MICROBLOGGING THE NEWS: WHO SETS THE AGENDA?

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by

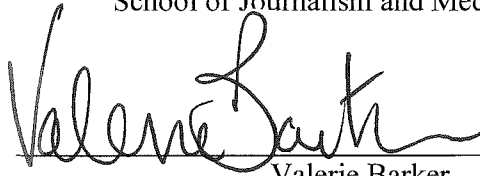Dmitri Diakov

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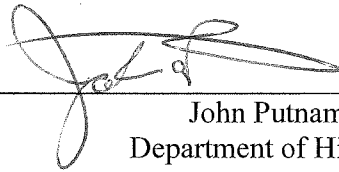Microblogging the News: Who Sets the Agenda?

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DEDICATION

Completing this Master's journey is one of my greatest accomplishments to date. Every challenging work needs self-efforts as well as guidance of elders. My humble effort I dedicate to my family, friends, and Journalism and Media Studies facility mentors, without whom none of this would have been possible.

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Thank you

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Microblogging the News: Who Sets the Agenda?
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In recent years Microblogging has become a popular way to aggregate and disseminate content on the web. One of the most popular microblogging sites, reddit, will be the focus of this research. A content analysis of the website was performed to gather empirical data, examining a relationship between traditional mainstream media news and reddit. The goal of this study is to demonstrate reddit's agenda setting effects on mainstream media websites. Additionally, this research will probe into other factors in this relationship, such as the contributors to reddit and how mainstream media use reddit.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"The future of journalism is uncertain, but clearly social networking is booming",
(Gleason, 2010, p. 6). Commenting in the *American Journalism Review,* Gleason referred, in
part, to the emergence of Web 2.0 whereby dynamic web pages became the norm. Originally,
the commercial Internet was in what is called the "static Web" era. Static Web pages are
created documents that do not change; the user can read the content or click on a link to go to
another page. In contrast, dynamic web pages are typically generated by a web application
and can change depending on user behavior. The time of arrival of dynamic pages is difficult
to pin down; some of the earliest versions of dynamic Web pages were search engines like
HotBot and Ask Jeeves, dating back to 1996 (Leiner et al., 2003). Dynamic pages present a
significant starting point for this review because they were the sparks that ignited the flames
of the Web 2.0 revolution, which in turn contributed to the rise of user-generated content and
citizen journalism online. Content creation on the web during the static page era required a
robust understanding of hypertext markup language (HTML). In the dynamic web page era,
much of the HTML writing/coding is automated, allowing the everyday user to create a
presence online and share their content with the masses. The goal of the present study is to
examine the impact of the everyday user on mainstream media based on the theoretical
framework of the agenda setting theory. For decades researchers have examined the
relationship between mainstream news media, the public and their perception of the news.
Agenda setting theory posits that mainstream media determine which issues the public
considers important based on the coverage of some issues over others (McCombs, 2005).

Today's Internet is characterized by the interconnectedness of users through a myriad
of online services. Gone are the barriers to content sharing characterized by a lack of
knowledge about the use of HTML coding (Shirky, 2009). The ease of sharing content in the
post Web 2.0 Internet has allowed the user to become a producer (Reagle, 2011). Indeed, the

emergence and success of social media networks like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, and reddit are indicative of the proliferation of, and demand for user-generated content (UGC). The pages that follow will include a more detailed and nuanced discussion of the evolution of UGC and its impact on the newsrooms and news professionals thus far.

Many social media users take to the Internet to post personal content or simply follow those who do; a smaller portion of the Internet user base is doing something different. Some are creating their own "cyber newsrooms" (Wasike, 2011). These users can be found on websites like reddit. Such websites allow users to post pre-published news articles, obscure blog posts, images, videos, and podcasts on which other users then vote, determining importance or as McCombs and Shaw (1972) defined it, salience. This user-edited type of content has begun to trickle into the mainstream media broadcasts on TV, radio and newspaper as genuine news stories, completing the full cycle by consequently appearing on the mainstream news media websites. This begs the question: Can UGC and citizen journalism rich websites like reddit influence traditional opinion leaders and agenda setters characterized by professional journalists and traditional mainstream news media?

The theoretical foundation for the comparison between online producers and mainstream news media in this study will be agenda setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Originally, agenda setting theory applied to traditional news source influence on public perception of political topics covered by the news. Conceptualized before the age of the Internet, agenda setting theory still remains relevant in today's Web 2.0 world. Moreover, with the advent of new media and a decentralization of information sources, the traditional top down influence function of agenda setting effectiveness has been complemented by the influence of UGC (Maier, 2010; McCombs, 2005). The presence of UGC content in mainstream news media demonstrates an influence from non-traditional journalistic sources. UGC in the newsroom is evidence that mainstream media takes cues from public interest when covering news, referred to as "reverse agenda" or the "bottom up" approach to the way agendas are sometimes set in the online sphere (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Chernov, Valenzuela, & McCombs, 2011; Keefe, 2009). As author Jonathan Last (2004) put it, "An informal network, the new media, has arisen that has the power to push stories into the old media" (p. 23). The current study is devoted to the subject of how news dissemination works

in the Internet age, providing some insight into the trends and dynamics for future developments in the new media communication. A content analysis of reddit posts was employed to supply evidence of intermedia and reverse agenda setting trends.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

What follows is an assessment of the relationship between traditional news media channels such as television, radio, and newspapers and online users through the medium of news microblogs. In an unprecedented fashion, consumers gained the ability to, not only influence what the content producers deliver, but also to become producers themselves. In turn, traditional media news outlets found it necessary to change and adapt to the new media landscape of news consumption by instituting UGC in their newsrooms (Brown, Dubberley, & Wardle, 2014; Harrison, 2010).

The evolution of mainstream media into digital media was supported by the availability and affordability of cellular technology, laptop computers and broadband Internet connection. Further, this evolution was intensified by the development of technology to digitally share ideas, media content, and sources with other users - linking individuals who would normally never interact either on or offline. The sections below include a background discussion of the development of blogging and Web 2.0, plus the, so called, citizen journalism phenomenon, culminating in a more detailed discussion of agenda setting theory and how it applies in the current study.

BLOGGING

Media is a corporate possession…you cannot participate in the media. Bringing that into the foreground is the first step. The second is to define the difference between public and audience. An audience is passive; a public is participatory. We need a definition of media that is public in its orientation.

-Rushkoff (1996)

The promise of the initial web was a simple one; everyone could publish, communicate and connect. As the primary inventor of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee (1999) said his intention was always to facilitate two-way flow of information- "...we

ought to be able not only to find any kind of document on the Web, but also create any document, easily" (p.182). Users embraced this idea and took to the Internet to express their experiences, emotions and offer services through a process called blogging.

Jorn Barger created the term weblog in 1997 to describe a collection of links recorded on his website (Wortham, 2007). Then, deriving from the word weblog, the term blog was coined by Peter Merholz in 1999 (Eastment, 2010). Initially, the act of blogging started out as an individual diary-like entry. In late 1990s, HTML programmers and professional weblog editors dominated blogging because of its inherent complexity. In 2000, websites Pitas and Pyra released free build-your-own-weblog tools like Blogger (Lindahl & Blount, 2003). This enabled users lacking HTML coding ability to create content quickly, easily, and free. Original blogs were link-driven sites, where users did not have to create original content but merely link to someone else's website on their own. Despite copyrighting issues, each website became a unique mixture of personal thoughts, links, commentary, and essays (Lasica, 2004).

Serving as a platform for users to express themselves, weblogs began to evolve into filters. Out of countless web pages sprawled out through the cyberspace, weblog editors picked out the intriguing, the ridiculous, and most compelling websites to feature on their blogs (Blood, 2000). Filter blogs aggregated news with minimal commentary by the editor. Traditional news organizations began to view this type of *brief blog punditry* as more factual than blogs that offered more extensive summaries of the articles (Blood, 2000).

Numerous research studies and professional articles have focused on the blog's impact in mainstream news media (Meraz, 2009; Messner & DiStaso, 2008; Messner & Garrison, 2011). From this an interesting question arises: How frequently do mainstream news media use blogs as sources? In the Messner and Garrison's (2011) study of intermedia agenda-setting relationship between mainstream news media and blogs, of the overall references (2,102), 32% constituted the use of the blogs as sources. On average, mainstream news media used blogs 10.9 times per day as a source during the 61-day election period (Messner & Garrison, 2011).

Furthermore, to determine whether mainstream media were using the blogs for news or opinion, Garrison and Messner dissected their source variable. They described a factual source as an *information-contributing* source, while an opinion source was defined as a

source that *editorializes* on facts and takes a side in an argument. It was found that 60.4% of the blog sources were used as opinion sources and 39.6% as factual sources. On the other hand, the results for filter blogs showed a reverse trend. Of the filter blogs, 44.4% were used as opinion sources, while 55.6% were used as factual sources. Another interesting question arises from this study: Why did the traditional news organizations choose filter blogs over others more frequently as information contributing source? Tomaszeski, Proffit, and McClung (2009) theorizes that this is simply online mainstream news media catering to their audiences. Online readers prefer concise summaries filter blogs provide. By selecting some weblogs over others, readers dictated the popularity and even "correctness" of the content that web editors were publishing (Lasica, 2004). Tomaszeski et al. (2009), found this process of niche opinion reinforcement evolved into a telling phenomenon, particularly in the political blogosphere.

Despite having a fraction of the audience mainstream media enjoyed, filter bloggers gained the ability to influence mainstream media and public agendas. Cooper (2006) suggests that this was due to a *disproportionate* number of traditional journalists, opinion leaders, and political operators reading and interacting with the blogosphere. A filter blog does not have to be read by everyone to exert influence. Mainstream news agenda-setters and opinion leaders may be persuaded by the value of a certain blog and then deliver its content via mainstream news media outlets. Despite this interconnectedness, mainstream news media and the *blogosphere* do not enjoy a cozy relationship. Mainstream media news producers are wary of the professional blogger because of their seeming lack of standards (Cooper, 2006).

By contrast, Tomaszeski et al. (2009) found that, although political bloggers may encroach on mainstream medias' stronghold as agenda setters, they do not feel threatened by the mainstream media because they do not view themselves as a replacement, but rather a dutiful "watchdog of the watchdogs" (p. 73). Tomaszeski et al. (2009) focused on well-established filter blogs, often operated by former and currently working journalists or newsroom professionals. Many other studies have also examined this issue further with the agenda-setting framework (Brown et al., 2014; Cooper, 2006; Lasica, 2004; Meraz, 2009; Messner & DiStaso, 2008; Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002). However, at the time of writing, very limited scholarly research exists on the microblogging site reddit using the agenda-setting framework.

Reddit is important because it delivers news to the readers in a more concise manner than filter blogs, with limited commentary. The commentary that is provided tends to be *funny, satirical, and non-intrusive* on the public's already established beliefs (Wasike, 2011). Furthermore, the users determine the salience and popularity of the posts. These qualities are important components of the most viral content found on the web as defined by Wasike. Viral content is content that receives the most shares on social media and blogosphere websites and is *generally* determined newsworthy by mainstream media (Wasike, 2011).

A search on the *EBSCO Host Academic Search Premiere* and *Communication and Mass Media Complete* reveals only two scholarly studies about reddit. Searches on other databases and pertinent journals such as *New Media and Society* yielded studies mentioning reddit, but none of them used the platform as a standalone subject of research. Wasike (2011) analyzed the top stories on reddit using framing theory and Meese (2014) examined reddit and its structure of image sharing. Moreover, micro and filter blogs share an interesting history, in that they both evolved from then public forums such as *Slashdot* and *Fark*.

Thus, the current study will fill an important gap, because microblogs and filter blogs are an extremely influential media delivery services with agenda setting qualities (Gleason, 2010). Furthermore, their rise in popularity was integral to the Web 2.0 revolution (Darwish & Lakhtaria, 2011).

WEB 2.0

Web 2.0 is the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the Internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them.

-O'Reilly (2005)

Following the dot-com collapse in 2001 (O'Reilly, 2005), many websites lost tremendous market value, many ceased to exist, and those that survived paved a way for significant structural change. This change allowed "everyday" users to go beyond browsing the Internet, to the dissemination of their content to the online publics. The emergence of this shift is, what is commonly referred to as, Web 2.0. The shift from the static Web to Web 2.0 coincided with the transition from low-speed (dial-up) Internet connections to high-speed (Ethernet) connections (O'Reilly, 2005).

John (2013) presented a variant definition of Web 2.0, summing it up by a single term: "sharing." In 2006, O'Reilly revisited his previous position on Web 2.0 and conceded that: "Tim Berners-Lee's original Web 1.0 is one of the most 'Web 2.0' systems out there — it completely harnesses the power of user contribution, collective intelligence, and network effects" (O'Reilly, 2006, para. 1). Therefore, a more complete definition of the Web 2.0 would include the shift from dial-up to broadband *and* facilitation of sharing content.

Whether it is posting of videos, memes, knowledge, or innovative ideas, Web 2.0 has empowered Internet users with an unprecedented ability to interact (Darwish & Lakhtaria, 2011) and function as sources of media content dissemination. The ability to comment on RSS feeds, hyperlink stories, store digital data on the cloud for easy sharing, real time posting, and commenting on stories, are byproducts of Web 2.0. The aftereffect has been a surge of websites offering users the ability to express themselves and actually be heard. One of these sites is a microblogging site called reddit.

REDDIT

Reddit is important because it is highly salient within the United States, as well as the rest of the world (Meese, 2014). Founded in 2005 by two students from the University of Virginia, reddit is an online microblogging community with over five billion views and 114 million unique visits per month (Meese, 2014). In 2013, Pew Research concluded that six percent of all American online adults and more than 15% of those aged between 18 and 29 are active reddit users (Duggan & Smith, 2013). This was the first survey that specifically examined reddit as a standalone platform. In a telephone survey of 2,252 adults, Duggan and Smith (2013) found that men were twice as likely as women to use reddit and that the site's popularity dropped significantly within the 50-and-older age group.

Reddit is different from other social media communities like Facebook and blogging communities like WordPress. Users rarely post diary-like content, instead, they link to external sources (Reddit, 2014b). These sources can vary from a mainstream news media site like CNN.com, to image hosting sites, to someone's personal news blog. Reddit users write headlines for their posts based on the information they find and post the headlines in the appropriate subreddits. These subreddits are communities created by users. The people who create them generally moderate them. In some instances, if a subreddit boasts high numbers

of subscribers, reddit's community relations team appoints the moderators. There are currently over 6500 active subreddits (Reddit, 2014b).

User account creation is available to anyone with an Internet connection and an email is not required. This has allowed users to create a multi-account presence without the requirement of authentication. Users are incentivized to post content and comment on posts by the prospect of acquiring "karma." Karma is tracked for all users; the information about each user's karma points is available to every other user, along with history about the user's posts and comments. Ability to track this history is an important feature of reddit, allowing users to conduct a background check on the source and their past behavior.

The front page of reddit dubbed, "The front page of the Internet" showcases the most popular content from around the Web, citizen journalism and UGC content is featured heavily there (Meese, 2014). An account is not required to view the front-page, unregistered users are exposed to a default list of the most popular posts of the day. To comment, and create posts an account is required. Creating a post with serendipitous ability to reach the front page is simple, a user may find an interesting story about a missing person on a local news website; a user then creates a headline and posts the original link with headline to an appropriate subreddit. The headlines appear in chronological order, and users who subscribe to the aforementioned subreddit will see those headlines and can vote them up or down. Highly up-voted headlines gain prominence, longevity, front-page status, and karma, while the unpopular ones get *buried*.

The comment section of the post is often where more user contribution occurs. For example, users provide further information on the local "missing persons" story, contributing personal accounts and knowledge of the area the missing person was last seen. In one case, this led to a false accusation. A user posted a link to a recently released, national front-page headline related to the Boston Marathon Bomber. Other users up-voted the post to the front page. MSNBC and CNN ran the story about the missing person as a potential suspect in the Boston Marathon Bombing (Carr, 2013) citing reddit as the source. Thus, on reddit, the process of gatekeeping traditionally reserved for news media professionals has, in some ways, been devolved to the consumers.

Harnessing the original promise of the static Web era, reddit combines interconnectedness with the dissemination capacities of the dynamic Web era, giving users

unparalleled ability to establish them as legitimate media disseminators, and opinion leaders. However, despite the capacity for inclusivity and participation, the barrier of possessing a certain level of education still exists. Duggan and Smith (2013) gauged reddit users' education level. In their telephone survey of adults (n = 1879) for Pew Research they found that a high level of education is an important characteristic of most reddit users.

Reddit and their sub-communities are not without criticism. Critics argue that the lack of authentication requirement facilitates fraudulent behavior when acquiring karma. Some users complain that the reddit image hosting structure infringes copyright and encourages content theft by forcing users to host images on an open public site, Imgur. Images hosted on this website generate advertising revenue for reddit, but does not offer copyright protection for images, or attribute them in any way to the original creator. Imgur came into existence out of users' necessity to host images on reddit for free. Created in 2009 by reddit user, Alan Schaaf, Imgur receives 1.5 million image uploads daily (Meese, 2014). There are also concerns over unchecked censorship, because subreddit moderators have the power to delete posts and comments without justification. Furthermore, because of user anonymity, reddit is open to publication of vulgarity, obscenity, and unauthorized images. A prominent example of the latter was "The Fappening" scandal. Numerous nude images of celebrities were released on a subreddit "The Fappening", and quickly ascended to the top rank of the front page (Reddit, 2014b).

However controversial, these issues do not negate the importance of reddit as one origin of the coveted viral status for online content. Moreover, reddit statistics have shown that the number of page-views per month has grown to five billion over the recent years (Reddit, 2014b). In comparison, in 2012, CNN.com and all their affiliated websites received 1.8 billion page views (Alexa, 2014). In that same year, CNN Digital outperformed all other major online news sources: HPMG News by 19%, NBC News Digital by 44%, Fox News Digital by 75%, CBS News by 134% and The NYT Brand by 208% (Comscore, 2014). Reddit receives over five billion page views monthly.

Some of the more prominent moments on reddit have happened in the ask-me-anything (AMA) subreddit. Users go on this subreddit to be interviewed by other users through a commenting structure, which functions similarly to the post structure described above. Popular questions get up-voted and can be seen in hierarchical order based on

popularity. Unpopular, publically determined irrelevant and down-voted questions do not get seen or answered. Generally, famous individuals like actors and politicians utilize this platform to promote themselves or products. Past notable visitors included the President of the United States, Barrack Obama, Bill Gates, and Stephane Dujarric (spokesman for United Nation Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon) (Reddit, 2014a).

As mentioned, there has been little research conducted about reddit as a news agenda setter (Meese, 2014; Wasike, 2011) and its salience in relation to other blogs, social media networks, and mainstream media. Reddit's archival structure of all past front pages, ability to trace the hyperlinks to original source, richness of UGC content, and the ability to establish a significant level of knowledge about the author makes it ripe for content analysis.

USER GENERATED CONTENT

We do not see…. reality…as 'it' is, but as our languages are. And our languages are our media. Our media are our metaphors. Our metaphors create the content of our culture.
-Postman (1986)

The phrase user-generated content (UGC) entered mainstream vernacular during the emergence of Web 2.0. That said, it is not a novel phrase and can be traced back to the late 17th century, when people used flyers to organize and rally protests, swaying mass public opinion and fueling the fires of American and French revolutions (Jenkins, 1992). Early *pamphleteers* and *muckrakers* like Thomas Paine paved the way for consumer content dissemination, setting the stage for successive media revolutions (Gillmor, 2004).

In the 1970s, the rise of the *Star Trek* culture had a profound effect on UGC. *Star Trek: The Original Series* was an American science fiction show that debuted in 1966 and was cancelled just three years later (Jenkins, 1992). Nevertheless, in those three years, this show would spark fan fervor that can be experienced to this day. Jenkins (1992) described this *Fandom* phenomenon as an unprecedented trend of consumer activism. Fans became participants, speaking back to the networks and producers, voicing their disgruntled opinions about the show's cancellation. To fill the void, fans began to create their own *Star Trek* content, creating thousands of books, magazines, songs and more recently videos and websites.

Long before the Internet, gatherings such as the *Star Trek Convention* provided fans with a "base from which they spoke about their cultural preferences and asserted their desires for alternative development" of the genre (Jenkins, 1992, p. 278). Original *Star Trek Convention* values were radically different from those embedded within the formal economy. They were "values of reciprocity and interdependence as opposed to self interest, collectivism as opposed to individualism, the importance of loyalty and a sense of 'identity' or 'belonging' as opposed to the principle of forming ties on the basis of calculation, monetary or otherwise" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 280). The *Trekkie* culture and its conventions generated systems of distribution that rejected profit and broadened access to creative works. This was economically viable and even profitable because of the sheer volume of the creative works, functioning as a launching platform for anyone with a desire to contribute. Fandom culture did not distinguish between artists and consumers; everyone had the potential to be a writer waiting to be discovered by the masses of the *Star Trek* culture.

Primary motives of the fandom culture are very much in sync with characteristics of UGC. Consumers and fan producers are less motivated by the prospects of monetary gain and are more driven by the prospects of affiliation, friendship, sense of belonging and community. In the post Internet era, *fandom* ideas have flourished. Large databases with books and stories intertwined the creative fan culture together in a massive, organized fashion. Virtual economies that promote exchange of ideas and other personally generated content can be found on every social network (Jenkins, 1992).

Following the Web 2.0 revolution, UGC encompassed various forms of media content. For example, photographs, video captures, and blog posts not originating from a professional organization but, rather, ordinary, everyday people who make their content available for anyone to use and alter, often for no monetary gain (Atkins, 2010; Brown et al., 2014; Moon, Kim, & Armstrong, 2014). UGC is typically associated with websites like Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr and WordPress. Microblogging and social media sites such as Tumblr, reddit, Twitter, Facebook and more recently, the reinvented MySpace are also considered to be UGC rich websites. Moon et al. (2014) describe these websites as 'online environments' where users tend to create 'virtual communities' with intent to contribute and retrieve UGC content. Because of the inherent characteristics of UGC, user participation and collaboration, and *open-source* characteristics are essential.

Open-source content is a neologism that describes creative works that others can copy or modify without the fear of legal repercussion. *Fandom* communities are often regarded as open source communities (Jenkins, 1992). There are studies that look at factors motivating users to contribute to open-source communities (Brown et al., 2014; Harrison, 2010; Reagle, 2011; Turner, 2006). Turner (2006) posits that, when fame is to be gained from participating in an online community, the quality of UGC posts tends to be 'demotic' but not 'altruistic'. That is to say, people contribute for inclusivity rather than the greater good. Conversely, Reagle (2011) demonstrates that when there is no prospect of fame, the quality of the posts is the opposite - people contribute for altruistic reasons. Reagle examined the single user UGC site Wikipedia.

Unlike mainstream media content providers like television and radio, Wikipedia is an open-source content community and is not driven by commercial motives (Reagle, 2011). Access to UGC sites like Wikipedia is free. The underlying assumption about UGC sites is *if it's free, you are the commodity*, meaning that, even though, on the surface, it would appear that the service is free, the content generators are actually giving something away. In the case of Wikipedia and other sites like it, communities that are dependent on user contribution, users give up their time to add and correct content that has been published on the website by other users. Furthermore, users give up personal data and information about their behavior like mouse scrolls and link clicking on the website (Reagle, 2011). In general, for random users, the cost of access to UGC sites like reddit, Youtube, Wikipedia, and Star Trek Wiki is low, often requiring only an Internet connection and an email account.

By contrast, for mainstream news media using UGC the costs are quite high. In June of 2008, BBC created a department specifically to deal with and integrate UGC into their operation (Harrison, 2010). The intent was primarily to cut costs, by capitalizing on the abundance of user created information. The reality turned out to be quite different. In an attempt to retain their high standards and journalistic quality, BBC had to spend an *exorbitant* amount of money fact checking their sources and reformatting information to be more objective (Harrison, 2010). This has not deterred newsrooms from integrating UGC into their operations. Moreover, since 2003 BBC has been collecting public opinion on a subsidiary website called iCan about various news articles from its website (Gillmor, 2004). This type of feedback access to professional articles allowed users to participate in the

journalist's news writing process, often resulting in information being provided that was lacking from the original article. One such example was "The Jane's Intelligence Review." The public provided *harsh and honest* feedback to a tech article written by a journalist, illuminating important details on the issue, causing the article to be corrected and rewritten (Gillmor, 2004). These contributions are valued by the BBC's journalistic community and their appreciation can be seen on the iCan website in the form of official recognition statement of all past contributors. Today, according to the BBC.com "About" section, BBC has an expanded UGC department and is at the forefront of merging new media with the old.

Another study that looked at UGC in the newsroom (Brown et al., 2014) found that using UGC was mainstream media's new, uncomfortable reality. The study found that the biggest problem with the use of UGC is failure to verify and accredit digital content properly. This is characteristic of any UGC found online. The technology to tag content with metadata that persists through sharing without the capacity to be altered is not yet well developed. The most pertinent findings from Brown et al. (2014) study were that, out of 38 newsrooms surveyed, only two had *never* used UGC in their output, and, on average, UGC was used 11 times per day by all the news organizations surveyed. UGC prominence in the newsroom highlights online publics' desire for citizen journalism and mainstream news media's willingness to accommodate that demand.

CITIZEN JOURNALISM

The future presented by the Internet is the mass amateurization of publishing and a switch from 'Why publish this?' to 'Why not?'

-Shirky (2009)

With the arrival of Web 2.0, citizen participation in online journalism has seen an unparalleled increase (Blaagaard, 2013). There are many paths available for people who have no training in professional journalism to capture live and current events, and deliver them to the general public. Sites like YouTube, Ustream, reddit, Facebook, Buzzfeed, LinkedIn, Twitter, Flickr, amongst many others are important tools for anyone who desires to gain the public's attention. These websites have lowered the barriers to dissemination of news information, and increased people's ability to express their voice. Labeled the "Generation C" (McCombs, Hinsley, Kaufhold, & Lewis, 2010), for users who crave new skills and

interests in "content" and "creativity", these new "produsers" (users who produce content) are credited with the "casual collapse of mainstream media" (p. 61). Loosely speaking, those who successfully harness the ability to be heard by online and deliver news and current events, without formal journalistic training are known as citizen journalists.

The blurring of lines between professional journalism and citizen journalism has been evident for some time (Gillmor, 2004; Goode, 2009). Individuals have always contributed to local news by petitioning the editor or contributing eyewitness accounts. Then in 2006, cable television channels like Current TV, Al Jazeera, and G4 began to gather user-generated content and eyewitness reporting on their websites for use on their cable broadcasts (Goode, 2009). For the purposes of the current research, citizen journalism will be viewed through the prism of online participation.

A concrete definition of citizen journalism is currently elusive because of the rapidly changing digital landscape. Goode (2009) describes citizen journalism as 'original content creators' who engage online in current affair-based blogging, photo and video posting relating to the news, and eyewitness commentary on current events. Lasica (2003) defines activities such as re-posting, linking, 'tagging' (labeling with keywords), rating, modifying, or commenting on news material posted by peers and professionals as participatory journalism. According to Goode (2009), this type of involvement has contributed to the 'democratization' of the journalistic function of gatekeeping on the World Wide Web. Gillmor (2004) warns of the grave responsibility that comes with being a gatekeeper of news. Not heeding conventional laws and applying them to the Internet sphere can result in legal ramifications such as "libel, copyright infringement, forbidden links, defamation, and plagiarism" (Gillmor, 2004, p. 220).

Lewin (1947) first coined the term gatekeeping, aiming to illustrate how widespread social changes can be achieved in a community; his primary focus was to show how one could bring changes to a population's food habits. Media gatekeeping refers to the process of information filtering by mainstream media companies in preparation for publication (Reese & Ballinger, 2001). For example, a newspaper has space for only a certain amount of column inches and therefore, decisions on reporting must be made among many world events. Some will become news items, while others are discarded at the discretion of the editors (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

The traditional role of news editors as gatekeepers has been challenged by a phenomenon dubbed viral content or viral news (content that has been shared most often on the Internet). Critics maintain that this paradigmatic shift is "unsettling to the public/journalist distinction from detachment to involvement, from factual verification to assertion, from objectivity to subjectivity" (Tumber & Prentoulis, 2003, p. 228). Others posit that the label "citizen journalist" stigmatizes the professional journalist as anything other than a citizen (McCombs et al., 2010). Jarvis (2001) proposed rebranding the term as "networked journalism" to avoid the tension between professional journalism and citizen journalism. Despite misgivings, professional journalists are reluctantly accepting of the new news agenda (Rosen, 2008) set by online and wireless citizens, particularly the younger generation of future journalists (Blaagaard, 2013).

In a survey assessing journalism students' perceptions about their chosen profession and citizen journalism, Blaagaard (2013) found that, on average, the participants were optimistic about their future with a significant number regarding citizen journalism as "a journalistic tool to find news angles and sources, or a source in its own right," (p. 1088). Another important insight from the study was the cognition of shifting media delivery methods. Many participants predicted a more fragmented and decentralized media landscape by the time they finish their education. All of the student participants acknowledged the abilities of new technological developments to turn everybody into a potential journalist. However, they still defended the worth of their profession as a "valuable distinction between the public and themselves" (Blaagaard, 2013, p. 1089). The most cited distinction between citizen journalists and professional journalists was strict adherence to a code of ethics.

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) outlines the professional journalism code of ethics. SPJ, (formerly named the Sigma Delta Chi and the National Association of Radio News Directors [NARND]) adopted the code of standards for journalism in 1947 (Watson & Urofsky, 2008). These were largely non-punitive measures that included "recognition of conflicts of interests as a high priority problem, recognition of duty to respect human dignity and privacy rights" (Watson & Urofsky, 2008, p. 31). Following the Supreme Court case of *Sheppard v. Maxwell*, in which the conduct of journalists covering the murder trial of Dr. Sam Sheppard was brought into question, two provisions were added; "to actively

censure and seek to prevent violations of the aforementioned standards," and "actively control journalists' conduct during trial coverage" (Watson & Urofsky, 2008, p. 31).

In 1995, the Associated Press Managing Editors (APME) Code of Ethics proved to be the template for a set of ethics that had gone through numerous revisions in prior decades. Written for newspaper editors, these codes included but were not limited to: "The good newspaper is fair, accurate, honest, responsible, independent and decent. Truth is its guiding principle. The newspaper should not plagiarize words or images." (Watson & Urofsky, 2008, p. 38). These codes had no formal enforcement, and relied heavily on enforcement by peer pressure (Watson & Urofsky, 2008). The current Code of Ethics is posted on the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ, 2014) website and includes: *Seek Truth and Report It*, *Minimize Harm, Act Independently, Be Accountable and Transparent.*

Despite having a fairly institutionalized history, the professional journalism code of ethics has been greatly criticized as ineffective. Watson and Urofsky's (2008) study determined that the code of ethics is purely symbolic and does not directly influence whether a journalist behaves ethically or unethically.

The conversation regarding ethical standards for citizen journalism also has a fairly established foundation, dating back to the early days of Web 2.0. Enforcement relies on a combination of self-regulation in the form of comment critiques from peers, and journalist bloggers such as Jay Rosen and Rebecca Blood publishing guidance on the matter. Examples of early ethical codes for citizen journalists were entrenched by Blood (2000) on her blog: "*Publish as fact only that which you believe to be true; If your statement is speculation, say so*; *If material exists online, link to it when you reference it; Publicly correct any misinformation*; *Write each entry as if it could not be changed*; *Disclose any conflict of interest*; *Note questionable and biased source.*"

In sum, professional journalism and citizen journalism share two important characteristics. First, presently, there is no enforcement of ethical and professional behavior for online reporting. Much like traditional journalism, citizen journalism ethics are a work in progress. Second, both types of journalism are setting the agenda for mainstream media newsrooms by reporting news events. However, that is where the similarities end and the way each plays the agenda-setting role are distinctly different.

AGENDA SETTING THEORY

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting model has guided research in public opinion and mass communication about political and social issues for more than 30 years. Agenda-setting theory proposes that mainstream mass media tell the public what issues to think about rather than what to think (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In its later revisions, the theory was expanded to propose that mainstream mass media not only direct public attention to specific issues or people (first-level agenda setting), but also play an important role in how to think about them (second-level agenda setting) (McCombs, 2005). Both levels deal with the salience of specific topics; that is to say, the quality of the issues by which they stand out relative to each other.

There is a third level of agenda setting that deals with policy and how the policy maker's agenda is set. This addresses topics such as, where do US congress members get their news and how does this affect their policy-making (McCombs, 2005). For the purposes of this review, only the first two levels will be examined.

First-level agenda setting deals with the transfer of salience of specific topics (people, issues, companies, and events) from the mass media agenda to news publics' agendas. Second level agenda setting is limited to the transfer of salience of the attributes of these topics (Ragas & Kiousis, 2010). For example, when media highlight campaign finance reform as a prominent voter concern, it is an example of first level agenda setting. Campaign finance reform may be driven by discussions about term limits for elected officials and amount of money these officials can receive per donor, both of these factors could affect governance and representation of constituents. If the mainstream media highlight term limits over campaign donations, the public will rank term limits as the more important factor of campaign finance reform. This is an example of second-level agenda setting. In the aforementioned example, campaign finance reform becomes salient in the publics agenda. The path of influence is not always direct to the public's agenda. Often, mass media have an influence on each other's agenda; this has been called inter-media agenda setting (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, & Lennon, 1998).

The arrival of the Internet-connected blogger and a multitude of citizen journalists create incredible diversity in public opinion and agenda setting. Some have argued that this has led to a fragmented media landscape appealing to individuals in a customized manner,

promoting *conformity* and *groupthink* (Maier, 2010; Shaw, Hamm, & Knott, 2001). Others have argued that the process of convergence between mainstream media and online communities retains key characteristics of media salience as a whole, and, thus, the agenda setting perspective continues to be relevant regardless of media fragmentation (Coleman & McCombs, 2007; Meraz, 2009; Messner & DiStaso, 2008; Sayre, Bode, Shah, Wilcox, & Shah, 2010). The purpose of the present study is to contribute to the body of work determining agenda setting effects in the post Web 2.0 media landscape.

Since the early 2000s, when Internet-based communication became ubiquitous, scholars have shifted their focus from traditional media contexts to testing the agenda-setting theory on web-based platforms. Messner and DiStaso (2008) investigated how mainstream news media and popular blogs use each other as sources. Using content analysis, Messner and DiStaso (2008) reviewed 2,059 articles and 120 blogs over a six-year period. The findings were twofold. First, examining *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, they found that newspapers were increasingly relying on blogs as a source, legitimizing blogs as a news source. Second, blogs likewise, heavily relied on mainstream media as a source to set their agenda. This *news source cycle* allows for agendas to be passed back and forth from media to media, contributing to the power of each type of medium to set publics' agenda (Messner & DiStaso, 2008).

Maier (2010) conducted a comprehensive 18-month analysis of major news websites (Google News, MSNBC, Yahoo News, CNN, AOL News) and mainstream media (cable television, radio, newspapers, and network television) showing a 60% similarity in news agenda and its salience. However, in the same study Maier also demonstrated an important divergence between the mainstream media agenda and web-based platforms. Less than 30% of the front-page news on top blogs and social media sites overlapped with mainstream media news (Maier, 2010). Moreover, when the agendas did overlap, web-based news sites were *slightly* more comprehensive. Five years before Maier's study, McCombs (2005) attributed this aspect to the inherent structure of online news sites, with editors having the ability to re-edit news as needed, sometimes due to additional information and sometimes because of reader participation in comment sections.

Messner and Garrison (2011) also looked at the interaction between mainstream news media agendas and blogs. Their research explored source interaction between elite

mainstream news media and political filter blogs during the 2006 congressional midterm election. Their research findings underline an important effect in media presentation and consumption. The more mainstream news media use blogs as sources and opinions, the more credibility blogs gain as legitimate, trustworthy and newsworthy sources, empowering blogs with direct agenda setting effects on public opinion (Messner & Garrison, 2011).

Kim and Lee (2006) demonstrated in their Internet agenda-setting case study that Internet based agenda-setting differs from that of traditional research. Two factors that accentuated this difference were "Internet's direct competition with traditional media," and "the ability for content creators, providers and users to interact" (Kim & Lee, 2006, p. 177). Their case study looked at Korean public opinion regarding American foreign policy on various online channels like personal blogs, Twitter, and Facebook. The findings showed that a person's opinion disseminated via online channels does influence news coverage. In their research, online *agenda-building* generally followed three steps: (1) An opinion of an anonymous Web user spreads on the Internet through various online channels such as personal, filter and microblogs; (2) Other online news websites pick up the opinion and spread it to more online publics and; (3) If the opinion gains enough popularity online traditional media will report it to their offline public (Kim & Lee, 2006). This phenomenon was dubbed reversed agenda setting.

Thus, while mainstream mass media outlets continue to exert their agenda-setting influence, it is no longer exclusive. Alternate online media such as blogs, social media, and various other content delivery websites play an important role in setting the media agenda. Interestingly, evidence suggests that sometimes these non-traditional media forces tend to bypass mainstream media altogether to target and influence public opinion directly

Web-based agenda setting studies (Maier, 2010; Messner & DiStaso, 2008; Messner & Garrison, 2011; Roberts et al., 2002; Sayre et al., 2010) have demonstrated how blogs weaken the impact of mainstream media on the public agenda. Furthermore, microblogs, and reddit in particular, are becoming increasingly popular, accruing significant numbers of page views and popularity. It is the goal of this research to add to knowledge about online agenda setting by examining UGC, citizen journalism and the microblogging site, reddit, and the potential influence it exerts over mainstream online media.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Prior research has shown that news blogs do set the agenda in some respects. However, there is a lack of consistent evidence about how the mainstream news media use microblogs as sources. One thing is clear; since the advent of the Internet and later Web 2.0 revolution, consumers gained the ability to, not only influence the content mainstream media producers deliver, but also become producers themselves. Thus, by sharing ideas, media content, and sources with other users they potentially impact mainstream online news media and subsequently, the public agenda. Furthermore, this trend is likely to increase as the Internet population matures. Pew Research has indicated that reddit users are young, educated and enthusiastic about using new online technologies that proliferate UGC and citizen journalism friendly websites and are more averse to traditional, mainstream media sources.

The following hypotheses and research questions are based on the literature and prior research described above with a view to shedding light on reddit and its contribution to news agenda setting. This study uses a content analysis of post headlines on reddit and their related stories in order to determine their origin, and thereby further investigate the idea of reverse agenda setting. The ultimate goal of this research is to probe and inquire into the relationship between mainstream media and reddit. McCombs and Shaw (1972) determined that mainstream news media set the public agenda. Therefore, confirming that reddit sometimes sets the agenda for mainstream media will show that reddit may also have the capability to set the agenda for the public. A better understanding of this relationship can add to the discussion about the way new media impacts agenda setting.

As mentioned, Messner and DiStaso (2008) showed that newspapers increasingly rely on blogs as a source, and that blogs also, in turn, blogs rely on mainstream media as a source, each contributing to the public's agenda. However, Maier (2010) found that less than 30% of the front-page news on top blogs and social media sites overlapped with mainstream media news. Therefore, in the current study it was hypothesized that:

H1: Among user posts on reddit's front page, posts originating from mainstream *online news* media will use reddit as a source at least 20% of the time

H2: Among user posts on reddit's front page, posts originating from *reddit* will use *online news* media as a source at least 20% of the time.

Reddit, contains many posts comprising opinions or commentary; therefore, of interest in this study is the nature of the posts sourced by mainstream media: opinion vs. factual.

RQ1: Do mainstream *online news* media use reddit as an opinion or factual source?

For comparison, the study investigated the incidence of other blogs as sources on reddit.

RQ2: Among user posts on reddit's front page, how frequently does reddit use *other blog websites* as sources?

With regard to *who* contributes to the agenda setting role, an additional interest in this study is the incidence of the author types on reddit: Reddit's anonymous authors vs. mainstream news authors vs. authors from other blogs. Thus, the following research question was posed:

RQ3: How often do reddit's anonymous users vs. other author types reach reddit's front page?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study used content analysis to analyze a randomly obtained sample of user posts on reddit's front page. Content analysis is appropriate in this case because the intent is to gather empirical evidence of the incidence of specified phenomena. Other methods such as interviews with journalists and/or reddit users would not yield the same results because self-reported data is sometimes difficult to rely on and often provides only anecdotal evidence. The focus is to determine the relationship between the origin of the post and reddit, mainstream online news websites and other blogs. Typically, user posts on reddit are hyperlinks from the Web with customized headlines. Because of reddit's popularity and high salience, obscure posts have the potential to become widely read and subsequently covered by online mainstream news media. Furthermore, because reddit's user activity can be tracked and most users are anonymous, they are ideal candidates for examination of reverse agenda setting on reddit.

Reddit's voting arrangement makes it a unique aggregator of news from around the Web, whereby *the community* determines the visibility, and salience of random posts. Therefore, the content population in this study is the reddit archive database, which was used as the source of past front-page posts. These posts often vary in content and category, and can include random images/memes hosted on reddit's image site Imgur, links to videos on websites such as YouTube and Vimeo, links to mainstream media news sources like *CNN.com* and *NYTimes.com,* or links to personal websites, blogs and social media. These posts were investigated via Google Search to determine if their origin was: online mainstream news media, reddit, or other blog. Front-page posts lacking mainstream online news media or other blog links were assumed to have originated on reddit. Bing, Yahoo and Google search engines were employed to determine the post's origin and if the post was subsequently reported by mainstream online news media and/or other blogs. A random

number generator determined the starting date. In terms of the timeframe for the content sample, two full weeks were examined Monday, September 15, 2014 through Monday, September 29, 2014. Forty front-page posts were archived for each day for a total content sample of 600 (15 days * 40 posts) posts.

CODING

The coding instrument was developed based on prior studies about blogs and traditional mainstream media (Maier, 2010; Meese, 2014; Messner & DiStaso, 2008; Messner & Garrison, 2011). The author and a trained assistant coded the reddit blog posts together. Before gathering and coding data, the author and assistant studied the coding sheets to become familiar with variable definitions and schemes. Next, the researcher and assistant independently coded two randomly selected days and compared notes to uncover discrepancies. In case of a disagreement on a coding point, the two coders discussed and resolved the differences. In order to retain consistency and validity in content analysis, intercoder reliability was calculated by double coding 10% of the data or approximately 60 front-page posts. Scott's Pi was used to determine intercoder reliability for each variable. The coded data used to determine intercoder reliability was not used in the final sample. Details regarding the intercoder reliabilities are included below; however, it should be noted that all the intercoder reliabilities met the bench mark of .8 or better in this study.

Nine variables were coded from every post; story type, date of story, original source, story style, author, which mainstream media website the link was associated with, original author, if the post used by *online* mainstream media, style of story as appearing in mainstream media, websites representing mainstream media.

MEASURES

Story type determined if the story was news or other. To determine if a post was news Maier's (2010) definition was used, evaluating posts on five dimensions: timing, significance, proximity, prominence, and human interest. This variable was coded as news (1), or other (2). Intercoder reliability for this variable was .90.

Story original source variable was operationalized as mainstream media (1), reddit (2), mainstream response to reddit (3), other blog (4), or other blog response to reddit (5).

Stories found on mainstream media that directly cited or mentioned reddit were coded as "mainstream response to reddit." Stories originating from webpages other than reddit and mainstream media were coded as "other blog." Likewise, if those blogs mentioned reddit directly, stories were coded as "other blog response to reddit." To determine whether the origin of the post was on reddit, mainstream online news media, or other blog, a timestamp was examined, if the timestamp was edited or not provided website developer tools were used to determine time of original publishing. Intercoder reliability for story original source was .88.

Mainstream media websites were coded as the following websites; Not applicable, Google News, The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, Huffington Post, MSNBC, Fox News, ABC News, CBS News, NBC News, USA Today, Christian Science Monitor, and Los Angeles Times. All other posts not originating from reddit were coded as other blog posts. Originally, intercoder reliability for mainstream online news media was 78% or .64. The researcher and assistant reevaluated their answers and discussed the discrepancies. Most of the disagreements dealt with the ambiguity of news aggregator sites Google News and Christian Science Monitor. Following a recoding attempt of ten more posts the intercoder reliability was at the acceptable level of 96% or .85.

Story style pertains to the headline as well as content of the reddit posts. This variable was operationalized as not applicable (0), opinion/comment source (1) or factual source (2). Any content contributing information to the source was treated as factual source. Any content that was commentary on news and took a position in an argument was treated as opinion/comment source (Messner & Garrison, 2011). Posts containing images and/or content that were not newsworthy were coded as "not applicable." Original intercoder reliability was 66% or .55. This discrepancy was primarily due to confusion regarding Messner and Garrison's definition and the assistant's understanding of the meaning "factual and opinion/comment." Following a discussion and a recoding of ten posts, intercoder reliability was 94% or .80.

Author was operationalized as mainstream journalist (1), reddit anonymous (2), other blog anonymous (3), or other blog journalist (4). To determine the post author's affiliation, a search engine analysis was conducted on the original poster. Authors who published on professional blogs were coded as blog journalists. Intercoder reliability for this variable was

.86. Author of an original story was operationalized in the same scheme as the author variable. The second layer of authorship had to be coded because reddit posts are often aggregated from other news websites. Therefore, author of the posts not originating from reddit could similarly be categorized to determine which one reached the front pages more frequently and how it related to the previously described variable. Intercoder reliability for this variable was .90.

Finally, the mainstream media pick variable was coded nominally as no (1), yes (2). This variable determined if the reddit post was used by mainstream media websites. Intercoder reliability for this variable was .91. Reddit posts that were found on mainstream media sites were evaluated for style and coded as not applicable (0), opinion/comment (1), or factual (2). Reddit posts that originated on traditional mainstream media and did not contain newsworthy content or were simply images were coded as not applicable. Reliability for this variable was .89.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis was conducted using SPSS Statistics 22. Initially, in order to determine levels of incidence for the attributes of each type of post, frequencies for all the variables were obtained. Next, to determine differences between types and origins of posts, chi-square tests were conducted. Furthermore, for the hypotheses, one-tailed tests were employed while for research questions two-tailed tests of significance were obtained; a 95% decision rule (alpha < .05) was employed to determine statistical significance.

To answer the first question the source variable was recoded as reddit vs. not reddit. This was done to identify stories that originated on reddit. Then, a Pearson chi-square test was conducted to determine a relationship between stories originating from reddit and the variable that determined whether or not mainstream media used the reddit headline as source of the story. Similarly, a chi-square test was utilized to determine the relationship in research question three. The other research questions were addressed by inspecting the frequencies on their respective variables. Supplementary research was also conducted on reddit's headline use among mainstream media websites.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

H1 predicted that among user posts on reddit's front page, posts originating from *mainstream online news* media use *reddit* as a source at least 20% of the time. From a sample of 600, mainstream online news media sourced 23% (n = 139) of reddit front-page posts. However, many of the posts were links from and to other mainstream media websites. To determine frequency of use of reddit *unique* posts, the original story source variable was recoded into a binary variable: reddit (1) and not reddit (0) isolating unique reddit posts from blog, mainstream media, responses from other blog and mainstream media. Also, a binary variable determined if the story was reported by mainstream media (1) vs. not mainstream media (0). These findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Chi Square of reddit Post Use by Mainstream Media

Was the Post Used by Mainstream Media	All reddit Posts Excluding Unique Posts	Unique reddit Posts
Not Applicable	19.5%	.3%
No	39.3%	86.4%
Yes	41.2%	13.5%

Note: Reddit unique posts is the part of the new coded variable reddit vs. Not, identifying front-page posts that were unique to reddit.

The chi-square test revealed that, out of overall reddit posts used by mainstream online news media (*n*=139), reddit's unique posts were used as source 13% (n = 18) of the time, compared to 41% (n = 57) of other blog post's from reddit's front page ($X^2 = 161.04$, *df* = 3; *p* <.01). Clearly, mainstream media do use reddit as a source, but not to the extent hypothesized. Thus, H1 was not confirmed.

H2 predicted that among user posts on reddit's front page, posts originating from *reddit* use *mainstream media* as a source at least 20% of the time. Reddit's front-page posts

were coded into mainstream, reddit, mainstream response to reddit, other blog, and other blog response to reddit. Out of the sample of 600, reddit used mainstream online news media 11% (n = 68) of the time. Thus, although reddit community does use mainstream media as a source, as in hypothesis 1, they do not do so to the extent hypothesized. Further inspection of the frequencies indicated that there were differences in how reddit users utilized mainstream online news media on reddit. Eight percent (n = 46) of the time, reddit users posted links leading to news websites in their headlines. Three percent (n = 22) of the time reddit users linked to reddit original posts that were picked up by mainstream media. These posts were associated with unique reddit posts and contained the word 'reddit' or name of a subreddit in the original news story.

RQ1 asked if mainstream online news media use reddit as an opinion or factual source. To answer this question, a factual source was defined as an information-contributing source, while an opinion source was commentary on news taking a position in an argument. The chi-square test on the Source Style (opinion vs. factual) and "Reddit vs. Not" revealed that for *all* posts emanating from reddit, 309 (88%) were factual while 42 (12%) were opinion ($X^2 = 3.61$, *df* = 1; p <.05). This latter finding was mirrored in the analysis of reddit's 139 unique posts that mainstream online news media used, 88% (n = 43) were presented as factual, while 14% (n = 7) were opinion/comment (although this finding did not reach significance due to the small number of cases involved).

RQ2: Asked how frequently do reddit's anonymous users post *other blog websites* as sources. From 600 posts, *other blog websites* were used as a source 21% (n = 128) of the time. From those posts, reddit anonymous users were responsible for 71% (n = 92). Clearly, anonymous reddit users frequently cite other blogs as a source ($X^2 = 97.25$, *df* = 12; *p* <.01). Reddit unique posts constitute majority of reddit anonymous users posts, with blogs being a close second. These findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Source of The Story and Its Author

	Story Author			
Source of Story	Mainstream Journalists	Reddit Anonymous	Other Blog Anonymous	Other Blog Journalist
Mainstream	7	28	6	5
reddit	2	350	36	1
Mainstream Response to reddit	1	17	3	1
Other Blog	3	92	29	4
Other Blog Response to reddit	0	13	0	2

Note: The data displayed is raw data

Finally, RQ3 asked about the frequency with which Reddit's anonymous users vs. other author types reach reddit's front page. The author variable determined the author of the reddit front-page post, but not the link with which the post was associated. Reddit users who were not affiliated with any media organizations and showed no history of blogging outside of reddit appeared on the front page 83% (n=500) of the time. Established bloggers and bloggers whose username was associated with other news organizations reached the front page 15% (n = 88) of the time. These findings are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Author of Posts Frequency

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Mainstream Journalist	13	2.2
reddit Anonymous	500	83.3
Other Blog Anonymous	74	12.3
Other Blog Journalist	13	2.2

Another variable was coded as author of the original story. This variable examined the author of the post with whom the front-page link was associated. Anonymous reddit users reached the front page 54% (n = 325) of the time. Established bloggers and blog journalists reached the front-page 28% (n = 169) and 9% (n = 55) of the time respectively. These findings are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Author of Original Posts Frequency

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Mainstream Journalist	51	8.5
reddit Anonymous	325	54.2
Other Blog Anonymous	169	28.2
Other Blog Journalist	55	9.2

Supplementary analysis indicated that the most frequent users of reddit posts were international news organizations like Al Jazeera, BBC and RT (n = 48). Amongst them the use was evenly split at 33% (n = 16) each. Fox News was the second most frequent (n = 27) user of reddit posts. The least frequent user was the New York Times (n = 2).

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Traditional mainstream media have undergone dramatic changes since the advent of the Internet. To stay competitive and relevant, acceptance of new technologies and practices were required. Adoption of UGC content and use of microblogs such as reddit as sources have propelled traditional mainstream media into the Web 2.0 age, garnering attention and space on social media feeds. However, this has also potentially assisted in advancing their slow demise, by legitimizing alternative sources of news. Overall, this study demonstrated that there is a relationship between reddit and mainstream online news media. The relationship was not as strong as predicted, although, there is evidence that this relationship is solidifying.

Based on the study findings, mainstream online news media do periodically use reddit as a source. Looking through the prism of reddit front-page posts, this relationship is revealed by mainstream online news media posts containing the word reddit or references to a subreddit directly. The weak relationship in hypothesis 1 could be due to reddit's lack of journalistic standards. Following the erroneous *Boston Marathon Bomber* story sourced from reddit, websites like CNN.com and FoxNews.com understandably became apprehensive about using the front page of reddit as a direct source. Another reason could be due to the persistent problem with properly citing online sources. Messner and Garrison (2011) described mainstream news agencies' lack of attribution policy, particularly when dealing with website sources. This was also evident in the current research, making it considerably harder to track story sources appearing on mainstream online news media websites. Another limitation in the current study was that it examined reddit's relationship with online news media only and not traditional mainstream media websites and their use of blogs overall. Furthermore, to ensure external validity, a random date was selected for the starting date. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are peaks of attention to reddit which tend to coincide

with viral news or specific events. The date selected could have corresponded with a time period when reddit was *not* as prominent on mainstream media websites, leading to a weaker relationship than expected. Thus, future research should employ a larger sample, over a longer time period.

Hypothesis 2 assessed the link between reddit and its use of mainstream media as a source. Despite evidence showing reddit does use traditional mainstream news media, the relationship was not as strong as predicted. This could be due to the way that mainstream media were defined. Many posts that were from media websites outside the scope of major news networks were coded as other blogs. These included websites like Gizmodo, Mashable, TechCrunch, and Engadget. Reddit users do frequently rely on outside sources for their posts (n = 211), but the majority of the front-page posts were unique to reddit (n = 389). These ranged from humorous memes and pictures to personal commentary on various issues, to references from the AMA subreddit. This suggests that reddit promulgates UGC content. However, such posts are not of interest to mainstream news media websites. Memes of cats and instructional videos in the gaming community are not considered news.

Still, it is important to note, mainstream online news media is cognizant of reddit's importance. They have established a presence on the microblog via their own subreddits as in the case of Fox News, Huffington Post, and GoogleNews subreddits. They appeared on the front page 5%, 4% and 3% respectively. These were the most active mainstream news media networks on reddit. Moreover, some, like FoxNews.com, have established their own reddit news aggregators on their website, streaming *filtered* viral posts directly. This supports the idea that reddit is an important mass media tool and is playing a role in propelling the trend of reverse agenda setting. Because of reddit's voting structure, mainstream online news media are apparently listening to consumers' voices, letting them decide what is important. This trend is still in nascent stages and reddit infrequently appears on the front pages of mainstream news media. However, over time this has the potential to develop into a stronger interrelationship, infusing reddit with direct agenda-setting effects outside the sphere of their current users.

Research question 1 determined that mainstream online news media used reddit as a factual source more frequently than opinion source. This was true of all posts cited from reddit and reddit unique posts. Posts appearing on mainstream online news media sites linked

directly to the reddit posts via text hyperlinks. Often, these links had a brief explanation of the post's importance. Some mainstream news media websites had a special category for viral posts and in one instance had a direct aggregator of reddit's front-page posts. But this typically provided only a link and headline.

Research question 2 examined the relationship between reddit's anonymous users and other blogs. Reddit's anonymous users used other blog websites as sources frequently. Reddit's etiquette rules encourage links to appropriate subreddits. For example, if a user posts a link from *Huffington Post* on the *Fox News* subreddit and the content is not related to Fox News, the moderator will remove the link. This helps direct users to post indirect links from other sources on the related subject to the appropriate subreddit. Perhaps a user would post a link from *Media Matters*, concerning the same article from *Huffington Post* on the *Fox News* subreddit. Because *Media Matters* does not have their own subreddit, as of this writing, their link is more widely accepted. By doing this, the moderators indirectly endorse alternative media use to cover stories that originated from mainstream online news media.

This reflects the findings from Messner and Garrison's (2011) study, which determined that by using blogs as sources, mainstream media promote a level of validity in the blog's capacity as a news disseminator. Interestingly, moderator behavior on mainstream news subreddit and that of mainstream media news editors have a similar effect, whereby they are responsible for legitimizing their competitors. Therefore, for mainstream media the outcome is twofold. The more blogs are used as sources, the more credibility they gain because journalists' professional filtering capabilities will determine which blogs are trustworthy and newsworthy. Moreover, the more blogs are used as trustworthy sources by mainstream media the more they are trusted by mainstream media's audiences.

Research question 3 examined reddit's front-page authors' posts. Anonymous users appeared more frequently on the front page than other authors. One of the main contributing factors to the frequency of anonymous users is that it is simple to create multiple accounts making it is easy to stay anonymous. In some cases anonymity is promoted. Tech websites that utilize reddit for their news stories often rely on direct user contribution. Subreddits like the *Daily Tech News Show* promote community participation by featuring stories from anonymous authors. There are exceptions, for example, in the AMA subreddit, the user conducting the session generally goes by their name. In the current study, there were

limitations to the coding scheme for this variable. It was difficult to investigate the authors beyond a search engine query and reddit's internal database on author's history of posts.

Future studies should focus on a more extensive categorization of posts; investigate other blog sites as stand-alone sample pools; provide more comprehensive analysis of mainstream media use of UGC in relation to reddit; and assess patterns and behavior of everyday Internet users in terms of news media consumption. Moreover, the phenomenon of "cord cutting" is another fruitful area for research in relation to UGC, as more users abandon traditional media in favor of the Internet. Shedding light on these areas would increase understanding of the user-media-blog relationship as news blogs and other UGC content proliferate.

CONCLUSION

In a world where anyone can publish free UGC content and the written word is no longer something to be paid for, the journalism profession will have to change and adapt. The journalist of tomorrow will have to possess multiple skill sets. Shooting and editing video, writing for the web, writing on multiple blogs, interacting with their readers and running their own blogs are already essential skills required of today's journalists. Based on the study findings, in the near future, journalists will have to be data savvy, possess knowledge about search engine optimization, have a keen eye for new and innovative apps, websites and ideas to share their news, and command a presence on the most salient UGC websites.

Traditional agenda setting research has focused on the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda. The overall focus of academia, this study included, is still mainstream media centric. As UGC promulgates on the web, and mainstream media continue to lose their monopoly on people's attention, this theory should be broadened beyond the traditionally assumed premise about mainstream media's agenda setting role. New agenda setting relationships such as public-to-public agenda setting have emerged and future research should investigate these associations further.

The current research demonstrated a relationship between the microblog reddit and mainstream media. As technology matures and life without the Internet seems part of the distant past, proliferation of user-generated content will no doubt increase. Thus, it is important for mainstream media and other traditional organizations to accept this reality and

find innovative ways to incorporate UGC into their operations. Moreover, as BBC has demonstrated, use of UGC on the web and in broadcasts is not enough, as this does not promote user interaction and contribution. Another important implication for mainstream media to consider is the demographic attributes associated with online news consumption. As the population ages, the news consumers will be the Internet generation. Pew research has shown that these users are mainstream media averse and prefer to get their news from other sources online. Reddit has demonstrated that many Internet users prefer to get their news from other reddit users and from likeminded communities (subreddits). Therefore, it is important for mainstream media to create access points for Internet users to gather, debate, and contribute to the news in ways never before considered.

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