

Grassroots Journalism on the Web: An Overview

Chris Anderson

Doctoral Candidate in Communications

Political Communication

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Introduction

A new field-- the field of participatory or grassroots journalism-- is materializing before our eyes. By field I mean a social space “governed by its own ‘rules of the game’ and offering its own particular economy of exchange and reward” (Benson 1999, 465). By participatory journalism, I also mean something quite specific, namely, a social process in which the traditional practices of journalism—the collection, selection, narrativization, and distribution of real-world events—are taken outside the formal boundaries of the journalistic profession by people and organizations that have not previously been certified as “journalistic.” I argue that limiting the discussion that follows to these two specific terms may clear up a number of conceptual difficulties that have, for decades, bedeviled scholars of the alternative media. While media scholars have increasingly begun to analyze the social space journalism as a field (Benson 1999; Bourdieu 1998; Couldry 2003) there have been few attempts to define alternative media in strictly Bourdieuean terms, and at least one explicit warning *not* to. (Atton 2002) This reluctance, I suspect, stems from both an intrinsic academic wariness of the hype that has surrounded the emergence of weblogs (or blogs) as well as problems in defining exactly what it is we mean by alternative media.

The “emergence of a new social field” would seem to be an unusual event, although it is important to keep in mind that the field of journalism, as traditionally defined, is itself fairly new. Nevertheless, the very newness of the participatory journalistic phenomenon, combined with the inevitable and uniquely American excitement brought about by the promise of greater democracy through technology, has led a number of usually sober and serious-minded people to wax rhapsodic about the impact of the new social practice. Dan Gillmor, a celebrated blogger and former technology correspondent for *The San Jose Mercury News* has written that we are witnessing “journalism’s transformation from a 20th century mass media structure to something profoundly more grassroots and democratic” (Gillmor 2004, xii), while Orville Schell, dean of the University of California at Berkeley School of Journalism has noted that “the Roman Empire that was mass media is breaking up, and we are entering an

almost-feudal period where there will be many more centers of power and influence.” (“The Future of the New York Times.”) Of course, along with the celebration has come the inevitable backlash; Steve Lovelady of the *Columbia Journalism Review* has publicly referred to bloggers as “salivating morons who make up the lynch mob.” (Rosen 2005)

In order to draw the concept of participatory journalism into a dialog with more traditional sociological concerns, I begin by unpacking the relationship between “participatory journalism” and commonly theoretical understandings of “alternative media.” I argue that, although participatory journalism is a distinct social field, its relationship to more diffuse types of alternative media has been under-theorized.

After working through and situating these various definitions of alternative media, I undertake a provisional examination of the boundaries of the participatory journalistic field, comparing the mission statements of four organizational participants in the field—Ohmynews, UK Indymedia, Wiki News, and The Northwest Voice-- and analyzing their journalistic output along three dimensions: level of participation, adherence to “journalistic” norms, and ties to radical social movements. I conclude by resituating the participatory journalistic field within larger debates about the relationship between media and the public sphere.

What Is “Alternative Media”?

Many scholars of the alternative media have been inattentive to the differences between the various classes of media that fall within their area of study. This inattention, usually based on a well meaning desire not to overlook or exclude, has had serious some repercussions for the domain of alternative media research, leaving it open to charges that it “lacks sufficient rigor” or is “over-politicized.” In an era when three TV networks, FM radio, and an increasingly consolidated press dominated the media field, alternative media was easy to laugh at; now, in the days of increasingly fractured and hybridized media forms, such ignorance is inexcusable. For alternative media to be understood it must be investigated, and to be investigated it needs to be defined in a way that makes analysis possible.

Rather than burden the world with yet another definition of alternative media, I propose instead to group already existing definitions in a fashion that allows each to stand

intact in a unique but interrelated way. John Downing (2001) prefers the term “radical” to “alternative” when discussing media outside the mainstream, highlighting as it does the challenge that such media poses to established configurations of power. Couldry and Curran (2003) take issue with Downing’s definition, arguing persuasively that the term radical media inherently excludes “any media on the right of the political spectrum, even those whose challenge to the concentration of media resources in central institutions is explicit and direct.” (Couldry 2003, 7) Instead, Couldry and Curran define “alternative media” as that media which, regardless of political orientation, challenges existing concentrations of media power (7). Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis, who define “participatory” or “open-source journalism “as” the act of citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” add an additional wrinkle (Bowman and Willis, 2003), while Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) further complicates the picture, writing as she does of “citizens media,” a concept:

that accounts for the process of empowerment, concientization, and fragmentation of power when men, women, and children gain access to and reclaim their own media (Rodriguez 2003, 190)

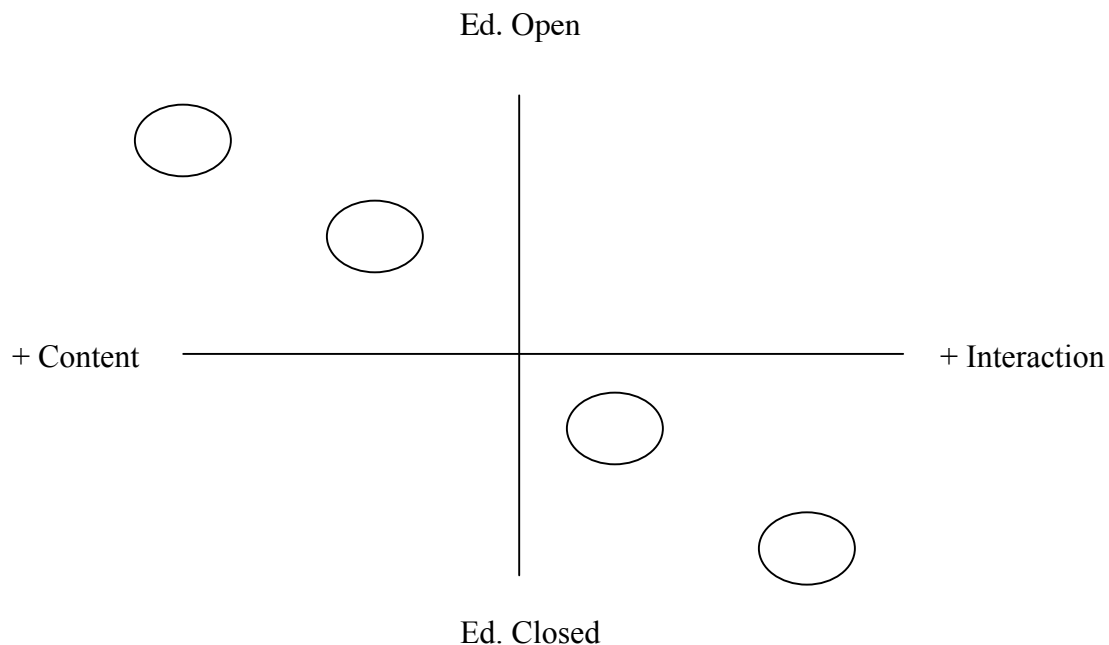
Chris Atton (2002) provides one of the most detailed overviews of the different scholarly definitions of alternative media, He recounts how this media is most often defined by its content, its structure, or its form, and argues that by themselves each of these definitions is incomplete. For Atton, echoing Duncombes’ work on ‘zines, the key to conceptualizing alternative media is to understand it both in terms of its attitude toward the dominant system of capitalist control and its position within that system. Atton proposes a six-part typology of alternative media: content; form; reprographic innovations; distribution; transformed social relations, and transformed communicative processes. The advantage to this multi-definitional approach, Atton contends, is that it opens the space of alternative media to publications that do not normally lend themselves to easy analysis: zines, for example, or personal web pages, both of which Atton feels should be included within the definition of alternative media.

Under this revamped definition can alternative media be analyzed as a field? For Atton, it cannot. While acknowledging that Bourdieu's cultural theory does recognize a space for avant-garde artistic activities, Atton sees the concept of the *journalistic* field as too monolithic to "provide a realistic account of a plural and heterogeneous reality." (Atton, quoting Marliere 1998, 223) Could one analyze alternative media a field in its own right, then? Again, Atton argues that:

the multi-dimensionality of [my] model suggests a space wider than journalism tout court—are zines journalism? What is the relationship of anarchist web sites and Internet discussion lists to journalism? (Atton 2002)

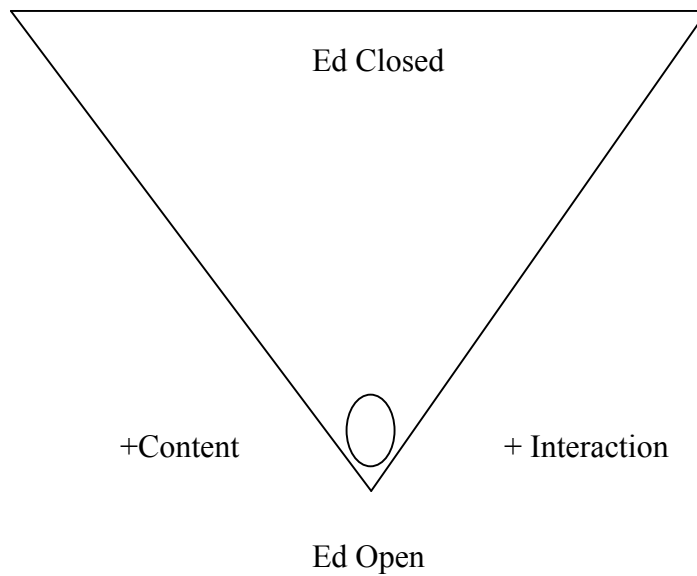
While I agree with Atton that defining alternative media through the lens of field theory would be unnecessarily restrictive, I also contend that by narrowing the scope of our investigation we can see participatory journalism as a field, and can analyze it as such. In other words, there may be segments of the fragmented and highly differentiated world of alternative media that lend themselves to field analysis—segments closer to the journalistic tradition, for example. Taking all of the above definitions and disagreements into account, I propose the following initial typology: participatory journalism (in Bowman and Willis' sense) is a kind of alternative media (as defined by Couldry, Curran, and Atton) that may or may not be citizen's media (as described by Rodriguez). In other words, participatory journalism is a specific media form within a much larger alternative-media domain, a form that can then both be *analyzed as a specific field* and *judged normatively* along the lines proposed by Rodriguez, Habermas (1989), Bourdieu, and Lash (2002), depending on both the process by which it is created and the manner in which it is used politically.

Fig 1: The Social Space of Online Journalism (Deuze 2003)



Given the distinctions above, how have scholars attempted to map the social space of online journalism? Mark Deuze (2003) provides us with one of the most comprehensive assessments. For Deuze, online journalism websites can be viewed along two axes, depending on whether they are editorially open or closed and whether they focus more on the production of good editorial content or on facilitating online interaction (fig 1).

One of the problems with Deuze's map, however, is that it does not actually discuss the concept of grassroots journalism in any great detail. Though Deuze would most likely argue that grassroots journalism could be incorporated into the above social map, many partisans of participatory journalism would most likely argue that his distinction between a focus on content production and a focus on the facilitation of community is overdrawn. For many grassroots journalists, at least in theory, there is no distinction between the production of content and open participation. Indeed, the two criteria cannot be easily disentangled. The social space of grassroots journalism would therefore look more like an inverted triangle (fig. 2)



Grassroots journalism, at least in the mind of its practitioners, can thus be seen as perched at the “utopian point” where content production, interaction, and editorial openness meet. How accurate is this self conception? Do participatory journalistic websites approach this “utopian point”? Answering this question is one of the aims of the following investigation.

Problems and Methodology

We can now begin to formulate additional questions about the participatory journalistic field:

- Do “participatory journalistic” organizations produce original material? Or do they mostly reprint the material of other, professional journalistic organizations?
- Do social actors who define themselves as participatory journalists “commit journalism”? In other words, do they “pound the pavement,” take pictures and video, conduct interviews, and rifle through government documents? Or do they merely pontificate?

- How common is *objective* participatory journalism? Is it entirely biased? Do participatory journalists align themselves with social movements?
- How are participatory journalistic organizations the same? How are they different? Are they similar enough that we can productively group them together as a *field*?

In short, in the pages below, I attempt to draw some provisional boundaries around the participatory journalistic field. I examine four major organizations within the universe of grassroots journalism: Ohmynews, The Northwest Voice, Indymedia UK, and Wikinews. While I do not argue that these examples exhaust the limits of our key analytic category, all four have been cited in the secondary literature on participatory journalism as important contributors to the current alternative media landscape, and all four are self-described “grassroots media” outlets. By exploring variations in this self-definition, along with the actual content and layout of these websites, we can obtain a deeper understanding of the participatory journalistic field as a whole. Following both Rodriguez (2001) and Castells (1983) I note that this kind of comparative study does not attempt to find “overlapping evidence” in all cases in order to prove or disprove a strict scientific statement. Rather, “each case examined should point to a unique and specific facet of the social phenomenon under investigation.” (Rodriguez 2001, xi)

I begin with an overview of the mission statements of Ohmynews, The Northwest Voice, Indymedia UK, and Wikinews, along with a brief examination of the key secondary literature on each media outlet. I next undertake a comprehensive content analysis of the journalism produced by each site during a seven-day period from March 20, 2005 through March 26, 2005. The content analysis is undertaken at the story level and attempts to define certain surface-level features. Each article is coded along three axes-- level of adherence to “journalistic” norms, ties to social movements, and grassroots participation. While this level of qualitative generality might be troublesome to some, I argue that, to date, the actual amount of content analysis performed on online participatory media has been so limited that we must begin with broad brushstrokes in an attempt to construct even a simplistic model of exactly what it is we are so interested in. (for exceptions to this general lack of content analysis see Anderson 2004, Anderson 2005)

There are several possible types definitional variation possible within each category:

Type of Journalism / Adherence to Journalistic Norms:

Reprint (0)	Announcement (1)	Press Release (post event) (2)	Commentary and Analysis (original) (3)	Interview / on the spot report / audio / pictures / video (4)
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Ties to Social Movements

No social movements mentioned	Social movements (mainstream political)	Social movements ('lifeworld')
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Grassroots Participation

Professional journalist or government official	Citizen journalist
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The second and third categories (social movement ties and grassroots participation) seek only to identify possible article variations. The first category, on the other hand, contains an implicit hierarchy of “journalistic-ness” and thus results in an overall “traditional journalism score” for each website, ranging from 0 (the least like traditional journalism) to 4 (the most like traditional journalism). In other words, reprinting an already-published article on a participatory journalistic website is considered to be “less in the spirit of journalism” than contributing an article that undertakes original commentary and analysis ... which is itself less “journalistic” than engaging in on the spot reporting.¹

¹ I acknowledge the potential criticism that talking about “traditional journalistic practices” sounds somewhat old-fashioned in an era of hybrid, digital media. I also accept the criticism that definitions of “traditional journalism” are culturally constructed and vary, to some degree, across the borders of nation-states. My idea of “traditional journalism” is not in and of itself a normative concept; rather, it is a crude attempt to *operationalize*, for comparative purposes, a certain set of normative principles that define the self-understanding of professional journalists in the United States.

Below are examples passages that might be included in each of the four journalistic categories:

Announcement: “The Bakersfield Sierra Club’s monthly breakfast meeting will be held Saturday, April 2, at 8:30 a.m. at the Jungle Café, located at 700 Truxtun Ave.”
(from the *Northwest Voice*)

Post-Event Press Release: (Labeled as official release, directly from organization): “Anti-poverty campaigners today claimed victory as UK water company, Biwater Plc, announced it has withdrawn from the bidding process for a controversial water privatisation in Ghana.” (from *Indymedia UK*)

Commentary and Analysis: “The idea of a weak U.S. dollar is a trade promotion tool, an unofficial ‘steroid’ support stand of the Bush administration, despite its ‘strong dollar’ policy.” (from *Ohmynews*)

On the Ground Reporting: “The march was well attended for a Northern march. A few hundred of us in attendance, we started off with speeches from various people, followed by a slow march from the town centre to the Covance site where we had more speeches and generally hang around.” (from *Indymedia UK*)

By itself, a quantitative content analysis is insufficient to establish a websites adherence to categories like “journalistic norms,” “ties to social movements,” and “grassroots participation.” A complete study of the participatory journalistic field would include in-depth interviews with its practitioners, intensive ethnographic research, and incorporate Cameron Marlow’s insights into “on-line authority.” (Marlow 2004) Given space restrictions, I limit my additional qualitative analysis to a brief examination of the “site architecture” of Wikinews, Ohmynews, UK Indymedia, and the Northwest Voice. By looking at the layout of the different websites we can gain additional insight into the ways that each participatory journalistic enterprise visualizes both its mission and its users.

Grassroots Journalism: Mission and Self-Understanding

How do grassroots journalists define who they are and what they do? Any adequate understanding of participatory journalism as a field would need to grasp both how its actors view themselves and how they view the other actors in their field. Field analysis is inherently *inter-subjective*; that is, it seeks to determine relationships between various social agents. I have refrained from conducting interviews or gathering the kind of ethnographic data that would help me construct a relational description of the participatory journalistic field, so for the time being, I largely rely on an analysis of the mission statements of the four participatory journalistic organizations that were the object of my study.

Indymedia UK

The worldwide independent media center movement was born on the streets of Seattle during 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO). (Downing 2003) Convinced that the corporate press would neither cover the anti-globalization protests accurately nor give adequate voice to those opposing corporate globalization, activists created their own, web-based media network through which anyone could, via a process of ‘open publishing,’ publish photos, text, and video about the protests to the website. Following in the wake of anti-globalization protests that were, in the early years of the 21st century, spreading from trade summit to trade summit, Independent Media Centers (IMC’s) proliferated. By early 2000, permanent IMC’s were being established to provide coverage of local activist struggles, apart from and addition to the mushrooming anti-globalization protests. By April 2005 there were over 160 Independent Media Centers on six continents, one of which was located in the United Kingdom (<http://www.indymedia.co.uk>).

In late 1999, with a number of technical barriers still in place that discouraged individual publishing on the Internet, the concept of “open publishing” was a major theoretical plank within Indymedia’s larger mission. According to Matthew Arinson:

Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available. Those stories are filtered as little as possible to help the readers find the stories they want. (Arinson 2001)

Other Indymedia partisans simply echoed the words of punk singer Jello Biafra: “don’t hate the media, be the media.”

True to the circumstances behind its founding, the United Kingdom IMC mission statement grounds its exhortation to “be the media” in a commitment to activism. The editors of UK IMC emphasize the participatory journalistic aspects of the site—“the content of the Indymedia UK website is created through a system of open publishing: anyone can upload a written, audio and video report or a picture directly to the site through an openly accessible web interface”—but precede the invitation to publish with this statement about Indymedia’s goals:

The Indymedia UK website provides an interactive platform for reports from the struggles for a world based on freedom, cooperation, justice and solidarity, and against environmental degradation, neoliberal exploitation, racism and patriarchy. The reports cover a wide range of issues and social movements - from neighbourhood campaigns to grassroots mobilisations, from critical analysis to direct action. (Indymedia UK)

One can reasonably expect that the journalistic content of the UK IMC will not be “balanced” in any traditional sense. At the same time, however, the political passions of those who agree with UK IMC’s mission statement may encourage them to “commit more journalism.” The fact that Indymedia was born in the act of providing actual on-the-ground coverage also distinguishes it organizationally from many “weblogs,” which see their mission as providing commentary and analysis to supplements the reporting of more traditional journalists.

Ohmynews

Like Indymedia, Ohmynews was also born out of political struggle, in this case, the battle to elect the first liberal President of South Korea in over forty years. According to Ohmynews founder Oh Yeon Ho, OhmyNews is widely credited with rallying Korean voters in the final days of the 2002 presidential election, “aiding then-underdog liberal candidate Roh Moo Hyun to get elected with its nonstop reporting of a last minute crisis in which Roh's election partner, Chung Mong Joon, suddenly withdrew his support.” (Thacker 2004) And like Indymedia, Ohmynews links to the empowerment of citizen journalists and progressive political change to the same radical social struggle. According to the Ohmynews mission statement:

The traditional newspaper inherently has two limits: time and space. That's why only professional journalists can write articles for the papers. But Internet media can overcome these two barriers ... By means of the Internet, OhmyNews created a two-way journalism. The readers are no longer passive. They can be reporters anytime they want. The main concept of OhmyNews is "Every citizen is a reporter." Journalists aren't some exotic species, they're everyone who has news stories and shares them with others. (Ohmynews)

Or, as blogger and citizen journalism guru Dan Gillmor puts it:

Ohmynews has shaken up the journalism and political establishments ... by melding 20th century tradition—the journalism as lecture model, in which organizations tell the audience what the news is and the audience either buys it or doesn't—into something bottom-up, interactive, and democratic. (Gillmor 2004, 126)

Of course, there are many differences between Indymedia UK and Ohmynews, despite the similarities in their philosophical conception of the changing role of journalism. For starters, while posting to Indymedia is completely anonymous, “citizen reporters” with Ohmynews register themselves and provide personal identification information to the sites directors. Ohmynews is largely funded through advertising. Finally, citizen journalists working with Ohmynews submit themselves to both light

editing and fact-checking—a process conspicuously absent on Indymedia UK.

“Unfortunately, it is unlikely that all of your stories will be accepted as OhmyNews articles,” note site editors.

OhmyNews International editors will read through your stories, fact-checking them and editing for style, making them more polished for your readers. If your story doesn't make it to the main page, it will remain in the database and viewable to all as a 'Saengnamu' article. (Ohmynews)

We can see that while both sites emphasize the political aspects of their mission, the ideology of Ohmynews is rather more traditional” than that of Indymedia, with its acceptance of registration procedures, editing, and advertising dollars.

Wikinews

On the face of it, Wikinews the same mission as Ohmynews and Indymedia:

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 ... We seek to promote the idea of the *citizen journalist*, because we believe that everyone can make a useful contribution to painting the big picture of what is happening in the world around us. The time has come to create a free news source, by the people and for the people. (Wkinews)

At the same time, however, the Wikinews project differs in at least one significant way—it embraces a “neutral point of view policy” (NPOV). Whereas Indymedia and Ohmynews both revel in their biases-- “Indymedia UK does not attempt to take an objective and impartial standpoint,” the IMC mission statement notes—Wikinews holds fast to notions of journalistic objectivity. “The neutral point of view policy states that one should write articles without bias, representing all views fairly,” writes Wikinews. “The

policy says that an article should fairly represent all, and not make an article state, imply, or insinuate that any one side is correct.”

In some interviews, Wikinews organizers specifically contrast their mission to that of Indymedia. “At Wikipedia, we have very, very strong neutral policy,” says Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales.

We call it a neutral point of view, and it's really one of the central organizing principles of everything we do, including the news project. Unlike some other grassroots journalism type of projects like Indymedia, which is a very far left type of thing written by activists, we strive to be a neutral, high-quality source of basic information. (Interview with Jimbo Wales)

In the same interview, Wales highlights some of the possibilities and limitations of grassroots journalism:

I don't really see how we could take over the mainstream media. One of the things they can do well that we can't do is send a trusted reporter out to the Ukraine, for example, and get a report back that can be trusted. We're not going to be able to send people places. *We can rely on people who are local, but if we don't know who they are, then we can't trust them as sources.* Because typically, people who would be attracted to writing original reports would tend to be activists, not necessarily journalists. (*ibid*)

Unlike Indymedia, which allows for complete anonymity amongst its posters, and Ohmynews, which restricts its anonymity somewhat but still seems to provide web space to people it does not know, Wikinews emphasizes the problems raised by allowing strangers to contribute grassroots journalism. Can readers believe the journalism these contributors produce, especially if they are obviously biased to favor of certain political positions?

At the same time, while restricting the range of its journalistic input, Wikinews makes its editorial process highly transparent. The changes made to each and every Wikinews articles are viewable online, and one can scroll through the different versions

of a story to see how they changed and the degree to which the different changes adhere to the NPOV policy. In all respects, Wikinews' primary mission seems to be that of building trust: by limiting first-hand reports, Wikinews can remove potential confusion regarding the veracity of an article while at the same time allowing its editorial process to be completely open.

The Northwest Voice

On the face of it, The Northwest Voice resembles nothing more than a traditional, local newspaper. Indeed, that's how it began. As *Wired* described it:

A small California newspaper has undertaken a first-of-its-kind experiment in participatory journalism in which nearly all the content published in a regularly updated online edition and a weekly print edition is submitted by community members. It's all free. Following in the footsteps of past community journalism projects that sought to give individuals a voice in local news, as well as the growing trend in news-like blogs, The Northwest Voice is giving residents of Bakersfield's northwest neighborhoods near-total control of content.

The Northwest Voice is somewhat unique insofar as it is an example of what Dan Gillmor and others call "hyperlocal" grassroots media-- a website specifically geared towards the input and needs of a geographically localized community, usually a small suburb. "The Northwest Voice welcomes all contributions from the community," notes the site's online submission form, "including articles, pictures, information about community events, letters to the editor and most anything else you'd like to share." Site editor Mary Lou Fulton explains:

In our community, people immediately liked the idea of a neighborhood publication, but they didn't get the content model at first. We'd explain about how we wanted people in the community to write all the articles, and inevitably we'd hear, "OK, but can you come out to cover my event?" And we'd politely say, "No, but if you'd like to write something up, we'd be glad to publish it." I think it

simply had never occurred to many people that such participation was possible. It's interesting and exciting to see passive consumers turn into active participants, which is exactly what we want. (The Northwest Voice)

Beyond simply hoping that area residents would stumble onto the site and start contributing, Fulton and others recruited an "advance team" of important community members to provide journalistic content-- school superintendents and principals, leaders of parent-teacher organizations, and pastors. As of July 2004, 50% of the sites content was coming from this core group, with another 25% being submitted by paid staff and 10% by everyday area residents. The advance team concept also helped militate against the fears expressed by Wales and other Winkews editors regarding the problem of trust. "Most of our community contributions come from 'trusted' individuals like school teachers, youth sports coaches and ministers," Fulton told Cyberjournalism.net, "so we don't feel the need to double-check on everything they write. If we receive contributions regarding a public controversy, we do make sure the facts are correct but the presentation of the information is entirely up to the individual."

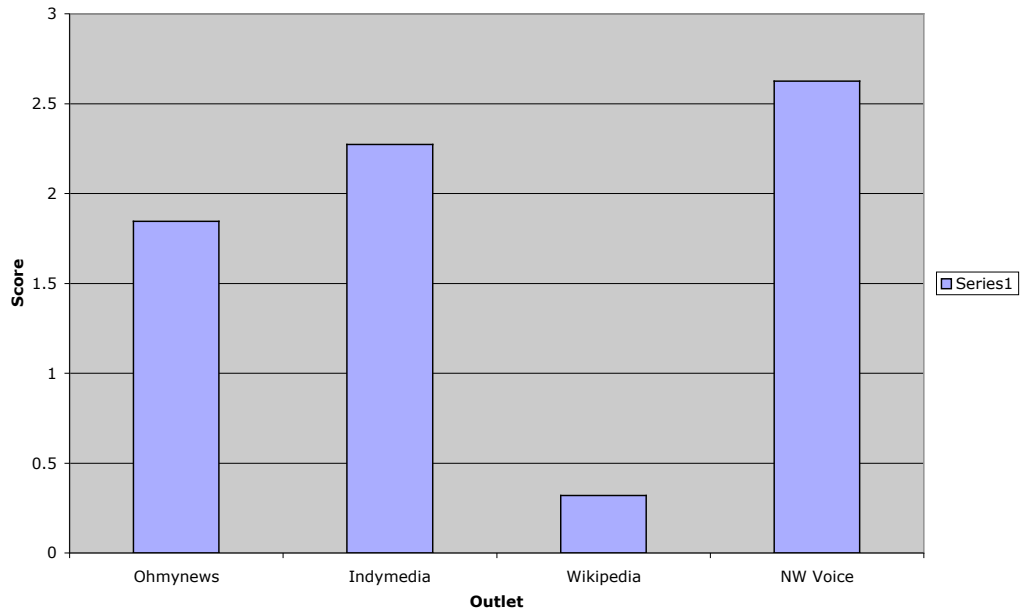
When asked to elaborate upon her vision of participatory journalism, Fulton couched her response in the rhetoric of democracy:

The open source model offers us a new way to connect with readers, to better understand their worries and joys, and to enable them to share some of themselves with the world. It gives readers a personal and emotional stake in our products, and I believe that is critical to the future of our industry. ("Interview With Mary Fulton")

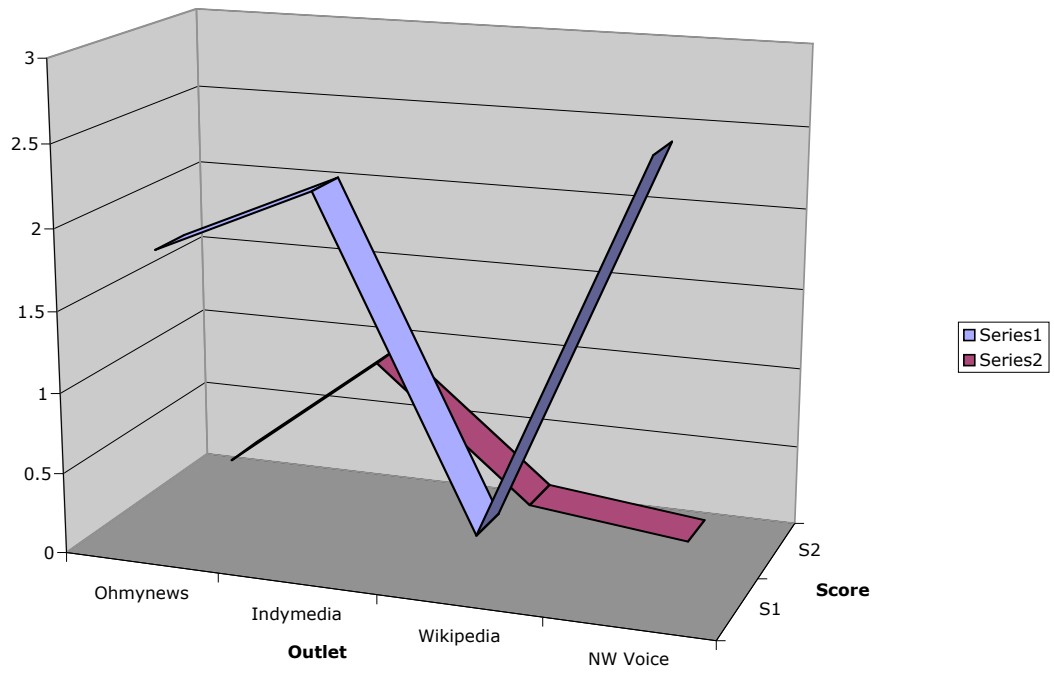
Having examined the mission statements of four grassroots journalism websites, I now turn to an overview of the results of my content analysis. What kind of articles are these sites actually producing?

		<u>Ohmynews</u> 1.846	<u>Indymedia</u> 2.273	<u>Wikipedia</u> .320	<u>NW Voice</u> 2.625
<u>Journalistic Norms</u>					
	<i>Reprint</i>	46.2%	10.9%	92.0%	0
	<i>Announcement</i>	0%	32.8%	0%	43.8%
	<i>PR (Post-Event)</i>	3.8%	4.7%	0%	0
	<i>Commentary / Analysis</i>	23.1%	18.7%	0%	6.3%
	<i>Reporting</i>	26.9%	32.8%	8.0%	50.0%
<u>References to Politics</u>					
	<i>No Link</i>	76.9%	2.3%	82.7%	93.8%
	<i>Political Activity</i>	11.5%	13.3%	6.7%	0%
	<i>Radical Activity</i>	15.4%	84.4%	10.7%	6.3%
<u>Participatory Nature</u>					
	<i>Other (paid reporter, etc)</i>	63.0%	14.1%	92.0%	25.0%
	<i>Grassroots Journalist</i>	37.0%	85.9%	8.0%	75.0%

Journalistic Score



Journalistic Score and Radical Connections



Content Analysis: Results

First, some general comments about the results of my content analysis before I examine each of the four sites individually.

Before I began my analysis of site content, I hypothesized that there would be a positive correlation between political content and “traditional journalism score.” In other words, the more political the content of a website, the more its users would be driven to devote their time and energy to it. Whatever else it is, journalism, classically defined, is *work*. It takes time—often, a lot of time. Unpaid journalists will be more likely to engage in this kind of work if they are helping to advance a political cause they believe in.

This hypothesis turned out to be incorrect. Or rather, it was correct for three of the websites examined (UK Indymedia, Wikinews, and Ohmynews) but the content of the Northwest Voice undermined my basic belief. The Northwest Voice was simultaneously the most participatory and least political of all four sites. Reasons for this will be examined shortly.

The posts on most sites appeared to correlate strongly to the mission of that site. For example, Indymedia UK had a large number of posts by political activists, while the Northwest Voice was entirely local in character. It is interesting to speculate, however, what might happen to the Northwest Voice should Bakersfield enter a highly politically charged period. For example, what if corruption in the mayors’ office was uncovered or if there was a terrorist strike on Sacramento? Would there be a rash of political postings? And would those who maintain the site tolerate them? Only additional research, particularly interviews with the founders and maintainers of these websites, can answer these questions.

I now turn to a more in-depth of the content of each of the four websites.

Indymedia UK

Most of the journalism found on the Indymedia UK website centered around protests on the second anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. A number of grassroots journalists posted pictures and video of marches and speakers. A typical report about an anti-war protest march goes something like this:

An eyewitness account of today's antiwar demonstration in London, followed by a brief restaurant review, then a synopsis and diagnosis. Here's what happened: Started off in Hyde Park, with a temperature in the early 20s Celsius, bright sun and a mild breeze. Ranks of vans were situated about the place, especially up near the Marble Arch. The march stretched back to some distant end of Hyde Park that I didn't care to amble down to. (Indymedia UK)

These numerous reports were eventually collected and turned into a “center column feature” by UK IMC editors. I will describe editorial features on Indymedia UK shortly. For now, sufficed it so say that more than 32% of the material posted to IMC UK from March 20 to March 24 2005 was some type of firsthand reporting.

An equal amount of material (32.8%), however, was in the form of pre-event announcements or press releases. For instance, a March 21 article began: “Birmingham Indymedia Cinema presents a screening of "Trading Freedom: the secret life of the FTAA" and “Workers Without Bosses” on Tuesday 22 March 2005 at the Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham.” Another posting read: “social change philosopher and activist Joanna Macy will be visiting Oxford to give a talk and lead a two day workshop in May 2005. She is an author, scholar and spiritual teacher who has been active worldwide in movements for peace, justice and deep ecology.” One can assume that these announcements were designed to increase awareness about particular activist events. We can see that Indymedia’s identity as both journalistic endeavor and movement facilitator is reflected in the equal number of postings devoted to news and to movement building. The remaining third of the articles were roughly evenly split between reprints, post-event press releases, and original commentary and analysis.

Ohmynews

As we saw in the introduction, Ohnynews is generally seen as a model for many grassroots media sites around the world. It was certainly one of the earliest, most popular, and most powerful grassroots journalism websites. With that power, however, Ohmynews international seems to have retreated somewhat from its original participatory ethos. More than half of the content found on Ohmynews international is either original

reporting (26.9%) or commentary and analysis (23.1%). That said, however, only 37% of Ohmynews content was contributed by grassroots journalists; U.S or Japanese academics, business executives, or Korean government ministers wrote much of the remaining 63%.

For example, an article, “Can Europe Help Break N.Korea Impasse?” was jointly written by a Labour Party member of the European Parliament, and a postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University's Asia-Pacific Research Center. Many other important articles are reprints of summaries of reports released by the European NGO Human Rights Watch. And as part of its coverage of the Dokdo Island crisis, Ohmynews featured a statement from the South Korean government that was prefaced with this editorial note:

In a statement last Thursday, the South Korean government said that Japan's claim to a small cluster of islands called Dokdo, off Korea's east coast, is "not simply a territorial issue" but denies Korea's national sovereignty. The move is a "justification of aggression," it added. (Ohmynews)

Indeed, much of the truly grassroots journalistic content on Ohmynews seems specifically confined to movie reviews, travel reviews, and other “lifestyle” content. This post, for example, was written by an American teacher of English living in Japan:

Spring has come to Japan and winter has been pushed out the seasonal door. And I say good riddance, for even though I like winter and snow, I'm afraid if it were to last any longer I might be tempted to try snowboarding again. Weeks after the attempt I still feel aches and pain from this self-inflicted Spanish Inquisition of winter sports. (Ohmynews)

There is nothing inherently “wrong” with lifestyle journalism. Nevertheless, one begins to detect a pattern when that style journalism represents the bulk of grassroots coverage on a purportedly participatory website.

Finally, there is a special section on the Ohmynews website titled “Talkback,” which is prefaced by the headline “Join the Ranks of Global Citizen Reporters.” The vast majority of the Talkback postings during the period in which I examined the website, however, were reposts from the one of the major Korean daily newspapers. I will have

more to say about the Talkback section when I discuss the architecture of the Ohmynews website.

Wikinews

Of all the grassroots journalism websites examined, Wikinews was the most disappointing. Indeed, it is probably accurate to say that, so far, Wikinews is not really even in the participatory journalism business; rather, it is doing something more along the lines of “grassroots editing.” 92% of the articles on Wikinews during the period examined were combined reprints of articles from various other major news outlets like the BBC, the AP, and the New York Times. Only 8% of the articles I looked at were first person reports; one reported on a recent earthquake in Japan, a second discussed the conversion of a landmark Cambridge gas station into a Hess station, while a third reported how a woman in Wendy’s found a human finger in her chili. Indeed, over the course of Wikinews’ brief career, there have only been 25 grassroots journalism stories out of the hundreds published.

Much of this can probably be attributed to the extraordinary difficulty in practicing grassroots journalism under the current Wikinews model. For example, a “first person” article about the possible eruption of Mt. St. Helens in early March was headlined “Ash and Steam Reported Over Mt. St. Helens.” A second Wikinews contributor immediately asked “who saw this? I can’t tell from looking at the article? Who is this mysterious Wikinews correspondent?” A third Wikiuser asked “how can Wikinews claim that someone reporting for Wikinews is a firsthand witness without attributing that report to someone with a name?” Of course, one could conceivably encounter the same questions on any of the grassroots site I examined; nevertheless, a certain type of “web culture” has grown up around these sites in which firsthand posts are generally either accepted as accurate or are disputed through the articles comments section. For some reason, Wikinews seems to be the exception to this culture of trust.

One blogger attributes the problem to differences between running an encyclopedia and running a news site:

A collaborative news service is a different creature than a collaborative

encyclopedia ... If people are motivated to engage in DIY media, they mostly want to talk about themselves and their lives. In the 1980s, these people did personal zines. Now they run blogs. Finding people to volunteer time to write collaborative journalism is just very hard. This is one of the huge factors working against the Wiki News project. (“Problems With Wikinews”)

A second blogger takes aim at Wiki’s much touted Neutral Point of View Policy:

“One potential pitfall of Wikipedia's NPOV philosophy is that the goal of neutrality makes it very difficult to write articles that make politically contentious fact-based conclusions ... If a NPOV philosophy is unwilling to "adjudicate factual disputes," then it only seems to be raising the amount of ‘informational uncertainty.’” (“What’s Wrong With Wiki”)

One way to avoid the pitfalls of having to “adjudicate factual disputes” (and this seems to be the road taken by Wikinews so far) is to concentrate largely on summarizing the products of already existing news media. Wikipedian John Kearney may be right when he writes: “god, these articles on controversial topics that devolve into a polemical essay by one side, followed by a refuting polemical essay by the other side, are tiresome.” (*ibid*) But so far, the alternative produced by Wikinews offers little that a savvy news consumer cannot obtain from other, already existing, non-grassroots news sources.

A final note in what has, unfortunately, been a largely negative overview. Even Wiki News’s NPOV policy and its heavy reliance upon professionally produced media do not guarantee that it will avoid substantial errors of fact. Indeed, it may be more prone to them if its sources are consistently wrong. For example, a March 24 story, drawing on Xinhua, the New York Times, and NDTV, reported that “Iraqi and American forces raided a training camp in a remote, rural region 160 kilometers north of Baghdad on Wednesday, killing 85 insurgents.” The story of the attack on Lake Tharthar has since been largely discredited (see, for example Washington Post, Village Voice) and yet the archive of the Wiki story remains untouched. One of the advantages to grassroots media sites should be their ability to provide nuance that the mainstream media cannot, or at least engage in a conversation about these more mainstream products; if grassroots media

are overly dependant upon already existing sources, however, they can become little more than an echo of already crafted news.

The Northwest Voice

The biggest surprise that I came across during my content analysis of the four grassroots journalism sites was probably the Northwest Voice. It contained the largest percentage of “journalistic” articles, and it was also by far the least political. Its contributors wrote about new high school gyms, cheerleading contests, and music recitals. In short, the Northwest Voice resembled that which it had replaced: the small town newspaper.

Although a fairly high percentage of the articles on the Northwest Voice were announcements (43.8%), almost half of them were straight out reporting. True, this reporting was rather banal. In an article entitled “Norris Welcomes New Gym,” the local school superintendent Wallace McCormick proudly described the reaction of students as they entered their “real gym”: “as the students entered the gym there were many exclamations of ‘Wow!’ and ‘This is cool.’ Each advisory class selected a male and female student to try half-court shots with a basketball. Three shots were actually made.” A second article on March 21 regaled readers with lunch stories from Fruitvale Junior High. “Meet the lunch ladies and learn what the right ingredients are for packing a healthy lunch from home,” the story promised.

Compared to anti-war protests, these subjects seem mundane. How did reporting about such trivial occurrences attract such a high degree of participation? And why did the Northwest Voice invalidate our initial hypothesis, which posited that a website’s levels of grassroots participation would directly correlate with its degree of political engagement? The two answers are related. In a sense, our initial speculation that people would be more willing to “commit journalism” if they were writing about subjects they cared deeply about was not wrong, we simply had too narrow a definition about what it is that “people care about.” People do not just care about just political protests and the World Bank; many of them care, and indeed, care far more, about their news high school gym or about local cheerleading competitions. The stories in the Northwest Voice probably appear, to many of the residents in Bakersfield, to have a larger impact on their

everyday lives than events in Iraq, Accordingly, these stories mean a great deal to those who produce them. In short: Americans still love their local news, whether they consume it or, increasingly, report it.

Analysis of Website Architecture

By itself, a content analysis is insufficient to establish a websites adherence to categories like “journalistic norms,” “ties to social movements,” and “grassroots participation.” To supplement this analysis I examine of the “site architecture” of Wikinews, Ohmynews, UK Indymedia, and the Northwest Voice. By looking at the layout of the different websites we can gain additional insight into the ways that each participatory journalistic enterprise conceives its mission and its users. As Beczkowski writes:

Processes of media choice and interface design can be, at least partly, understood by looking at the *inscription of a vision of the user* ... In Akrich’s terms, in the very fabric of what they create, designers “inscribe” by whom and how an artifact will be used.

How do the various architecture choices employed by the website designers of Indymedia UK, Ohmynews, Wikinews, and the Northwest Voice “inscribe their vision the user?” How does this vision of the user supplement our content analysis?

Indymedia UK is a network of individuals, independent and alternative media activists and organisations, offering grassroots, non-corporate, non-commercial coverage of important social and political issues.

INDYMEDIA@UK

Skip Nav | Home | Editorial Guidelines | Mission Statement | About Us | Contact | Help | Support Us

Kollektives
Cambridge
Leeds Bradford
Liverpool
London
Manchester
Oxford
Scotland
Sheffield
South Coast
West Country
World
Other UK IMCs
Bristol
Scotland

Breaking news
16-03-2005 15:15 Computers owned by activist legal defence staff working on the Genoa G8 trials have been seized by police in Genoa, Italy outside an unrelated activist trial.

14-03-2005 14:22 | [Anti-racism](#) | [Repression](#) | [Cambridge](#)

Corp Media Watch :: Sun Starts Hate Campaign Against Travellers

The Sun started a campaign on Wednesday the 9th of March to "stop (the) Gypsy invasion". One front page was followed by another, which claimed mass popular support for their racist ramblings. By the second day the Daily Mail had caught up on this incursion onto their own home ground and come out with their own headline.

Previous coverage: [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6]

[Read more](#) | 18 comment(s) >>

10-03-2005 00:01 | [G8 2005](#) | [Ecology](#) | [Globalisation](#) | [London](#) | [South Coast](#)

Protests Planned At G8 Ministerial Meetings

Publish Your News

Calendar - Announce an Event

EVENTS COVERAGE:

UK
17th March Derby: G8 Environment Ministers Protest
19th March UK Anti-War Day of Action | PGA Call for Actions
2nd April Manchester Demonstrate Against Deportations
6-10th April Lanarkshire Festival of Dissent!
15-17th June Sheffield: G8 Justice and Home Affairs Meeting
2-8 July 2005: Gleneagles, Scotland: G8 Summit Protests | Dissent! | G8 Alternatives | Make Poverty History | Links and Resources

EUROPE
2nd April Pan-Continental Day of Action Against Detention Centers and Deportations

AMERICAS

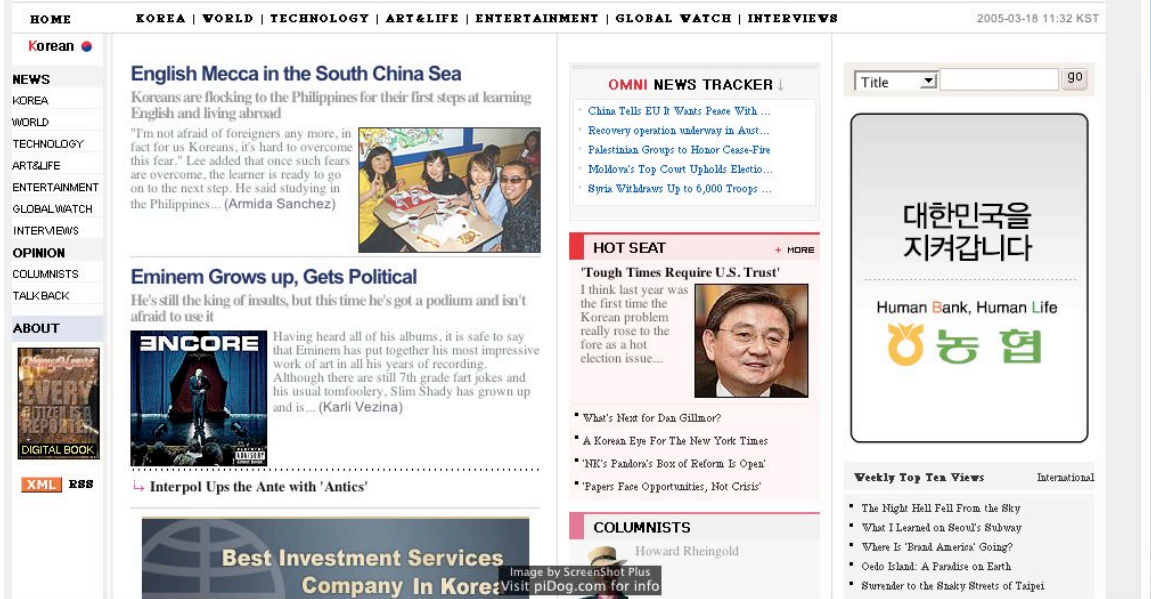
Image by Screenshot Plus
Visit piDog.com for info

Indymedia UK is divided into three columns, and is dominated by a center column. This center column which functions as a “feature” page, and allows volunteer site editors to collect thematically-related or important stories that grassroots journalists post to the website. The left-hand column contains the IMC “cities list,” a list of more than 200 formally recognized IMC sites around the world. The right-hand column is topped a list of upcoming protest events, and is followed further down the page by the IMC “open newswire,” which is where grassroots journalists submit their stories, in reverse chronological order. Above the right-hand column is a large grey box that reads: “publish your news.”

Several points: first, there are no ads on the site. Secondly, its function as an activist portal is trumpeted by its list of protest events at the top of the right-hand column, while the importance it gives to its status as a worldwide-network is shown by the relatively large amount of screen space that it devotes to the other cities that are a part of Indymedia. A fourth point concerns the prominent placement of the “publish your news” button, immediately making clear that the site allows anyone and everyone to contribute.

Finally, this relative openness to participation is somewhat compromised by the dominance of the center (or “editor’s”) column. Despite the fact that grassroots

journalists contributed 85% of Indymedia's articles, many of these journalists are dependent on site editors for the highlighting of their stories. In other words: on the IMC UK website, all stories are equal, but some stories are more equal than others (the stories that the volunteer editors think are important). A number of internal policies—both written and cultural—strive to limit this power differential; nevertheless, it would be naïve to deny its existence. At the same time, however, it is possible to argue that the relative “flatness” of most of the IMC site-- the prominent placement of the publish button, the listing of stories in reverse chronological order, etc.— combined with the wide diversity in its content, necessitates some degree of editorial control. We will explore this idea more when we turn to the Northwest Voice.



Ohmynews embraces both a four-column site layout and a relatively complex hierarchy of news-value. Unlike the Indymedia website, there is no one section of the site that automatically draws the eye of the first time viewer. Different sections include feature stories, the “hot seat” (a featured interview), the week’s top viewed stories, featured columnists (presumably on staff), and the reader “talkback” section. As one can see, the talkback section is “below the digital fold” and does not call any great attention to itself.

The layout of Ohmynews provides additional evidence that the site is downplaying its participatory roots. As I noted, the section in which viewers are invited to contribute is neither well placed nor especially noticeable. There is no single “button” that asks readers to contribute; instead, a budding grassroots journalist has to wade through several pages of text before they reach the content-submission form. In addition, the works of the website’s paid columnists are prominently displayed. While Ohmynews continues to call itself participatory, there can be little doubt that this fact is not immediately apparent to first-time site visitors.



Wikinews' is probably the most elegant of the four websites I examined, especially in comparison to the particularly text-heavy Indymedia and Ohmynews. The site echoes the Indymedia design, embracing a three-column layout with a single, “featured” story and additional stories below the fold. The right hand column allows readers to browse stories by subject, and highlights a list of breaking material as well as stories that are currently in violation of the NPOV policy. The right hand column also features useful news like the weather and global stock market reports. The left hand column provides additional information about the purpose and mission of Wkinews.

In its relative simplicity, Wikinews is both clean and easy on the eye. Wikinews also clearly announces its mission and the fact that it aims to be a site for participatory, grassroots journalism; the top banner tells visitors that the site is a “free content news source that you can edit.” The site’s registration system, however, is a bit more complicated, and the manner by which one actually becomes a Wikinews contributor or editor is not spelled out clearly anywhere on the front page. Like Indymedia but unlike Ohnnews, there are no advertisements immediately visible on the Wikinews website.



Share your voice
Share your news and photos with others in the community. [Click here](#) to find out how.

Giving a voice to Northwest Bakersfield

MARCH 2005 EVENT CALENDAR						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

Thursday, March 17, 2005 - Welcome

[Help](#) | [My Profile](#) | [Log in](#)

search for...

- Home
- News
- Schools
- Youth Sports
- Community Photos
- Letters
- Columnists
- Celebrations
- Events Calendar
- Church News
- Bulletin Board
- Community Links
- Local Businesses
- Classifieds
- Submit an Article
- Advertise
- Contact Us
- About Us
- Rack Locations
- Print Editions

Most Viewed Stories

Dinner on the run

Northwest residents turn to takeout and meal preparation services.

A Vet's Voice: Tragic chimpanzee event holds lessons about wild animals

Wild animals are not suitable as pets, period.

Outdoor Life: Go on an off-roading trip than includes wildflower viewing

Keyesville has a boatload of single track motorcycle and bike trails.

Editor's Picks

Outdoor Life: Go on an off-roading trip than includes wildflower viewing

Keyesville has a boatload of single track motorcycle and bike trails.

A Vet's Voice: Tragic chimpanzee event holds lessons about wild animals

Wild animals are not suitable as pets, period.

School Zone: Hints for last-minute cramming and long-term studying

Tips for coping with test jitters.



Dinner on the run

Most Recent Postings

Giant Easter Egg Extravaganza and Hot Dog Lunch

by *Mardi Yeary, Brimhall Road Assembly of God*, posted 3/16/2005 11:16:00 AM

Free giant egg hunt and hot dog lunch - age-divided hunts from 1 to 12 years old. Free photos with the Easter Bunny, live music, face painting, bounce houses and kiddie train rides. For more information, call 589-5254.

Local Expert: All businesses need insurance

by *Jim Windes, State Farm agent*, posted 3/16/2005 11:07:00 AM

All business owners need insurance to protect them from financial disaster.

New in the Neighborhood for March 17

by *Lauren Ward, Northwest Voice Editor*, posted 3/16/2005 Image by ScreenShot Plus
Grandpa's Farm opens, M.A.R.E. faces obstacle in [Visit-piDog.com](#) for info

ADVERTISING

Valley Baptist Church
We invite you to join us for Pastor Roger's new ten week series, "Attitude Adjustments."

Fitness Connexion
Join now and save during our Spring Special!

Performance Automotive
Come and visit our new State of the Art location in Rosedale.

Olive Drive Church
Join us on Good Friday for an interactive service of worship & discovery.

Rosedale Bible Church
People just like you are discovering Rosedale Bible Church. Visit us

Like Indymedia UK the Northwest Voice clearly invites its readers to participate, with a visible "share your Voice" button dominating the top of the page. The Northwest voice also utilizes a three-column layout, although the content of these columns differ little the content of a more traditional newspaper. The right column is composed entirely of classified ads, while the left column is made up of category headings that echo those found in a normal paper: "letters," classifieds," "church news," and so on.

Although the top of the center column is largely constructed by the site's editor (with its "editors picks" and "most viewed stories") the hierarchy between editor and contributor is much less noticeable than it is on the Indymedia UK website. Indeed, the function of the "open newswire" on Indymedia UK is transported to the center column of the Northwest Voice, with every story, in effect, featured, even those that consist of a single line or picture. I suspect that this can be attributed to the relative infrequency of reader contributions (the Northwest Voice receives between 2 to 5 gets a day while Indymedia UK gets between 10 and 50) as well as the fact that the stories sent to the Northwest Voice are generally all the same. Because it is so unfrontational and community focused, in other words, there is much less need for the site's editors to separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to the posting of news.

From the above overview I hope we can see ways in which the layout of a website both reinforces and contradicts the data we obtained during our content analysis. In many ways, the design of a website also crystallizes the assumptions, both about mission and about readership that I discussed earlier in my overview of organizational mission statements.

Summary of Findings

Drawing together our analysis of mission statements, our content analysis, and our website architecture overview, what general conclusions can we draw with regard to the state of the participatory journalistic field?

Grassroots media outlets are committed, at least theoretically, to the de-professionalization of journalism.

Despite the wide variation in political and ideological perspectives, all four websites—Indymedia OK, Ohmynews, Wikinews, the Northwest Voice—were convinced days of the professional journalist were numbered. At the very least, these sites believed that there was now room in the journalistic dialog for amateurs, storytellers, and ordinary citizens. At the most extreme, journalists were denounced as “agents of modernity”—privileged and out-of-touch representatives of a pseudo-scientific caste whose time was running out.

The commonly accepted notion that there is little original reporting on the Internet, defined in the traditional sense, was incorrect.

With the exception of Wikinews, contributors to all four sites did more than simply link to already written news stories and comment on them—they “committed journalism,” filing on the spot reports, conducting interviews, and taking pictures. Of course, the question of whether this journalism is *actually important for the public at large* is another question entirely, one that I address in my conclusion .

At the same time, no participatory journalistic website was either entirely participatory or entirely journalistic.

The amount of original reporting on each site ranged from 50% (Northwest Voice) to 8% (Wikinews). On average, this means that about two-thirds of the content was something else—commentary, announcements, or reprints. All four sites also had editors, either to create feature stories, to make sure content was newsworthy and factual, or to make sure it was locally relevant. Pure participatory democracy did not exist on any of the sites I examined.

The healthiest websites seemed to be those that maintained connections with 'actually existing' communities.

Organizations like Wikinews or Ohmynews that functioned largely in virtual space sometimes seemed to struggle with a democracy deficit or a lack of grassroots participation. The Northwest Voice, on the other hand, was grounded in an actually existing local community, the town of Bakersfield, California. Indymedia UK was also geographically limited (to the United Kingdom) and based within an active political community. Sites that allowed their readers to contribute journalism that had an impact on their lives seemed more likely to encourage participation than sites which aimed for neutral content.

Conclusions and Potential Future Theoretical Enquiries

Throughout this paper, I've alluded to ways in which we could expand our empirical investigations into online grassroots journalism websites. Rather than repeat those remarks here, I hope to conclude by discussing theoretical avenues for further thinking and research.

So far, we've avoided any normative discussion of the impact of grassroots journalism on the public sphere. How does the growth of grassroots media affect deliberation and the emergence of public opinion?

Historically, philosophers of the public sphere have approached the concept from two but distinct complementary perspectives. According to the classic republican, or “liberal” view, the public sphere stands as an integrating device between society and the state. Public opinion, formulated within civil society, is mediated or “transmitted” to the organs of the state via a public sphere composed of autonomous opinion transcribing organizations. Amongst theorists of the public sphere with more of a focus on the institutions of journalism, that sphere often has the secondary function of providing its citizens with the accurate information they need to in order to render proper judgment upon state conduct. On this view, the key function of journalism in the public sphere is to serve as an “accurate” conduit of both opinion and information in order to aid self-government. Jurgen Habermas,, with some modifications exemplifies this tradition.

Other theorists, coming from a more “critical” perspective, still see the public sphere as standing between the state and society. These theorists, usually operating from within a Gramscian or Foucauldian tradition, see civil society as a field of conflict that both mediates societal conflict and can serve as a “staging ground” for limited attacks on state or governmental power. Civil society, Gramsci writes,

has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to the catastrophic ‘incursions’ of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.). The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare. In war it would sometimes happen that a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy’s entire defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer perimeter (Gramsci 1999)

On this view, the key function of “revolutionary” journalism in the public sphere is to create a “counter-hegemonic force” that can facilitate a “war of position” against state power in the battle to overthrow capitalism.

How do arguments about the power or peril of alternative journalism fit into these unique but overlapping perspectives?

- **‘Trickle up’ Journalism:** Arguing that the mainstream press’ ability to faithfully mediate between the state and the public sphere is inadequate, Rosen, Gillmor, and other blogging-partisans argue that the internet will facilitate a kind of “journalism from below.” While this “trickle up journalism” will not replace the mainstream media, it will increase the sources of information that flow into the larger mainstream press. In a perfect information system, this increase in information would lead to better journalism and a more accurate picture of the public sphere. Alternative media aids the cause of “trickle-up” journalism and thus aids the cause of truth
- **Balkanization and ‘Public Sphericules’:** Seeing the proliferation of online information sources a potential threat to the health of the body politic, Cass Sunstein’s argument about the “ghettoization” of online opinion is well known. Rather than grassroots journalism aiding the cause of truth, it will sequester various social actors inside their own “mini-truths,” leading to a breakdown of deliberation and a short-circuiting of the state-public sphere conduits. Gitlin has referred to this process as the creation of “public sphericules.”
- **Fighting a “War of Position” in the Political Sphere:** Left and right-wing attitudes towards grassroots journalism often echo a Gramscian perspective, arguing less about truth than the degree to which various journalistic reports will advance a partisan position. According to this view, the goal of grassroots journalists should be to colonize the public sphere in a way that will affect the ability of various political groupings to influence or seize state power.

Although not exhaustive, these three perspectives on the relationship between grassroots journalism and the public sphere generally summarize the traditional thinking on the issue. I have argued elsewhere, however (Anderson 2005b), that we can approach these questions from additional angles if we rethink the relationship between the public sphere and the state. Drawing on anarchist theory and a radicalized philosophy of civil society, I have tried to theorize the place of the public sphere in a stateless political

system.² In other words, I ask how our normative understanding of the public sphere and grassroots journalism might change if we were to no longer envision the public sphere's primary function as the *mediation* between the state and civil society.

Within the space available, I can only gesture at possible answers to this question:

- **Creating Alternative Communities Via the Media's Ritual Function:** Rather than understanding grassroots journalism as process that does or does not provide "information," we can instead see it, a la James Carey (1989), as a ritual that connects dispersed communities together through cyberspace. Although this ritualized function of journalism has historically served to strengthen the nation-state, such a conclusion no longer automatically holds in an era of the Internet.
- **Grassroots Journalism as Concientization:** Drawing on the work of Paolo Freire and other post-Marxist theorists, Clemencia Rodriguez contends that alternative media should no longer be primarily viewed as a game-piece in battles over state and media power. Rather, she argues, engaging in the act of producing grassroots journalism can "account for the process of empowerment, conscientization, and fragmentation of power when men, women, and children gain access to and reclaim their own media." (2003) Such a perspective sees the creation of alternative media as meaningful at the individual and community level, shunting aside question of informational power at that the level of the state.
- **Local Intelligence and Gift Exchange:** Grassroots journalism can lead to the creation of "local intelligence" gleaned from localized communities and transmitted to other localized communities through a process of gift exchange. In many ways, this process echoes the utopian dreams of John Dewey, who argued that a great community, grounded in the "neighborly community"

² I actually refer less to a stateless society than I do a society in which the state is no longer seen as the *sine qua non* of political action and existence. As I discuss elsewhere, the anarchism I refer to in this paper is of a "radical reformist" variety that does not envision the immediate abolishment of the state via revolution, but rather its progressive displacement across larger and larger areas of social life

could emerge through communicative advances. My perspective, however, de-emphasizes Dewey's hopes for the creation of a national public opinion or great community, stressing instead the idea of shared intelligence at a local level. (Dewey 1991)

Regardless of whether it is more convincing to analyze grassroots journalism's impact on the public sphere through more traditional theoretical approach or my own more anarchistic lens, I hope to have at least succeeded in describing what is actually "going on online" in today's grassroots journalistic field. The area is a fertile one for additional investigation and explanation.

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