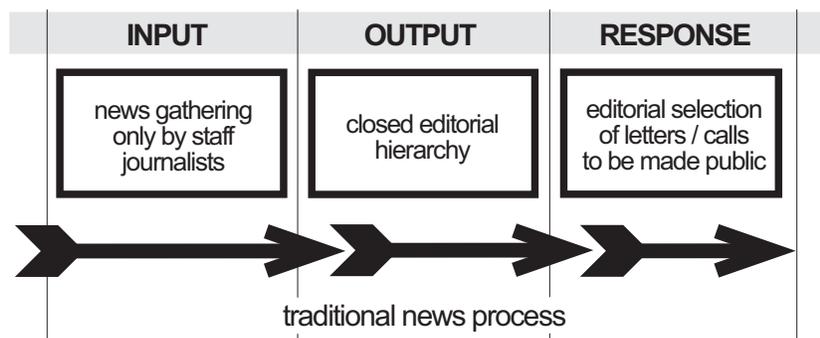


Fig. 1 Three stages of gatekeeping (from Bruns 2005a: 12)

Reliance on users as gatekeepers and producers can take different forms across different sites, though. In traditional news production, it is possible to identify three distinct stages of gatekeeping (see fig. 1), and some alternative online news sites still retain control at one or two of these stages even while opening up others for producer participation (or involve users as quasi-gatekeepers). Most if not all collaborative online news sites are open for participation at the input stage, where a decision is made on what stories should be covered in the first place – often, a simple ‘submit a story’ form makes it possible for users to become participants and producers in the news community. Beyond this, however, *Slashdot* editors continue to police the output stage, for example, where a decision is made on which of the stories submitted by user-producers are published to the site. By contrast, in *Slashdot*-inspired sites such as *Kuro5hin* and *Plastic* that stage is opened up to the participation of registered users as editors who can suggest changes to submitted stories and vote on whether or not specific news stories should be published to the site proper. By contrast, most *Indymedia* sites support fully open news publishing, where any story submitted is published automatically and immediately – and there are further moves afoot to develop this model into open editing, allowing user-producers to make changes to the news story *after* it has been published. This would be akin to the ‘anyone can edit’ model of the *Wikipedia* and many other wiki-driven sites.

As Shirky describes it, “the order of things in broadcast is ‘filter, then publish.’ The order in communities is ‘publish, then filter.’ ... Writers submit their stories in advance, to be edited or rejected before the public ever sees them. Participants in a community, by contrast, say what they have to say, and the good is sorted from the mediocre after the fact” (2002: n.pag.). Beyond the output stage, this is particularly evident in the response stage, where analysis and discussion of the news takes place. Given the multiperspectival, deliberative nature of many alternative online news sites, this stage is of special importance (indeed, in sites such as *Slashdot* the news stories themselves are often no more than brief launching-points for extended discussions at the response stage) – and contrary to practices in traditional news media, where only a very select few audience responses ever make it into the publication itself, this stage is wide open here. Many sites allow their participants themselves to police this stage, however – often by deploying community self-moderation systems which enable participants to rate the discussion contributions made by their peers, and to hide comments which rate below an adjustable threshold (this can be described as a kind of internal gatewatching, highlighting the best comments).

Beyond the realm of dedicated collaborative online news sites, similar observations apply for news coverage in the blogosphere. Here it is the input stage which remains closed, as individual bloggers are able to decide what news and current events they want to cover and comment upon, while the other stages remain wide open: bloggers and other participants are usually able to leave comments directly on one another’s blogs, or can discuss another blogger’s comments by linking to them and critiquing them on their own blog (using technologies such as Trackback to establish a direct link between blog entries). Additionally, of course, they can also link to and discuss stories in the traditional news media. Thus, “Weblogs should not be considered in isolation but as part of an emerging new media ecosystem – a network of ideas. No one should expect a complete, unvarnished encapsulation of a story or idea at any one Weblog. In such a community, bloggers discuss, dissect and extend the stories created by mainstream media” (Lasica 2003: 71).

Finally, it should also be noted that a common feature of blogs and collaborative online news sites alike is their reverse-chronological display of news stories. It is perhaps worth noting that to some extent this mode of ordering content constitutes a departure from traditional forms of news publishing: while of course at a macro-level today’s newspaper or news broadcast contains more recent news than yesterday’s, internally the ordering logic for newspapers and bulletins remains one of perceived importance for the audience rather than simply time of coverage; even in 24-hour TV news channels headline news is repeated regularly. (Interestingly, however, the growing use of RSS feeds by the online sites of traditional news publishers can be seen to drive a move towards reverse-chronological ordering for their content, too.) Blogs and collaborative online news sites struggle to filter events by their importance, therefore, and often rely on internal or

external measures of evaluating importance levels – such as the internal tracking what stories are most read or most commented upon, or the automated analysis of new content in the blogosphere for shared keywords or links which is performed by external services such as *Daypop* or *Technorati*.

## Enter *Wikinews*

One of the most recent significant additions to collaborative, alternative online news production is *Wikinews*, a project of the Wikimedia Foundation which also runs the massively successful *Wikipedia*. *Wikinews* was first proposed in mid-2004, with a first demonstration site launched in December that year. In addition to the original English-language *Wikinews* site, versions in a variety of other languages have now also emerged – but as it is the largest incarnation of *Wikinews* to date, we will focus on the English version here. As its mission statement puts it,

we seek to create a free source of news, where, provided that we can overcome the digital divide, every human being is invited to contribute reports about events large and small, either from direct experience, or summarized from elsewhere. Wikinews is founded on the idea that we want to create something new, rather than destroy something old. It is founded on the belief that we can, together, build a great and unique resource which will enrich the media landscape. (*Wikinews* 2005: n.pag.)

In comparison to the alternative news sites we have discussed so far, *Wikinews* is unique in its use of technology – rather than using blogs or similar content management systems which order content by its time of submission and allow for threaded discussions, *Wikinews* builds on a MediaWiki wiki environment which provides the tools for a far more flexible organisation of content and enables the continued editing of any article posted on the site. Further, the MediaWiki system (which also supports the *Wikipedia* and all other Wikimedia Foundation projects) also provides instant discussion functions in the form of 'talk' pages attached to each article. The close connection of *Wikinews* with the *Wikipedia* and its MediaWiki technology can be seen to be as much a benefit as a problem for *Wikinews*, as it introduces a mode of operation which requires significant changes to news reporting practices which are standard in other traditional or alternative online news sites, and often places the still-fledgling *Wikinews* in the shadow of its already far more mature and extensive sibling site.

Like the *Wikipedia*, *Wikinews* allows for the open editing of its content by any user, without a need to create an account. As *Wikinews* administrator 'Amgine' put it in an Internet relay Chat discussion about *Wikinews*, therefore, "Wikinews works backwards from most editing standpoints; we assume authors are writing well, and we have an easy repair process for when problems crop up" ([http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wikinews\\_Chat/2005/02/05/log](http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wikinews_Chat/2005/02/05/log)). Further, the site has also "inherited its most important guiding principles from Wikipedia: all Wiki communities try to get as much consensus as possible and all stories must adhere to a Neutral Point of View" (Yeomans 2005: n.pag.). This Neutral Point of View (or NPOV) doctrine clearly sets *Wikinews* apart from virtually all of the other collaborative online news sites and blogs we have discussed here, then – where the other sites are often clearly partisan and reflect the views of their enthusiast communities, critiquing the first tier of mainstream news media and adding multiple alternative perspectives, *Wikinews*, while also encouraging a more multiperspectival coverage of the news, aims to synthesise these multiple perspectives in a more inclusive and unbiased way than is offered by the mainstream media.

Indeed, as Yeomans reports, for *Wikinews* adherence to the NPOV doctrine has been elevated almost to the point of turning into an ideology. "One of the first major debates was over including opinion pieces, a mainstay of any professional news operation. The collective answer, agreed after much online debate, was no: opinions would compromise the Neutral Point of View" (2005:

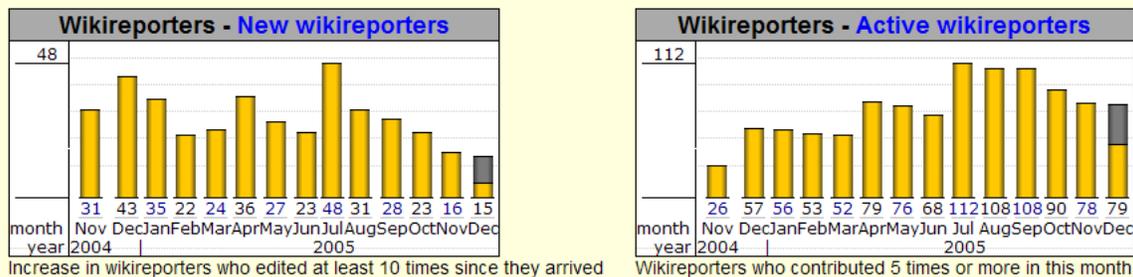
n.pag.). As a result, even beyond the published articles themselves it is notable that very little discussion of the news takes place, despite the ready availability of article talk pages. Where such pages are used, this is done mainly to discuss potential offences against the NPOV doctrine or note errors or potential extensions to the story. This is a significant departure from the standards set by other collaborative online news sites such as *Slashdot*, where communal commentary and discussion far outweighs the news stories themselves, and as *Wikinews* administrator Dan Grey (a.k.a. 'Dan100') puts it, "it's deliberate - opinion or commentary is banned. There are enough blogs already" (Grey 2005, comment on *snurb.info*).

Due to the differences between news reporting and encyclopaedic writing, the wiki system and workflow in *Wikinews* has been modified somewhat from *Wikipedia* standards, too. While in both systems a small cohort of administrators exists to deal with cases of vandalism and other disruptions, in *Wikinews* they also have the role of locking stories after some time – preventing the re-editing of stories once they have moved into the news archives. Administrators are also very actively involved in the continuing development of *Wikinews* and its operational practices, more so than is the case in the more established *Wikipedia*, for example; they continue to fine-tune the presentation of stories on the *Wikinews* front page, for example, and have recently explored the provision of recent news through RSS feeds and a *Wikinews* blog (which makes reusing content from *Wikinews* easier for external users, as they can use tools such as Trackback to create permanent links to *Wikinews* articles).

Indeed, perhaps the generation of article listings which are ordered in reverse chronological fashion or by the relative importance of stories remains one of the most significant problems for *Wikinews*, perhaps. The international nature of the site, combined with the uneven geographical distribution of its contributors, further complicates matters: so, for example, the 30 August 2005 *Wikipedia* front page featured stories on the arrival of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, on the resignation of New South Wales opposition leader John Brogden, on an FBI raid on the Nigerian Vice President's home in Maryland, and on an attempt to end the 'bra war' textile imports row between the European Union and China as its top four current events.

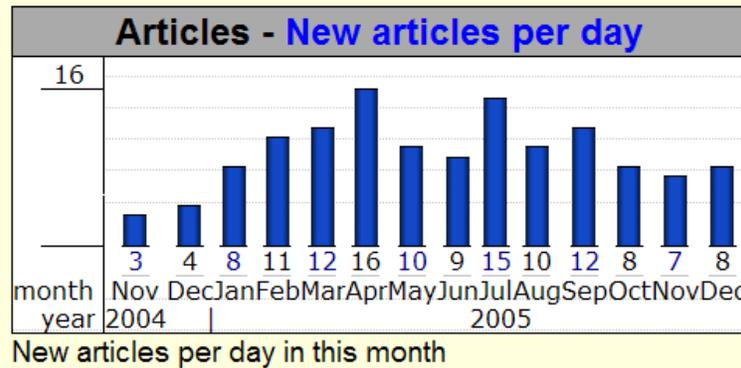
Clearly such uneven coverage of world events is simply also a result of the still-emergent nature of *Wikinews*, with a limited number of contributors, but it may point to deeper problems. *Wikinews'* statistics are a cause for some concern in this respect, and while *Wikinews* contributors were quick to point to a solid growth rate both in terms of new contributor accounts and new articles during the first nine months of the site's existence (see e.g. 'Davodd' 2005 for statistics to late August 2005), such figures must be regarded with some scepticism. Other statistics show spikes in the growth rate for both new contributors and new articles during July and August/September 2005 (related to the 7 July bombings in London and the arrival and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans), but an otherwise unimpressive performance on these and other counts. (It should also be noted that up-to-date statistics for *Wikinews* are surprisingly difficult to obtain – this might indicate its participants' own disappointment with the site's performance so far.)

Focussing specifically on new 'wikireporters' (active contributors), statistics until December 2005 show a post-Katrina decline of growth even below the first-year averages, as well as a decline in the number of frequent contributors back to April 2005 figures.



**Fig. 2** Monthly growth in wiki reporters / Monthly number of active wiki reporters (*Wikimedia*, 2006)

As Yeomans notes, it is also the case that “within the wiki community, burnout is a common trait. Many contributors to Wikipedia and Wikinews put a massive amount of time into the projects only to hit a wall and then withdraw to recover for a week or so” (2005: n.pag.). Indeed, in what is perhaps the most worrying statistic for its supporters, the creation rate for new articles in *Wikinews* dropped sharply after the first six months, and (ignoring the short-term spikes related to the London bombings and Katrina) stagnated at a low level since then:



**Fig. 3** New *Wikinews* articles per day (*Wikimedia* 2006)

An analysis of what more recent statistics are available reveals little change. The total number of what are accepted as ‘good’ articles – that is, articles which have been thoroughly edited and exclude “talk’ pages, pages about Wikinews policy, minimal ‘stub’ pages, redirects, and others that probably don’t qualify as articles” – stands at around 5,100 in mid-May 2006 (*Wikinews* 2006); this is an increase of some 1100 articles since mid-December 2005 and equates to some 8.5 new articles per day in 2006 so far, and is in line with growth during the last quarter of 2005.

Similarly, while new users do join *Wikinews*, the site’s rate of growth remains stagnant on this count as well: from the 4,021 users reported in August 2005 (‘Davodd’ 2005), *Wikinews* has grown to some 7,800 users in May 2006 (S23.org 2006); this equates to a growth by some 420 users per month during this time, slightly below the 447 new users per month between December 2004 and August 2005. While this could be seen to demonstrate a steady growth in users, it must be noted that these figures are not corrected for inactive accounts of users who have left the project, and that (as shown in fig. 2) the base of, and growth in, active contributors is significantly smaller and evidently has not resulted in an increase in the rate of article creation.

### What’s Wrong?

In spite of the picture of a relatively stagnant publication which emerges from the data, it is certainly too early to predict the overall success or failure of *Wikinews* – however, a number of observations on what factors will affect the site’s fortunes can be made. To begin with, as with many of those alternative online news sites which allow their users to participate as content producers, a speedy response to developing events has been a major advantage for *Wikinews* as well, and clearly also enthused its users and contributors about the participatory *Wikinews* process. Early articles covering the 7 July bombings in London or the arrival of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans were posted to the site within minutes of the first alerts from affected areas, and were rapidly extended and updated as information came to hand. Frequently in such contexts *Wikinews* also acted as an aggregator of reports from many other news sources, blogs, and eyewitnesses in this context, demonstrating again the effectiveness of distributed gatewatching. A further advantage of *Wikinews* is its easy integration with the *Wikipedia*, which functions as a significant source of quality background material. This makes it easier for *Wikinews* contributors

to focus on writing story updates while being able to simply incorporate further material through *Wikipedia* links.

The quality and response speeds of the *Wikipedia* also cause problems for *Wikinews*, however. Since before the inception of *Wikinews*, *Wikipedia* has run a 'current events' section highlighting existing *Wikipedia* entries of relevance to the daily news, and new entries covering emerging stories. As Grey acknowledges, *Wikipedia*'s current events page constitutes a kind of mini-*Wikinews* in itself, slowing the development of *Wikinews* proper "a lot"; however, he also notes that current events "also tends to be just single lines, rather than articles – less effort involved." (It could also be argued that the current events section simply points to full and up-to-date articles in *Wikipedia*, though, whose maintenance is a significant effort.) At any rate, though, the division of the participant base between *Wikipedia* and *Wikinews* was also one of the major arguments against the *Wikinews* proposal in early discussions, and clearly has not yet been resolved.

A further factor limiting the contributor base is *Wikinews*' focus on the provision of a generalist news service. As specialist and activist news sites such as *Slashdot* and *Indymedia* demonstrate, a sense of shared enthusiasm or political persuasion can significantly help in the development of a cohesive and active producer community; even in the case of the similarly generalist *Wikipedia* individual clusters of entries are most likely contributed and refined by groups of topic enthusiasts. Many potential contributors to *Wikinews* may instead participate on other news sites or in blogger communities which more obviously share their interests and therefore engender a more immediate and immersive sense of community, therefore.

This problem is further exacerbated by the active discouragement of news *discussion* on *Wikinews*, as in other sites it is exactly this discussion which promotes a sense of community, however hard-fought the arguments over specific disagreements may be on many such sites. While there clearly is a strong sense of community amongst *Wikinews* administrators and other regular contributors who are involved in debating organisational aspects of the project, no such community spirit is evident around the stories and topics covered by the site, potentially leading to a lack of enthusiasm which discourages contributors.

Indeed, in this deliberate discouragement of discussion, *Wikinews* can be seen to perpetuate a more traditional sense of journalism as lecture (in Gillmor's terms) rather than as conversation. While Grey writes that as *Wikinews* contributors "we're not into telling people how they should think – we present the facts, and let them make their own minds up", this does not seem to take into account that minds are rarely made up in solitary engagement with the facts, but more often through a discussion and exchange between competing points of view.

While the NPOV doctrine could be said to encourage multiperspectival coverage, then, its use in *Wikinews* may enforce a synthesis of competing views in an overly artificial and counterproductive manner. Rather than using multiperspectival coverage to encourage discussion and deliberation, as many other collaborative online news sites can be seen to do, this dialogic and inherently unfinished process is curtailed in *Wikinews*, in favour of producing an apparently finished news product. *Wikinews* is wide open at the input and output stages of the news process, but locks out contributors from the response stage almost entirely – in fact, it eradicates that stage altogether: as Grey puts it, "what would be the point [of news discussion taking place on *Wikinews*]? There are already thousands of sites and millions of blogs doing just that." In essence, this suggests that users should come to *Wikinews* for the input and output stages, but go elsewhere if they want to participate in the response stage – but as a result of this approach, it seems evident that contributors stay away from *Wikinews* altogether and participate on these other sites at all three stages of the news process.

In other words, as Yeomans suggests, it may be the case that

in their zeal for a Neutral Point of View, Wikinews seem to revise the life out of their stories, reducing lively news coverage to dull

regurgitation of facts. Devotees of Wikipedia may crave totally unbiased information, but is that what the reading public wants? As 150 years of newspapers and five years of blogging has shown, opinionated points of view have a way of grabbing an audience. (2005: n.pag.)

Indeed, a true multiperspectival journalism may necessarily come in conflict with the Neutral Point of View doctrine. As Gans writes, “when several perspectives must be taken into account on any given topic, ... the news would become more ideological, with explicit ideological diversity replacing the implicit near-uniformity that now prevails” (1980: 314-5). Heikkilä & Kunelius similarly suggest that dialogic journalism

must openly encourage different readings (and search for new modes of stories that do so) and it must commit itself to [the] task of making these different readings and interpretations public. The challenge is to make the accents and articulations heard, to give them the power and position they need to argue on particular problems and to make them the objects and starting points for new emerging public situations and conversations. (2002: n.pag.)

By contrast, *Wikinews*' approach appears to stifle such conversation outright, driving it (along with the contributors involved in it) elsewhere.

While the motivations for this approach remain somewhat unclear, there seems to be an underlying ambition for *Wikinews* to become a ‘proper’ journalistic publication and thus distinguish itself from other collaborative and alternative online news sites. Perhaps also influenced by the observation that, as Meikle has put it in a similar context, “the posting of established media source material does raise the question of whether this simply re-legitimises those media as the authentic forum for news” (2002: 100), *Wikinews* could be said to suffer from something of an inferiority complex which seems to lead to a dogged pursuit of traditional journalistic ideals of objectivity and neutrality even though these ideals themselves may stem from an outdated worldview which posited the existence of irrefutable objective facts even in the context of human affairs. A truly multiperspectival approach to news, by contrast, acknowledges that virtually all ‘facts’ are subject to interpretation, and unlike *Wikinews*' attempt to synthesise them, simply presents these interpretations and offers a space for a dialogic engagement between them.

This points to the fact that the traditional journalistic format of objectively written news ‘stories’ themselves is misleading and outdated. As Yeomans describes it, in *Wikinews*

at present, nearly all of the stories posted on the site are overviews of news coverage published elsewhere in mainstream media. ... Talk to any active Wikinewser and they'll talk enthusiastically about producing original breaking news. However, almost none of them have any journalism experience. So instead they play to their strengths and their core beliefs – evaluating news coverage on many other websites and then reproducing it in aggregate for the reader, stripped of the editorial bias they see in mainstream news. (2005: n.pag.)

Any belief in being free of personal bias is ultimately flawed, of course. Further, such digest work only perpetuates and condenses the traditional story format of journalism, rather than developing a mode of news coverage which is better suited to dealing with complex events and presenting multiple perspectives on the news.

Thus, at present *Wikinews* is missing its opportunity to truly advance contemporary forms of news coverage, and instead wastes its energy on attempting to replicate outdated models in a wiki environment. The difficulty in preparing a reverse-chronological presentation of the news, and the comparative ease with which *Wikipedia* already covers current events almost as an afterthought, should point *Wikinews* contributors in a different and far more exciting direction. Rather than condensing ongoing events into individual, separate stories, *Wikinews* could instead highlight current news issues and topics in a manner which presents ongoing events as ongoing events – in the form of what may resemble an up-to-the-minute dossier more than a newspaper. In doing so it would provide a platform of debate around these issues; in the process it could especially also highlight relevant *Wikipedia* content and drive users to contribute to the speedy update of such content as new information emerges. It would thus facilitate and employ gatowatching to channel the material discovered in this effort into timely *Wikipedia* updates, without duplicating work by developing only relatively short-term, ephemeral *Wikinews* stories.

This would take into account many recent observations about the changing face of journalism, rather than attempting to continue a declining legacy. As Baradoel & Deuze point out, for example, “with the explosive increase of information on a worldwide scale, the necessity of offering information about information has become a crucial addition to journalism’s skills and tasks ... . This redefines the journalist’s role as an annotational or orientational one, a shift from the watchdog to the ‘guidedog’” (2001: 94).

### **Why *Wikinews*?**

In its current format, then, *Wikinews* has so far failed to answer the question ‘why *Wikinews*?’ It has not yet developed a compelling response to Meikle’s challenge for alternative online news providers “to develop ways of telling stories which are issues-focussed, without replicating the conflict-based narrative structures of the established media” (2002: 99), and as a result has also failed to attract a significant and enthusiastic contributor base. It seems clear that in order to thrive and succeed *Wikinews* will need to develop a much more innovative approach to news publishing (and its use of wiki technology in the process), rather than attempting to replicate traditional news media modes of operation.

It can take comfort in the fact that other online forms of engagement with the news have managed to do so without simply copying what traditional journalism does; so, for example, Lasica acknowledges that it is not likely “that blogging will supplant traditional media or, as some have suggested, that blogging will drive news organizations out of business. When a major news event unfolds, a vast majority of readers will turn to traditional media sources for their news fix. But the story doesn’t stop there. On almost any major story, the Weblog community adds depth, analysis, alternative perspectives, foreign views, and occasionally first-person accounts that contravene reports in the mainstream press.” (2003: 73) For *Wikinews*, then, the challenge is to discover what unique contribution it can make to the news process. Graham Meikle’s work may offer a hint in this context:

the opportunity – and the challenge – for open publishing is to find new ways of writing which bring audiences closer to solutions to the problems under discussion. Stories that address complexity rather than reducing it to a good guys/bad guys schema. Stories that stimulate discussion and debate rather than constructing conflicts. Stories that go beyond a spurious objectivity and recognise their writer’s responsibility to strengthen civic discourse and involve community members in coverage of issues which affect them. Stories that are part of an intercreative, unfinished, Version 1.0 media space – a messy space, but one in which people collaborate in making their own DIY culture,

rather than selecting from the news-jukebox of prepackaged points of view. (2002: 100)

*Wikinews* also needs to better understand what has made its great sibling, the *Wikipedia*, so successful. While the *Wikipedia* does adhere to a Neutral Point of View doctrine, and also contains relatively little discussion and commentary, the significantly different nature of its content orientation means that these aspects cannot be copied wholesale from here to *Wikinews*. News, as we have seen, is complex and requires ongoing discussion and deliberation especially as regards unfolding events. News reports are only a starting point for this engagement between different viewpoints, and the engagement itself must happen in another forum (but one which ideally is located very close by the original report, rather than on another site – this is why the practice of attaching discussion sections directly to news stories has proven so successful on blogs and open news sites. The aim in such debates is not necessarily to come to a synthesised, neutral conclusion which eradicates all differences of opinion, but simply a full representation and acknowledgement of all reasonable points of view.

For encyclopaedia entries, on the other hand, this engagement of alternative viewpoints takes place not in a debate around the entries, but in the editing of the entries themselves, with an aim to make them more fully representative of a wide range of views. Debate around *Wikipedia* entries would be pointless unless the views expressed in such debates also flow into revised versions of these entries, so that here prominent discussion sections are less important – a neutral synthesis of views at least to a reasonable degree *is* an aim in this context. Any further responses to an entry are themselves made again by creating a further revision, rather than by adding a discussion contribution.

While the *Wikipedia*'s NPOV doctrine is commendable in an encyclopaedic context, then, it cannot apply in the same way for *Wikinews*; indeed, it may even be counterproductive where it stifles engaged debate on complex issues. Instead, *Wikinews* has the potential to make a significant contribution to public engagement with news and current events, especially also because of its ability to build on the vast informational resources contained in the *Wikipedia*, but at present it does not yet realise that potential.

As Rushkoff notes,

the true promise of a network-enhanced democracy lies not in some form of web-driven political marketing survey, but in restoring and encouraging broader participation in some of the internet's more interactive forums. Activists of all stripes now have the freedom and facility to network and organise across vast geographical, national, racial and even ideological differences. And they've begun to do so. The best evidence we have that something truly new is going on is our mainstream media's inability to understand it. (2003: 53-4)

It remains to be seen whether *Wikinews* and its contributors, in spite of their current attempts to appear more journalistic than journalists, will come to understand these developments and their role in them. If they fail to do so, it would be a great opportunity wasted.

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