

Where is the business model for citizen journalism?



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Abstract

Citizen journalism is not stealing much of the audience from traditional journalism. To date, it has failed to find a viable business model in the sense that it does not pay for itself. Yet it threatens traditional journalism because it has the potential to fragment audiences. That means that traditional journalism is going to have to revise its values and practices. The most likely scenario is a coming together of professional journalism and user-generated content and comment. Even so, the same dilemma confronts all forms of journalism: how to access financial support for "quality".

For the past half-decade, various pundits have predicted that a combination of cheap technology, broadband access and people's desires to express their opinions would change the world of journalism. Audiences would flock to citizen journalism sites and forsake printed newspapers and the evening news bulletin, and these "traditional" mass media would atrophy. Granted, audiences for printed newspapers and network television news have declined in the western world over the past two decades, relative to population growth. But those declines have mainly been a consequence of generational change in media consumption rather than audiences' embracing of citizen journalism. Put another way, the people who read the print version of a newspaper are a different audience from the people who read the online form (Metcalfe-Smith, 2008).

Citizen journalism has fragmented the media's potential audience, but only slightly. As data later in this paper will show, citizen journalism is not stealing much of the audience from traditional journalism. A much bigger danger for traditional journalism in terms of declining audi-

ences are the so-called pure plays – for example, Google, Yahoo!, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace and Flickr – and a downturn in the world economy. It should be noted that the former are not news organisations. They aggregate news and most of that news comes from traditional media.

Why are audiences important? Because media employ the same business model around the world: they gather audiences and sell those audiences to advertisers. Advertisers go where the eyeballs go. Another potential danger for mainstream media is a reduction in advertising revenue brought about by the global financial crisis. Australia's media has benefited from a booming economy in the past decade. Between 2002 and 2007 the national advertising pie grew 42 per cent, from \$7.81 billion to \$11.09 billion, according to Fairfax Media analysts (Metcalf-Smith, 2008).

The main thrust of this paper is to suggest that citizen journalism does not have a viable business model, in the sense that it does not pay for itself. So it is not likely to have the longevity of traditional journalism. Citizen journalism poses a danger for journalism only in the sense that it fragments audiences. They represent an obscure and tiny proportion of the totality of content in the world. The real threat comes from the pure play sites, which feed off mainstream media for their content.

Citizen reporters are part of an inevitable evolution explained by media-morphosis. The history of journalism shows that mainstream media modifies itself to accommodate new arrivals. Sometimes that media even absorbs the newcomer (Fidler, 1997, p. 1-3). Television news did not kill radio news; formats changed and the two forms of reporting continue to co-exist. Radio news did not kill the daily newspaper, as pundits predicted in the 1930s. Indeed, newspaper circulations boomed in the 1940s and 1950s. Radio changed its business model to make money from advertising rather than selling radio receivers. Citizen journalism will not replace newspapers. But the printed form will change its size, frequency and nature – focusing more on analysis rather than reportage of yesterday's events (Giner, 2008).

Over the past decade audiences for newspapers have soared in Asian countries with large populations such as India, China, Indonesia and Japan (WAN, 2008). The arrival of the internet will impact on this growth. But generational change and a perceived scarcity of time, coupled with the arrival of fast broadband, are the major factors influencing audience patterns. In Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States the average age of print newspaper readers and network television news audiences, hereafter referred to as traditional media, hovers between 50 and 55 in each country. The median age in each nation as of late 2008 was, respectively, 35, 39 and 36. Audiences for traditional media in western nations have declined because younger people have not replaced the ageing population, and because of a range of options for obtaining the news. These younger demographics get their news primarily from the web (Giner, 2008). People choose web content because it is convenient – they can access news at any time – and it is free. And people can access snippets of news to fit their busy schedules.

When people go online for news, they choose the online sites of mainstream media, not blogs or citizen media sites. Nine of the top ten online sites in Australia in September 2008 consisted of four pure plays (Google, eBay, Facebook and Yahoo!; all of which aggregate news from traditional media), the technology companies Microsoft and Apple, and the online arms of traditional media companies: News Ltd, Fairfax and Telstra. The tenth was the federal government. In the United Kingdom that same month, the same pure play and technology companies dominated the online world, plus Amazon. The traditional media representatives in the top ten were the BBC, Time Warner and News Corporation. It was the same story in the United States in October 2008: The top ten online sites included the pure plays (Google, Microsoft, Yahoo!, eBay, Apple and Amazon), plus the online outlets of the traditional media: Time Warner, News Corporation, InterActiveCorp and Disney (Nielsen/NetRatings, 2008).

The sages who predicted the demise of mainstream media amid the rise of citizen journalists and bloggers forgot about the bottom line: citizen journalism does not have a viable way to pay for the journalistic content, and is therefore unsustainable. Research from O'Reilly Media in San Francisco, released in February 2008, showed 99.9 per cent of all blogs and citizen journalism sites generated fewer than 5,000 page views a month. Based on current payments rates, which average US\$7 per 1,000 views, this means almost all citizen journalism sites would earn less than US\$35 a month. By comparison, mainstream media companies have huge sources of revenue to pay for content. Many of them have introduced cost-cutting procedures to improve their bottom line. Daily newspapers also have several advantages over citizen journalism: namely, large numbers of journalists, a reputable brand, codes of ethics that enhance their reputation for professionalism, and infrastructure for selling advertising.

Research from the University of Maryland's interactive journalism program, collected in 2006 and published in 2007, found only one in five American citizen journalism sites covered their operating costs. "In the absence of revenue, most appear to be running on the owners' blood, sweat and tears," the research said. According to the Maryland survey, half of respondents (51 per cent) said money was not necessary to keep their sites running (J-Lab, 2007). It would be interesting to ask how many of them still hold to that belief in 2009 as recession and the consequences of the global financial crisis hit home. In times of crisis, audiences turn to established brands. In Australia in 2008, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation recorded its best ratings for news since television news started in 1956 (Scott, 2008). Circulations of established financial newspapers and their online sites such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Financial Times* have boomed since the global financial crisis began to bite.

OhmyNews in South Korea is often exhibited as the best example of a successful citizen journalism site, but it breaks even rather than makes a profit. OhmyNews runs a conference for international members each year in Seoul. In July 2007 the conference concluded with a panel tasked with discussing future ways to pay for citizen journalism. Panel members consisted of the cognoscenti of international citizen journalists. They concluded the broadcast model was the best available business model. Indeed, it was the only income source members of the panel could suggest (personal observation). None of the major citizen journalism organisations worldwide is making money. The OhmyNews headquarters subsidises its forays into Japan and Europe (Quinn, 2008, p. 88). Markos Moulitsas, founder of the respected blog *the Daily Kos* in the United States, said anyone starting a new blog should not expect to make a cent from advertising. "People should blog because they love to write about their chosen subject matter. That should be the only motivation because for 99.9999 per cent of bloggers, that personal satisfaction will be all the payment they will ever see" (personal observation, 2007).

The spread of broadband internet, combined with the availability of easy-to-use and relatively inexpensive tools, does mean that "the people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006) are producing and distributing various forms of journalism, entertainment and opinion. But very few of these citizens have discovered a way to make a living. The question has to be asked: how long will their sites continue as a labour of love?

Meanwhile, media-morphosis is continuing. Mainstream media have re-assessed how they cover news and how they relate to their audiences. Traditional media are embracing the audience and actively pursuing content from the audience but not paying for it. CNN introduced its "I-Report" section for audience-submitted material in August 2007. Some submissions are included in mainstream news broadcasts. By early 2008 "I-Report" was forced to expand the site to accommodate the volume of submitted material, suggesting that citizen journalists preferred to be associated with a name brand. "I-Report" offers a range of tools for helping novice reporters, called the Toolkit (Gelman, 2008).

Reuters has also established a site for accepting content from audiences, along with Yahoo!

News, CBS and the Fox network in the United States. Reuters' site is called "YouWitness" (<http://www.reuters.com/youwitness>). Yahoo! News has a training site for its audience-generated contributions called "YouWitness News". CBS dubbed its service CBSeyemobile.com. The Fox site is called "URreport".

As mainstream media embrace audience-generated content, they are changing their approach to news and modifying their structures and formats. Newspapers continue to shrink both in terms of page size and number of pages. But they will survive, in a form unknown to current practitioners. The video form of journalism will survive, probably as some hybrid of print-broadcast-online. The business model for free-to-air television news is struggling to cope with digital video recorders and technologies such as TiVO (Quinn, 2007a, p. 13). But to suggest that citizen journalism will lead to the destruction of mainstream media ignores Fidler's theory of "media-morphosis" (1997, p. 78). People still want news and information from reputable sources. They are getting it in a variety of ways, but increasingly via the web sites of mainstream media.

Audiences continue to move online

Research from Zogby International in the United States, published in March 2008, shows mainstream media are perceived as reaching an ageing and shrinking demographic. This explains the drop in the share price of newspaper companies in 2007 and 2008. Relative to other industries, the media sector in the United States fell 20 per cent more than other sectors in 2007. Almost half of respondents to the Zogby research (48 per cent) said the internet was their primary source of news and information, up from 40 per cent who nominated the Internet a year earlier. Younger adults were most likely to name the Internet as their top source: 55 per cent of people aged 18 to 29 said they got most of their news and information online, compared with 35 per cent of the 65 and older demographic.

These oldest adults are the only age group to favour a primary news source other than the Internet, with 38 per cent of these seniors who said they get most of their news from television. Overall, 29 per cent said television is their main source of news, while fewer said they turn to radio (11 per cent) and newspapers (10 per cent) for most of their news and information. Just 7 per cent of those aged 18 to 29 said they get most of their news from newspapers, while more than twice as many (17 per cent) of those aged 65 and older list newspapers as their top source of news and information. (Zogby, 2008).

As these figures above show, audiences are moving online. Advertising follows audiences. The online portion of the advertising pie in Australia jumped from 2 per cent in 2002 to 14 per cent in 2007, and was predicted to be 18 per cent in 2008 (Metcalf-Smith, 2008). Over that period, television, newspapers and radio each lost a few per cent to online. But as detailed earlier, the most popular online news sites belonged to the established brands. Sites owned by Fairfax Media, News Ltd, Channel 9 and the Fox network occupied the top nine places in the Nielsen ratings for the months of July and August 2008. Because audiences are getting more and more of their news and information online, it is understandable that mainstream media are putting their resources into online. In Australia in 2008 we have seen the demise of Channel Nine's *Sunday* program, the death of *The Bulletin* and lay-offs within Fairfax Media. But both PBL and Fairfax are recruiting for their online arms, even as they discard staff.

What is citizen journalism?

We need to agree on some definitions, to have a base line from which to operate. What is

citizen journalism? The term is nebulous and operates on several levels. At its simplest, some citizens perform the role of journalists by publishing on the internet. Journalist Mark Glaser writes the MediaShift column for America's Public Broadcasting Service web site. He described the idea behind citizen journalism as people without professional journalism training using the tools of modern technology and the global distribution medium of the internet to create, augment or fact-check media. "Because of the wide dispersion of so many excellent tools for capturing live events the average citizen can now make news and distribute it globally, an act that was once the province of established journalists and media companies." Glaser noted controversy over the concept because many professional journalists believed "only a trained journalist can understand the rigors and ethics involved in reporting the news". One of the most useful ideas behind citizen journalism is the acknowledgement that mainstream media reporters and producers are not "exclusive centres of knowledge" on a subject. The audience knows more collectively than the reporter alone, suggesting that a "pro-am" approach is likely to succeed (Glaser, 2006).

As described earlier, some traditional media organisations have embraced citizen journalism as a way to get free or cheap content, and a way to attract younger audiences. This has spawned the ugly but descriptive phrase user-generated content. At a more complex level, some traditional media partner with their audiences. Examples from South Korea, Singapore and the United States later in this paper show that this "pro-am" form of journalism appears the most successful in terms of generating audiences and revenues.

Blog is an amalgam of the words web and log. In July 2006 the Pew Internet (2006) and American Life Project released a portrait of American bloggers, based on a national telephone survey begun in November the previous year. The survey reported that blogging enabled "a new group of writers and creators to share their voices with the world". Almost half cited their life and experiences when asked to name the primary topic of their blog. Politics and government, the stuff of journalism, came a distant second (11 per cent), followed by entertainment (7 per cent), sport (6 per cent), business and news (5 per cent each), and technology (4 per cent). Faith, religion or spirituality rated 2 per cent. Just over half (55 per cent) used a pseudonym while the rest blogged under their own name. Most journalists' codes of ethics discourage or reject the use of pseudonyms.

Why do people blog, given the vast majority do not make money? When asked to list the main reasons, 52 per cent said they wanted to express themselves creatively and half said they wanted to document their personal experiences or share them with others. Just over a third (37 per cent) wanted to stay in touch with family and friends and a third wanted to share practical knowledge or skills with others. Making money was last on the list, with a mere 7 per cent citing it as their main reason for blogging. Given the paucity of business models for blogging and citizen journalism, this lack of desire for financial success is probably a good thing.

Most blogs die soon after they are created, with 60 to 80 per cent abandoned within a month, depending on whose figures we accept. Pew reported 60 per cent of bloggers stopped after two posts (Lenhart, 2007). Few blogs are regularly updated. But others soon replace them. In other words, most blogs have the lifespan of a blowfly. Like blowflies, they arrive in great numbers. Technorati (<http://technorati.com/>) is the leading blog measurement site. As of October 2008 Technorati was tracking 133 million blogs and more than 250 million pieces of tagged social media (State of the Blogosphere, 2008, p. 1).

About 17 per cent of the world's population, or about 1.3 billion people, have the potential to go online (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/> 2008). If about 60 per cent of blogs cease after the second post, then globally there are perhaps about 53 million active blogs. If we divide 53 million by the 1.3 billion people with internet access, we find at best 4 per cent of the world's online population actually blogs. Those blowflies make a lot of noise. But they are not likely to replace journalism.

Pro-am sites the likely winners

Successful citizen journalism sites in terms of large audiences and paying for themselves include OhmyNews, STOMP in Singapore (discussed elsewhere in this issue), and the Huffington Post in the United States. In 2004 *The Guardian* named OhmyNews one of its top five news sites for its “interesting hybrid between weblog and pro news site”. On average, the site’s more than 60,000 citizen reporters submit about 200 stories a day. Most include a photograph, delivered by mobile phone or email. About a third of the stories are rejected. More than 60 editors in Seoul fact check and polish each piece, and decide where it will appear on the site. The higher up on the home page, the more important the story. Dr Oh Yeon-ho launched OhmyNews in February 2000 because he believed the internet encouraged interaction: “Journalists aren’t some exotic species, they’re everyone who seeks to take new developments, put them into writing, and share them with others.” Dr Oh formed the germ of the idea that became OhmyNews when he worked as a reporter for a small liberal magazine, *Mahl*, in the late 1980s, and later when he was a graduate student in the United States (personal interview, 2005).

In his memoir, published in Korean in 2006, Dr Oh wrote that he wanted to start a tradition free of newspaper company elitism (Yeon-ho, 2006). Contributors earn between US\$4 and US\$20 a story, depending on where it appears on the site. Jean Min, director of OhmyNews International, said OhmyNews was trying to combine traditional journalism with citizen journalism. “Our model of community journalism and web sites is unique.” Empowering audiences was the key, Min said. “Everyone is a stakeholder in the media business. The web is a community space. Without contributions from the community, web-based media organisations cannot do anything.” Min said a different kind of economic model was appearing. “It’s like wiki-nomics. Everyone is a stakeholder. The easy way to appreciate the OhmyNews model is to remember that the audience is the content. The nature of your content will be decided by the nature of your audience.” OhmyNews breaks even through a combination of advertising and selling content to other online sites. But it succeeds because it has a team of more than 60 professional journalists editing the citizen content (Quinn 2007b, p. 25).

Like OhmyNews, STOMP (*Straits Times* online multimedia and print) is a pro-am combination. Between 80 and 85 per cent of the content comes from the audience, delivered by mobile phone or email. But a team of a dozen journalists select where the content will appear, working with the audience to write the content. The island of Singapore has a population of about 4.4 million. The audience sends STOMP about 100 photographs a day. Almost all are published on the website. Only low-quality or offensive images are rejected. Newsworthy images are published in SPH’s 11 newspapers (Lewis, 2007).

When STOMP launched, the newspaper was 161 years old, and “looking ahead at the next 160 years”, according to the then editor Jennifer Lewis in 2007. Editorial managers decided that the future had to be online because that was the way to reach young readers. The focus, they decided, would be on interacting with readers. “It’s rare within an established media group to be so involved with user-generated content,” Lewis said. STOMP started in June 2006 and in mid-2007 it averaged 5 to 6 million page impressions a month, which rose to 7 million a year later.

When people send an email, MMS or SMS about an issue or story, STOMP journalists interview them and re-write the story before it appears online. When the story is uploaded, STOMP staff inform the original supplier so that they can check for accuracy. Lewis said:

We ask them are you happy with it? If it doesn’t reflect what you meant to say, call us back and we’ll adjust it. This is different from how citizen journalism works in other countries like South Korea. Much of what we are doing is new to everybody and given some of the cultural preferences in Singapore our audiences would rather relate their story. We are very meticulous. We write it all down and take copious

notes. And often they send us long emails which we re-write. Because we have their contact numbers and email addresses we can contact them for clarification, and they certainly know they can get back to us. (cited Quinn, 2007c, pp. 10-15).

The Huffington Post in the United States launched in May 2005 with about US\$12 million in venture capital. By March 2008 the site was breaking even on advertising revenue of somewhere between US\$6.8 million and US\$11 million a year, depending on one's source of information. Driven by huge interest in the presidential election process, the site had more than 11 million unique visitors a month. By February 2008 Nielsen//NetRatings and comScore listed the Huffington Post as the ninth most popular news site in the United States, a remarkable achievement for a site less than three years old. Its founders were computer whiz Jonah Peretti, a former AOL executive named Kenneth Lerer, and author-activist Arianna Huffington. The editorial strategy is based on free content from the audience, moderated by a team of about 30 editorial staff. "User-generated content is all the rage, but most of it totally sucks," Peretti said. He admitted the strategy was to invite users to "argue and vent on the secondary pages" while professional editors "keep the front page looking sharp" (cited Alterman, 2008). In a *New Yorker* article, Eric Alterman said this strategy allowed web companies to increase traffic but it was also the best way to sell advertising via "a slick, pretty front page where corporate sponsors can admire their brands". The vast bulk of the site's stories originate from television or newspaper web sites "or on someone's video camera or cell phone". Editors provide links to what they believe to be the best story on a given topic. Lerer said the initial plan was to emulate the Drudge Report. But then they realised the key was "taking advantage of our community" (cited Alterman, 2008).

This "taking advantage" of an online community has several interpretations, some not entirely positive. Mainstream media around the world are availing themselves of free citizen journalism content, augmented by the judgements of professional journalists. This pro-am concept of journalism, where the traditional media harnesses content from its audiences, and works in partnership with them, appears to be the most successful form of citizen journalism because it has a business model that works.

Image versus text online

Online video and social networking sites represent the most popular forms of audience contribution, though one would hesitate to call this journalism. YouTube, founded by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawed Karim in February 2005, was easily the most popular online video site in 2008, with a 28 per cent share of the total market, according to data published by comScore (2008). Google bought YouTube in November 2006 for US\$1.65 billion. YouTube is a loss leader for Google. It attracts by far the biggest audience share of online video sites – all other sites are in single digits – but YouTube costs Google more than US\$1 million a week to provide the vast array of servers needed to store the 10 hours of video uploaded to the site every minute of every day. MySpace and Facebook were the most popular social networking sites in 2008. Despite their huge audiences, they make less money than they cost to run, though they are attracting higher levels of advertising. Indeed, MySpace's biggest advertiser is Google, which in 2006 paid MySpace's owner News Corporation US\$900 million for the right to advertise (*State of the News Media*, 2008).

Newsmakers from political candidates to humanitarian and activist groups have begun placing video content directly on YouTube, Facebook and MySpace because they offer access to large audiences. During Australia's 2007 federal election, politicians used social networking and video extensively. The official Liberal Party site (<http://www.liberal.org.au/>) made extensive use of video rather than text. Kevin Rudd trounced John Howard in adoption of Facebook and MySpace as political tools. Dr Norman Abjorensen, a lecturer in politics at the ANU, described 2007 as

Australia's first video blog election, noting that never before had a campaign been so dissected as this one was online. "It is the shape of things to come, just as television was a few years ago. The politicians who can master the new medium now, as those that did then, will be the ones who dominate the coverage," Dr Abjorensen said (cited Quinn, 2007d, p. 26).

Mainstream media are embracing visual forms of citizen journalism, noting the success of OhmyNews, which streams video on the web via cameras strategically placed at news events. Video cameras and cameras on mobile phones are radically changing the role of the paparazzi and freelance photographers. *Wall Street Journal* reporter Andrew Lavalley (2008) has noted that photo agencies are increasingly relying on contributions from the general public. It has led to an explosion in the number of photographs available to entertainment magazines and web sites. "And it has created friction with the old-guard paparazzi, who often find themselves navigating throngs of amateurs at red-carpet events." Lavalley said the newcomers had depressed prices because they accepted fees of up to US\$50 for images that would have been worth several hundred dollars a few years ago.

Photo agencies such as Buzz Foto, Scoopt (acquired by Getty Images in 2007) and Mr Paparazzi, encourage amateurs and young photographers to send in their snaps. Brad Elterman, co-founder of Buzz Foto, said the most successful contributors were people who found themselves in the right place at the right time. "They can break the story before anybody else," he said. "That is the future, without a doubt" (cited Lavalley, 2008). But we cannot construct a business model around being at the right place at the right time.

Conclusion

The Major Trends section of the *State of the News Media* report for 2008 predicted that mainstream print media would try to "lure" citizens into creating content for them. The arrival of an array of sites, such as CNN's "I-Report", Reuters' "YouWitness", CBS's "Eyemobile" and Fox's "URreport", demonstrates this trend is occurring. As media-morphosis theory shows, mainstream media absorb newer forms of media such as citizen journalism to create new styles of reporting. Television did not kill the movies; cinema modified itself and each borrowed techniques from the other (Fidler, 1997, p. 10).

The prediction that citizen journalism will usher in a new golden era as it subsumes traditional news platforms needs to be challenged. Writing regular and grammatically correct text to a deadline requires discipline. It is difficult to do well, and explains why so many bloggers fail to update regularly. Traditional media, especially newspapers, employ the bulk of the reporters in the western world. They are expected to write clearly, adhere to ethical codes of conduct, and conduct themselves professionally. And they work for platforms that have an established brand.

Passion will only motivate citizen journalists for a relatively short time before they realise they have to feed themselves, especially as the global financial crisis bites. The most consistent citizen-contributed news will come in the form of photographs and video because it is easier and quicker to point a camera and push a button than craft a lucid paragraph.

The growth in citizen-based content produces many questions about the future of journalism. But the big question, ultimately, is how to pay for quality reporting and editing. The 2008 *State of the News Media* report concluded: "As with much of the web, the answer to one fundamental question — financial viability — remains uncertain."

We end where we began. The key questions remain unanswered: What is the business model for citizen journalism? How can we pay for quality content? All forms of journalism must find an answer if they are to survive.

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