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Conference Paper

Communication perspectives on social networking and citizen journalism challenges to traditional newspapers

22nd European Regional Conference of the International Telecommunications Society (ITS): "Innovative ICT Applications - Emerging Regulatory, Economic and Policy Issues", Budapest, Hungary, 18th-21st September, 2011

Provided in Cooperation with:

International Telecommunications Society (ITS)

Suggested Citation: Katz, James E. (2011) : Communication perspectives on social networking and citizen journalism challenges to traditional newspapers, 22nd European Regional Conference of the International Telecommunications Society (ITS): "Innovative ICT Applications - Emerging Regulatory, Economic and Policy Issues", Budapest, Hungary, 18th-21st September, 2011, International Telecommunications Society (ITS), Calgary

This Version is available at:

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22nd European Regional ITS Conference
Budapest, 18-21 September, 2011

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Full title: Communication perspectives on social networking and citizen journalism challenges to traditional newspapers

Abbreviated title: Citizen journalism challenges to traditional newspapers

JEL Codes

O3; O30; O33

Abstract

Communication perspectives are presented on the challenges posed to traditional newspapers by social media and citizen journalism, with special reference to the United States. This is an important topic given the critical role investigative reporting, long the domain of newspapers, plays in fostering democratic practices. New Media and social networking technology are evaluated in terms of their impact on the newspaper enterprise. Alternative scenarios for future developments are examined as are the implications for social values and the role of an informed citizenry in democratic society. Strategic management issues are analyzed, and the possibility is considered that social media can fulfill much of the democracy-enhancing role served traditionally by newspapers.

Keywords

Newspapers, news industry, social media, social networks, democracy, journalism

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The author thanks Pablo Boczkowski, Irving Louis Horowitz, Leopoldina Fortunati, Edda Humprecht, Anders Larsson, Kristóf Nyíri, John V. Pavlik, Aram Sinnreich and Todd Wolfson for their helpful comments. All errors and misinterpretations remain the responsibility of the author.

This article has been accepted in *Periodica polytechnica. Social and management sciences*.

Citation

Katz, James E. Communication perspectives on social networking and citizen journalism challenges to traditional newspapers. *Social and management sciences. Periodica polytechnica*. Publication pending.

Overview

In the liberal cultural tradition, newspapers have historically served not only as sources of news about events but also as sources of information about corruption and abuse, most particularly in the case of the government.¹ It has been a long-established article of faith that a free press is the cornerstone of a free society.² As a result, journalists and publishers in democracies have enjoyed special privileges and protections. Yet, due to the consequences of technological change, the ability of newspapers to serve, in the words of Thomas Jefferson as the “bulwark of liberty,” has been compromised. Expenses of traditional newspaper editing, production and distribution have soared even as reading habits of the public have shifted away from physically delivered newspapers. Although news consumption is quite high in democracies, growing percentages of the public turn to social media as news sources. Advertising spending has gravitated away from the printed newspaper to online outlets. In particular, Internet outlets for classified ads (most famously instantiated as Craigslist.com) and other forms of advertising have taken away revenue from newspapers, revenue that had been used to subsidize the news reporting enterprise.³ Social media alternatives to newspapers, for both news and advertising, have profoundly eroded the economic viability and social position of newspapers.

This article argues that social media have challenged the newspaper profession, which has in response sought to co-opt the tools of social media. This in turn has diluted the quality and authority of newspapers, with implications for the proper functioning of an informed citizenry in a democracy. In recognition of the situation, pundits and opinion leaders have proposed several alternative models to traditional advertising-supported newspapers. A survey of these alternatives suggests that in light of economic, social science and management processes, these proposals have either severe problems or questionable prospects of success. However, social media are increasingly shouldering the burden that newspapers have had in terms of investigative journalism and keeping the citizenry informed. The article concludes with a discussion of management and social scientific dimensions of the new policy environment.

Although the focus of the analysis is mainly on the United States the discussion should be relevant to many other countries. Yet it is also worth bearing in mind that local conditions vary in ways that limit the discussion’s generalizability.⁴

Why newspapers are important

In order to see the valuable role that newspapers (especially in terms of their “accountability”/investigative journalism activities) play in the operation of a transparent, honest and representative government, we can summarize the necessary prerequisites for a liberal democracy. These include:

1. freedom of expression,
2. free flow of information and especially such information that citizens can use to know about governmental activities,
3. checks and balances both within the government and between the government and other societal institutions,

4. the separation of powers within the government,
5. equal rights for minorities,
6. right of free association, and
7. restrictions on the power and reach of electoral victors to guarantee that those who lose will not be persecuted or disenfranchised.⁵

This is not the place to have a full discussion of the necessary and sufficient requirements of liberal democracy. However, the above axioms may be proposed as constituting its major operational elements. (It bears stating that individual privacy must also be protected and that there are legitimate needs to keep certain group information confidential, e.g., personnel, security and financial transactions.⁶)

Newspapers in democracies have traditionally occupied a vital social role in sustaining these requirements, even to the extent of being called a “Fourth Estate,” in that they act as a check on other powerful institutions in society. Equally, in authoritarian, anarchic or dictatorial regimes, they have played an important role in manipulating the public, spreading false and malicious ideas, and covering up official misconduct. In particular case of misconduct, to these problems been known to the public, severe problems would have been created for the governing elites.⁷ So the role of newspapers, both for good as well as for evil, is considerable.

The rise of the Internet and mobile communication has dramatically altered the news business in most countries. The production, distribution and consumption of news have been dramatically changed, both in terms of how the newspaper business can sustain itself and the meaning and social role newspapers can play. This in turn raises critical questions for the management of the news business and the future of democracy.⁸

Popularity of socially networked media widespread

Social media outlets around the world have become important sources of news outside as well as alongside of traditional mainstream media.⁹ In the United States, a 2010 national survey found that 34% of Americans said they got news online “yesterday,” up from 29% in 2008. Concomitantly, print usage “yesterday” was 31%, a decline from 34% in 2008. This survey indicates that more people in the US get their news each day from online sources than they do from newspapers.¹⁰ Citizen journalists have provided much of the impetus for this change. Citizen journalists may be contrasted to professional journalists, i.e., “someone who obtains information sought while working as a salaried employee of, or independent contractor for, an entity that disseminates information by print, broadcast, cable, satellite, mechanical, photographic, electronic, or other means.”¹¹ By contrast, citizen journalists are generally not paid and may be defined as someone engaged in “collecting and publication of timely, unique, nonfiction information by individuals without formal journalism training or professional affiliation”¹² or even more simply, as “when members of the public engage in journalism.”¹³ (The practice of citizen journalism has also been called “participatory journalism” or “grassroots journalism.”) Citizen journalism and volunteer news co-creation activities are increasingly prominent in the news mix of democratic and quasi-democratic states. (Such activities have been criticized

as being superficial, and citizen journalists stand accused of reliance on a mélange of recycled and worked-over material of dubious provenance that ultimately is of little value.¹⁴ Worse, their activities are said to destroy the very sources of legitimate news content that they cannibalize.¹⁵)

Blogging and tweeting have become an ordinary part of news reporting that now accompanies the activities of the so-called Old Media. Or to put it differently, online ancillaries are common correlates for all forms of news media including magazines, radio, and television programs but especially newspapers. For many, it may appear that this is a condition of advanced industrial societies, and that this condition does not extend to the Third World. But such a view would be in error: given the often Western-centric view of citizen journalism and blogging, it may be useful to note that Indonesia and Malaysia are among the leading countries in terms of bloggers.

By the same token, a worldwide trend is that information and communication technologies are reconfiguring the traditional balance between the creators and consumers of news and the journalistic reporting profession. Blogs, social networking sites, micro-blogging services such as Twitter, and mobile phones, among other technologies, have made new information and perspectives available about both regional and local events; they have also added important and often oppositional interpretations concerning the significance and meaning of those events.

One response of traditional institutions has been to co-opt these tools. For instance, in the United States most newspapers – large, medium and even small – have become deeply involved in social networking with their readers. The range and frequency of this involvement has been impressive, and many newspapers offer their readers a rich menu of social networking tools. The extent of this involvement was documented in a 2008 report covering America's 100 largest (as measured by circulation) newspapers.¹⁶ The survey found that more than half (58%) of the newspapers allow users to post user-generated photos, and 18% accepted their videos. One out of seven (15%) allow users to post their own articles. Overall, 58% of newspapers offered some form of user generated content in 2008, which is more than double the 24% that did so in 2007. Three quarters (75%) of newspaper websites permit users to post comments on articles, compared to only 33% in 2007. Although given the pace of change in the Internet world, 2008 data cannot be considered fresh, the above growth trends will doubtless continue.

It is obviously in a newspaper's best interest to allow readers to be notified about information of interest that appears in their publication. That newspapers grasp this reality may be seen in the fact that "push" technologies (such as RSS, Really Simple Syndication), which send customized content to the customers' devices (mobile phones or computer, for instance), have been universally adopted by large newspapers and most medium and small ones as well. Usage of external social bookmarking sites like Digg and del.icio.us have also grown rapidly, with 92% of large newspapers using them in 2008. Social networking tools, which include the ability to "friend" other users, was at 10%, a surprisingly low figure in light of all the excitement over this new form of interaction. (Again, this figure certainly has grown since the survey was conducted in 2008; that said,

there may be some variation among particular social media applications. For example, the adoption and usage of Del.icio.us may have slowed or even shrunk. Still, these would be exceptions to an otherwise strong growth trend.)

In terms of posting user feedback, three quarters (76%) offered views of Most Popular content. Such listings include topics such as Most Emailed, Most Blogged, and Most Commented. By comparison, only 33% offered such information in 2006. Twenty percent of the top 100 newspapers offer chatting options while 40% offer SMS alerts.

A great hope of the newspapers is that readers will be willing to pay for content, thus making up for the advertising revenues that have been siphoned off by Internet-based competitors. At least in terms of the American experience, this does not appear to be a viable path. In terms of payment or subscriptions for online content, the number of newspaper websites that require even registration to view most content (free or paid) has decreased from earlier years. In 2008 only 11% of websites required registration to view full articles, compared to 23% in 2006.¹⁷

The addition of these social media-based services tends to be incremental, and the newspapers themselves often do not “reinvent themselves” as totally new entities. In fact, some newspapers such as the *Christian Science Monitor* have gone entirely digital, dropping their print form altogether. This presumably is the next step of newspaper evolution, and there have been attempts to start entirely new forms of newspaper. That is, rather than simply dropping the print edition and going digital, the newspaper is designed from the ground up to be delivered via a rich digital platform. The most prominent example of this trend is Rupert Murdoch’s newspaper, *The Daily*, which is designed to be exclusively available on smart readers such as the iPad.

Yet the editorial function itself may be threatened by social media. Social media have the potential for becoming the new “editor” for news selection. Rather than an expert positioned to make decisions about the value of particular items or story possibilities, “crowd sourcing” and social networks have become the new arbiter. The rising importance of social networks in bringing news to the attention of the public may be seen with the leading newspaper in the United States, the *New York Times*. A Comscore analysis¹⁸ of Internet visits to the website of the *New York Times* (NYTimes.com) between 2008 and 2009 found that Facebook is a growing factor in bringing readers. In October of 2009, 20.8% of the traffic to the website came via Google; a year later, 20.4% came to the website via Google. This is a drop of 2% on a year-to-year basis. Over the same period, traffic from Facebook to the website rose from 2.9% to 4.8%, a year-to-year growth of 66%. Although the base was small, the trajectory is impressive. Moreover, even the amount of 5%, when translated to visitors, means that one out of 20 site visitors arrive there through Facebook. Clearly, social media has the demonstrated potential to be an important selection tool for guiding viewers to news content. In fact, in both the US and Europe, Facebook has become an important consideration for news outlets because it is increasingly attracting advertisers, which constitutes another form of competition for the revenue stream upon which the “loss-leader” of in-depth investigative journalism depends.

Yet even as social media become more important in terms of winning readership, the editorial function, which has traditionally been an essential aspect for attracting readers, appears to be waning. Although not a direct measurement of newspaper editing, a 2010 survey of US magazines found that two thirds of them were less rigorous in their fact-checking (or had none) of their web-based content relative to their printed content.¹⁹ (Further developments in this area are discussed later in the paper.)

Although this section began by citing keen on why citizen journalism and social media are threats to traditional newsgathering, most of my commentary has been directed towards the adoption by mainstream media of the features and activities of social media. As will be seen, this line of argument is used to bolster the view that social media is both less of an economic threat and more of an intellectual competitor (and feature-oriented inspiration) with newspapers than is generally appreciated.

Social networking raises severe challenges for traditional news outlets

Social networkers, including bloggers and citizen journalists, also constitute an economic threat to traditional journalism by providing alternatives to regular journalistic outlets.²⁰ This is because those with online access (including Internet-enabled mobile phones) can readily access content, which can be an important convenience but also translates into reduced readership for the traditional outlets. (Of course those without online media access will not be able to enjoy such convenience, but each year the number without connectivity – especially mobile connectivity – declines.) Even more consequential, in economic terms, is the fact that blog writings and other content from citizen journalist are usually free, whereas traditional journalistic outlets typically charge for their content, either directly from customers via sales and subscriptions, or indirectly by charges to advertisers. Over the long run, it is difficult to ask people to pay for goods and services that are freely and more conveniently available elsewhere, and that are sometimes even of higher quality.

A Pew-sponsored study from 2008 casts the situation in stark light:

“The fundamental issue for the future of journalism is not audiences splintering away to citizen media, corporate PR and other non-news venues. In many ways the audience for news—and for what traditional newsrooms produce—appears to be growing. Nor are journalists failing to adapt. There are more signs in 2008 than ever that news people embrace the new technology and want to innovate.

The problem, it is increasingly clear, is a broken economic model—the decoupling of advertising and news. Advertisers are not migrating to news websites with audiences, and online, news sites are already falling financially behind other kinds of web destinations.”²¹

(It is worth pausing to note that the Pew study does not entirely blame social media for the decoupling of news and advertising. There is an important difference between competing

for readers, which social media does, and competing for advertisers, which craigslist, monster.com, match.com, Google and other services do.)

These changes at the organizational, usability and financial levels pose critical problems for the continuing viability and impact of traditional or so-called Old Media, and most especially for the news-gathering and dissemination function that print journalism has traditionally played. Daily circulation for most newspapers in the US has plunged, as has the staffing in newsrooms. Many newspapers have ceased publication, and the ability to gather and report on important news stories (most critically on “story behind the story” in-depth analysis) has been diminished. As but one indicator, a 2010 census of foreign correspondents employed by ten of the largest US newspapers and one chain showed a 25% decline when compared to 2003 (from 307 to 234). The *Los Angeles Times*, one of the nation’s top five newspapers, reduced its number of foreign correspondents from 24 to 13.²² Thus on both professional and economic grounds, the social media are reducing the relative prominence of traditional news outlets as well as the stature of professional journalists. (Though newspapers (and media industries more generally) have been consolidating, this process on its own has not been far-reaching enough to account for a shrinkage of this magnitude in foreign correspondents.)

Among the clearest consequences of new social media voices seem to be to the adding of competing narratives to official viewpoints as well as the bringing of previously undisclosed or even secret information to light. This in turn introduces new rationales for social change, and also encourages the entrance of new personalities onto the public stage to advocate those rationales. As a result, the policy arena may over the short-run experience increased disharmony and social unrest. This certainly seems to be occurring in the case of Wikileaks, which through its release of secret government documents became a worldwide sensation.²³ The impact of the information disseminated by Wikileaks has arguably influenced the political viability and tenure of national leaders,²⁴ and thereby the distribution of global power. As one instance, it has been claimed (most prominently by Julian Assange) that the secret documents revealed by the Wikileaks website commenting about corruption in Tunisia helped precipitate the overthrow of the Tunisian government. The success of social networking protesters in Tunisia inspired their counterparts in Egypt who in turn forced Pres. Mubarak from power. Thus it may well be claimed that social networking sources of information not only precipitated the conditions that were necessary for the overthrow of governments but also provided the sufficient means. The power of the press, often claimed to be mightier than the sword, seems to have been eclipsed by the still-mightier power of social media.

However, the longer-term impact of these activities may not necessarily lead to conflict and destruction. In fact, it may well be the opposite: namely that social media as news outlets may lead to a lower degree of intense unrest and social disharmony over the longer term. This would be in keeping with the social change theory of Dahrendorf²⁵ and others who have argued that moderate (although sometimes severe) disharmony precipitated by public voices of dissent allow for redistribution of economic and political resources, as well as increase social mobility. In this way, the relatively moderate disturbances prevent far more negative consequences such as society-wide destruction that would otherwise

result from revolutionary change precipitated in order to relieve the pressure of extreme social cleavages.

At the level of professional journalism, the situation reinforces notions of Schumpeter's²⁶ view of "creative destruction" and dialectical processes. New structures are arising to address the functional and affective needs of the public and individual²⁷ typified by the movement known as volunteer citizen journalists. By its very nature, this movement represents a challenge to official and semi-official organs of news, no less than their sponsoring governments and media conglomerates. Citizen journalists often interrogate generally accepted and sanctioned interpretations of events through the presentation of alternative facts, speculations and opinions. Yet among these groups of citizen journalists there is seldom a leader per se, but rather their work is carried forward by a decentralized, flexible system of various levels of participation with collaborative decision-making and analysis.

Up to this point, I have argued that social media does in fact threaten newspapers, but only as hegemonic institutions. The effect of this threat is to democratize power and increase social harmony over the long term. In this sense, then, I cannot take the position that the obsolescence of newspapers is a threat to the democratic process per se but rather to its social role of bolstering democracy, variant though it has been. Could social media effectively assume the social role of newspapers? The prospects for social media fulfilling this role will be taken up subsequently, first by assessing the possibility of melding newspapers with social media processes and then by assessing the response of elites in responding to social media as a news outlet.

Counter-moves by news outlets

Earlier in this paper, the effects of social media in attracting readers to editorial content were discussed. In this section several methods of counteracting social media are discussed that go beyond the previously analyzed step of including more user-generated content on traditional newspaper sites. Nevertheless, this section does not address the value of such an endeavor, nor its likelihood of ultimate success. Rather it addresses strategies and effectiveness from within the perspective of newspapers and formal news organizations.

One important measure to staunch the loss of readers to bloggers is to co-opt bloggers/citizen journalists to the side of the newspaper. In the US, some political bloggers have been hired by traditional newspapers, for instance at the *Washington Post*. (As a side note, some bloggers/citizen journalists have struck out on their own, becoming powerful through their own writings. Ranging a bit afield from the US, one can cite for example, Malaysian blogger Jeff Ooi used his web site to launch what has become a political career, leading him to become a member of the parliamentary government of Malaysia. In this way, it is possible for citizen journalists to act as a counter to currently installed political elites, or even supplant them.²⁸ While this experience provides a model that could be emulated in other countries, there also appears to be huge variation on a cross-national basis. It may be the case that in Europe, where bloggers do not enjoy the

same visibility and repute as in some other countries, that this model would not work. Yet it remains an interesting dimension of political mobility in Southeast Asian countries where blogging is an important counterpoint to the mainstream media outlets.)

Another way the news industry has been seeking to strike a counter blow to social media sites is to allow the “wisdom of crowds” to guide editorial decisions. Social media tools are used to guide decisions about what stories visitors and readers will find on news sites. For instance, one analyst describes a typical process as follows:

“So-called content farms, such as Yahoo!’s Associated Content, AOL’s Seed and Demand Media, have essentially automated the functions of the assignment desk. Demand, for example, uses sophisticated algorithms to sift through haystacks of Web searches and other data to identify popular search topics (say, “garden gnomes”). It then marries this intel with data on keywords that advertisers are paying the most to be associated with on search pages (say, “repairs”). Story topics (“how to repair garden gnomes”) are then farmed out to armies of freelancers, who produce thousands of how-to articles and informational videos pegged to whatever the algorithms have detected.

The finished goods — featurettes on everything from travel tips to gardening to home repairs — then appear on popular Demand-owned Web sites like eHow.com and Livestrong.com, or on sites owned by mainstream media partners, such as USA Today, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and the San Francisco Chronicle.”²⁹

According to Rutgers University journalism professor John Pavlik, some news outlets (though as yet no newspapers) use computer-generated information to automatically “write” financial stories. He says that some stock trading companies use these computer-written stories to make decisions about trading. Thus, in an ironic twist, the entire “news cycle” can now operate via the Internet without any human intervention, or even without any human readers. This makes the system akin to having a robot or artificial intelligence system take the place of a human editor.

A few comments are in order here about the nature of these changes. Although robot editors seem to be astonishing steps (though not necessarily forward), one must recall that such operational technologies are not all that different from the use of wire services, which have been quite influential in news content creation, provisioning and selection since the 19th Century. Neither is it entirely a “counter blow” to social media because it is, in essence, a form of appropriation or concession to crowd sourcing efficiencies. In terms of content farms, despite their superficial similarity, they are actually the antithesis of the blogosphere, because they are centrally controlled, and though they employ multiple authors, they are governed by central administrators, monolithic algorithms and business agendas.

Another twist on “Robot-journalism” may be seen in a system deployed by Yahoo!, arguably the world’s most heavily visited news site. Yahoo! News has launched The Upshot, a blog on government and politics that chooses content by harvesting Yahoo!’s

vast database of search queries submitted by users in conjunction with analysis of items that draw visitors to Yahoo!'s homepage.³⁰ In effect, the content of what site visitors see is a predictive guess based on past behavior. One could construe this as an early step towards news production based on the neurology of potential readers, just as there have already been pioneering efforts in neural marketing of products to potential buyers, including the offshoot of neural marketing political candidates to the voters.³¹

On the level of professional training, as opposed to news production, journalists are seeking to absorb many of the tools of citizen journalism as part of their own armamentarium. For example the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism advertises training and courses on topics of "multimedia storytelling," "online journalism," and "mobile journalism." These efforts could be seen as attempts to import best practices as derived by citizen journalists into the professional routines of the corpus of what is to be considered good journalism. Yet one cannot help but to observe that such courses are reactive rather than ground-breaking. As such, they highlight the narrow, and increasingly nonexistent, gap between the professional and amateur. That is, they are engaged in essentially the same activities with comparable resources and perhaps also equivalent levels of expertise. By occupying approximately similar roles, and doing so in similar ways, one could argue that there is no meaningful difference – in social utility terms – between the two roles.³² Recall the argument that journalists enjoy a claim to professional power and privilege due to their skill and critical role. To the extent that there is no distinction between citizen journalists and professional journalists then any special treatment accorded to journalists becomes problematical. This premise goes to the heart of many issues of freedom, privilege, and power; these themes will be revisited later in the article.

Counter-moves by political elites

Earlier it was shown how social media and social networking tools allow users to directly access and interact with newspaper content. As well, blogs and other social media tools allow users to create their own forms of information, criticism, and mobilization.³³ Thus news outlets are chipped away at from below, as it were, as their audiences find other ways to have the social function of the news outlets fulfilled. This is occurring at the same time that their revenue base is being eroded, both by having advertising displaced and by having competitive if not superior material available through free distribution channels such as the Internet and mobile networks of users.

Social media and social networking tools pose a challenge to news outlets from another direction. They allow elites to speak directly to their constituencies. This then erodes the legitimacy and influence of news outlets from, as it were, above. A study conducted in late 2010 show that 20% of heads of state are now on Twitter³⁴, and a survey has found that nearly all national governments have public websites. (In the case of the totalitarian government of the Democratic People Republic of Korea (North Korea) it appears that the website is visible only to those outside the country.)³⁵

An instance of leaders reaching over the heads of the news media to communicate directly to the public was in evidence during the 2008 presidential election in the United States. Then-presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama announced his selection of his vice presidential running-mate by sending a text to his followers at three in the morning. This was a stark contrast to the traditional method of making an announcement at a press conference to coincide with the daily news cycle. Since Senator Obama's election, his administration has continued to aggressively exploit social media tools to communicate to the public.³⁶

The use of social media by leadership is not without implications for democracy. For instance, a tradition in the United States that allows the public to learn about administration policies has been the press conference, in which credentialed members of the press are able to ask detailed and probing questions, and are permitted to press forward with follow-up questions if the initial response is not satisfactory. However, when "Town Hall" or social media formats are used, i.e., when members of the ordinary public are allowed to ask one brief (generally untutored and unsophisticated) question, nearly all politicians are able to exploit the opportunity to brush off any potential criticism and instead highlight their achievements and get their message across to listeners. Moreover, these social media/Town Hall events can be used to blunt criticism for lack of holding press conferences with watchdog journalists. (The Obama administration has set new records for lack of contact with the press via professional presidential press conferences.) A sense of pseudo-democracy and pseudo-transparency is engendered by social media "ask the leader" style-events. For example, President Barack Obama conducted in July 2011 his first ever "Twitter Town Hall," answering questions on jobs and the economy for those whose questions are selected. The rationale of this event was to promote democracy. Jack Dorsey, co-founder and executive chairman of Twitter (and co-moderator of the event for president Obama), tweeted, "a key aspect of a democracy is a common venue to question." But, one wag noted, "It won't be easy for President Obama to explain his deficit plan in 140 characters."³⁷

Nevertheless political leaders can sideline the news media via social media in other ways than by using it to simply respond to a question. They can take the message directly to the people via the powerful combination of individual/mass communication afforded by social media tools such as Twitter and text messaging. Such messages can be immediate and direct, and can effectively communicate policy. As one illustration, US State Department spokesman P. J. Crowley has used Twitter for communicating governmental policy positions. After the ouster of Tunisia's president in early 2011, he tweeted,

"The people of Tunisia have spoken. The interim government must create a genuine transition to democracy. The United States will help."

Yet critics can use the new forms of social media to counter-attack official positions and policy declarations. After Mr. Crowley sent a birthday greeting to Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, former governor of Alaska and vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin attacked him via Twitter. She tweeted:

*“Americans awaken 2 bizarre natl security thinking of Obama Admn:
Ahmadinejad b'day greeting after call 4 Israel's destruction speaks volumes”*

Top political leaders who are competitors with the executive leadership can also use these tools to outflank the administration. This may be seen during the February 2011 crisis in Egypt that led to the ouster of President Mubarak. In this case, US Senator John McCain (Republican from Arizona and presidential candidate-opponent of Barack Obama) used his Twitter account to become an early and prominent leader to publicly call for Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to resign immediately. In a pronouncement he tweeted:

*“Regrettably the time has come 4 Pres. Mubarak 2 step down & relinquish power.
It's in the best interest of Egypt, its people & its military”*³⁸

Although it has not yet happened in the United States, it is also the case that national governments can directly coerce social media outlets to convey messages (which has also been the case with newspapers and other media in the pre-social media era). Again, drawing on the Egyptian turmoil of February 2011, national mobile phone carriers in that country were forced to send Pro-Mubarak messages. The Vodafone Group said it was ordered on February 1, 2011 to send mobile phone text messages by the Egyptian government, imploring the public to “confront the traitors and criminals and protect our people and honor and our precious Egypt.”³⁹ (Under emergency power provisions, the Egyptian government can require mobile providers to send messages; there are similar regulations in the United States and many other countries.) Hence, through social media, governments can effectively eliminate or greatly reduce the reliance on newspapers or other additional outlets to get their message into the hands of the people.

While traditionally it has been the case that governments (and especially authoritarian regimes) can compel communication service providers to deliver messages to citizens long before there was any such thing as social media, these examples are different in two ways. First, the reach of mobile phones far exceeds that of newspapers. Second, the messages are delivered to one's own individualized devices, such as cell phones, which is far more personal and direct than is the case when delivery is funneled through newspapers (or television or radio stations for that matter).

This section has explored another side of social media that is important for democracy: communicating government positions to the public and exposing political leaders to questions and concerns of the citizenry and the “Fourth Estate” *qua* custodians of the public trust. It also explored the way in which social media can be used to circumvent traditional democratic informational practices such as the press conference. It highlighted some potential abuses of social media by political leaders as well as some of the complexities that its use presents for newspapers and the traditional news industry which, conventionally, have been purveyors of the contents of news conferences.

Potential Solutions

To this point, numerous proposals have been put forth to try to preserve newspapers' important social role. One suggestion that is frequently offered is to have the government subsidize newspapers in various ways. Proposals of this nature have the drawback of freezing in place the competitive advantage of currently dominant institutions and ideologies. Further, it makes the newspapers beholden to the government in order to ensure persistence of their subsidies, thus profoundly distorting the very basis on which the original proposal was rationalized. (Of course, as alluded to earlier, media outlets are beholden to the government for regulatory and other concessions, though these proposals would greatly expand such obligations.)

A second suggestion is to license and certify journalists. This would once again require that the government intervene in precisely those processes that, in order to work effectively, need to be independent of the government's control. It is easy to imagine the forms of distortion and corruption that would likely ensue from government control, albeit indirectly, of the news process. Moreover, such regulation would for many countries, including the United States, significantly infringe on constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech and press. The US is not alone in this regard. As another example, Germany, due to historical reasons, has constitutional guarantees for the right of free public expression (within certain bounds, since it also forbids Holocaust denial and expressions of support for Hitler and the Nazis). This guarantee means that no license, diploma, or particular education requirement can be levied in order to become a journalist. To compound the problem, it is likely that certain governments that do not tolerate criticism or free speech would require journalists to avoid making statements that they would find offensive. This is by no means a hypothetical argument. The United Nations has been a forum for Muslim and other countries to seek to regulate journalistic practices and free speech. In a pernicious move, the UN has considered banning speech that offends or denigrates religions, thus raising the specter of profound limitations on freedom and the imposition of thought control.⁴⁰

A third option is to impose a tax on the public that would go to support already installed newspaper outlets (and other currently established incumbents, such as publicly funded National Public Radio). Suggested sources for the tax include general federal revenues, a surcharge on spectrum licenses, and tax on social media and Internet users. The proceeds of the taxes would then be used to cross-subsidize traditional media forms. Many current occupants of the "market" for news find these proposals attractive since they would be protected from new market entrants (i.e., competitors) that the public might find more useful, interesting or desirable. By stifling potential competitors and alternatives, this proposal has severe anti-competitive effects. As such, it would compromise the very basis upon which the newspaper's democracy-conducting role is predicated.

Besides direct subsidies, another avenue that newspapers have tried has been the hyper-local approach to newsgathering and reporting. Each town or locale would have a set of reporters who would dig into local issues, and of course attract readers who would be of interest to local advertisers. By attracting local advertisers, the broken revenue model

could be restored. This approach has been tried by both online ventures, such as Yahoo! and AOL, and well-established newspapers, such as the *New York Times*. Although some of these endeavors have met with minor success, much of the material tends to be coverage of local sports events and city council meetings. Many of the reporters are high school students. The argument that such efforts are higher social functions that justify a free press, such as investigative journalism projects that might stretch over months, is less compelling. It is worth pointing out that, at the theoretical level, locally derived advertising surpluses could subsidize investigative journalism. After all, this type of reporting has, generally speaking, always been a cost center rather than a profit center for news organizations. Yet the fundamental difficulty with this plan is that it requires significant capital expenditures, and thus rewards economies of scale except at the microcosmic level. Thus benefits accrue only to the largest, and ironically the smallest, news providers.

Perhaps one of the most interesting approaches is that of philanthropically sponsored investigative journalism. Here we have the model of Propublica, which was founded with a large grant by philanthropist Herbert Sandler (<http://www.propublica.org>). Likewise, the news and gossip site, Huffingtonpost, has established a \$1.75 million fund for investigative journalism. In fact, these models of philanthropic investigative journalism may better serve the public interest than have the for-profit newspapers.

The foregoing notwithstanding, the philanthropic approach is also fraught with problems, at least as such a system is practiced in the United States. For one thing, it seems that these philanthropic organizations under-pay their workers relative to the outlets to which they license their contents. In this way they are, in effect, undermining the pay rate of investigative journalists, albeit inadvertently, and are subverting the very purpose of the organizations they are purporting to help. Despite its huge selling price to America Online (AOL), in the range of \$315 million, Huffington Post does not pay its writers, instead only gives them the status rewards of being associated with a leading brand.⁴¹ Perhaps most damaging to the long-term reputation of these philanthropically sponsored investigative or non-profit journalism outlets is the fact that the sponsors often have a specific and rigid ideological ax to grind. This is the case with Propublica, for example or “Think Progress” (thinkprogress.org), both of which are also heavily supported by George Soros. Mr. Soros is well known for supporting many liberal causes; what is less well recognized is his unrelenting and extreme ideological commitment to anti-conservative and anti-Republican causes, which in turn are reflected in the choices of topics of these non-independent investigative journalism outlets.⁴² Thus, though at times better disguised, seemingly independent outlets can fall prey to the same ideological crusades and biases that typically diminish the potency and validity of materials published by partisan political groups.

This rapid review of potential solutions to the future of investigative journalism finds that there are no easy answers, especially when looking to the newspapers as an institution. Next the analysis will focus on the prospects of independent social media.

Cross-cutting themes⁴³

The argument to this point is that the special role that the newspaper has traditionally played in societies is going to be diminished significantly. Historically speaking, in the United States many of the so-called big scoops of investigative journalism have turned out to have been the result of tips being given to reporters rather than the results of inspired and dogged spadework on the part of reporters. Nonetheless, both those stories that the press has uncovered on its own, and the spotlight that newspapers have been able to throw when they have gotten wind of scandal, will be blunted. On the other hand, citizen journalists and online media have certainly done much to reveal scandals and corruption. Examples from the United States include the revelation by Drudge Report (www.drudgereport.com) of President Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky and camera phone capture of police abuse (www.onemansblog.com). These include performing a watchdog role on mainstream media (when, for instance, it was demonstrated that no racial epithets were thrown at African-American politicians during a Tea Party political rally, despite false claims repeated by major media outlets that there were⁴⁴). Citizen journalism and social media have had an even more far-reaching effect in the Middle East, where camera phones help stimulate and organize groups who overthrew despots.⁴⁵

Here we can return to the topic of the "Fourth Estate." Perhaps one of the most enduring social science conclusions concerning the sustenance of democratic participation in society is the importance of having multiple loyalties and competing "voices."⁴⁶ Certainly social media can serve as a competing voice, and can stimulate others to join in raising their own competing voices. But can social media provide a sustained counterbalance to other institutions, most especially the government? There remains serious question as to whether social media can play a systematic role in this regard. By the same token it is not entirely clear whether newspapers have been highly successful in fulfilling this role. In fact the record is rather bleak both in terms of an historical and contemporary perspective. Alex Jones makes the distinction between "fact-based" and "accountability" news.⁴⁷ Attention has been devoted by newspapers to finding corruption among government officials, and this has been a mainstay of "accountability" news. These activities have been most laudable. A well-justified fear then is that as newspapers cut back on resources for investigative journalism, corruption and governmental abuse would go unchecked. The possibility of less attention to state and local government is no longer theoretical; a recent survey has shown that many newspapers have been withdrawing their coverage of state governmental business.⁴⁸ Yet far beyond "fact-based" news, even "accountability" news often misses (or gives only passing attention to) systemic problems such as the destruction of the rain forests worldwide, continuing practices of human slavery and genocide, and the destruction of marine ecosystems. Moreover, even the supposed success stories concerning the role of the press in uncovering iconic scandals, such as the Watergate break-in that led to the impeachment of Pres. Nixon, appear overblown.⁴⁹ On the other hand, social media outlets such as Powerline Blog (powerlineblog.com) have been doing a remarkably consistent job of exposing egregious mistakes of the press (such as the derelict reporting by CBS television's newscaster Dan Rather and consistent biases in the New York Times). Beyond this, sites such as Big Government (biggovernment.com) have

revealed scandals such as race-based justice enforcement in the Obama administration and the promotion of child prostitution by federally-funded community organizations.⁵⁰ Hence, it could well be the case that social media could become an equally if not even more effective “Fourth Estate” when compared to the track record of the “accountability” oriented activities of the newspaper industry.

The discussion will now shift from the operational level (such as competing voices and investigative journalism) to broader issues at the level of social science and management processes, broadly conceived. These broad issues stem from premise that the mere existence of social media news outlets poses a challenge to society’s traditional power structures. (Though this premise has been confirmed via social science research, it is a principle that many leaders have understood implicitly. Recognition of this principle is one reason why many oligarchies and dictatorships, including those with a religious or ideological basis, seek to severely curtail competitive viewpoints.) This principle obtains even when availability of alternative sources (in this case, social media) is limited. As long as at least a small portion of the population has access to these sources, their threat remains significant. The implications of the premise that competing voices constitute a threat to governing structures play out on at least five levels.

First, they call into question the profession of journalism, since the issues of vetting, responsibility, and procedural training are pertinent to maintaining the relative autonomy and authority claimed by the profession. Blogs represent a challenge at this level because, to use the argument advanced by Peter Berger⁵¹ in a different context, the legitimating expertise of journalism is shown to be commonplace rather than uniquely conferred through training and certification. That is, the sacred canopy of the semi-charismatic civil religion of professional journalism is being shredded by social media competitors.

Second, it seems that the public looks for authoritative answers to the problems and events that confront them, and the oppositional readings of events that are provided by these outlets offer answers and solutions that pose a direct challenge to traditional sources of agenda setting in the media and in the larger society. The citizen journalists’ alternative evidence and explanations serve to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of the reader even as they displace the socially sanctioned outlets of news (i.e., professional journalists writing in newspapers). There is now an alternative in the process of determining what the basic facts are and what their significance portends. In fact the work of the citizen journalists often stimulates and provokes contending perspectives.

However, it would be a mistake to dismiss the pronouncements of professional journalists as much as it would be to dismiss those of political leaders. The public tends to valorize and invest with significance the statements of leaders, whether they be opinion leaders in the press or of the nation-state. Even though leaders may be misrepresenting the facts, and the listener grasps this, nonetheless a certain charismatic imbuing of their words takes place: people find it difficult not to fully discount the false statements they hear or read. Even more, a residue of the lie remains in people’s minds, sowing doubt that the statement is indeed a falsehood and may, in fact have an element of truth in it. This practice has long been understood by dictatorial regimes who often formulate bald lies that, even

though they are seemingly recognized as such, nonetheless seem to influence popular views and emotional states. (This was understood by Adolph Hitler who wrote about the residual effect in people's minds even of an obvious "Big Lie" (*Große Lüge*) in *Mein Kampf*. Subsequent social psychological studies have amply demonstrated this effect, even when people seek to explicitly expunge rejected information.)

Third, the alternative channel provides a competing explanatory framework through which outside interest groups can seek to persuade or pressure those in power to alter their decisions. As seen from these few examples, pressure from bloggers can embarrass officials (and media, due to their lack of coverage) forcing them to take action. They can even force mainstream news to retract or correct stories when the facts so indicate (and, too often, repeated pressure is applied in order to effect this change). That said, there is great deal of variability in the power of blogs. In Southeast Asia and the United States, they seem to be extremely influential, and often referred to by the public. By contrast, in some countries such as France or Germany, bloggers or alternative media players do not seem to reach large audiences. Even though there have been a few high impact examples, they generally do not receive much attention. In the case of Germany, audiences have strong ties to traditional media brands and their online offshoots. Hence niche markets for new players are slow to develop. One reason why this may be the case, particularly in Germany, is that the public retains a high degree of confidence in the press (as compared to the US).⁵² As to France, it may be that there is a more critical and contentious relationship between journalists and the political leadership, so therefore less perceived need to turn to alternative sources. In sum, despite these national differences, it seems reasonable to expect that independent bloggers and other alternative media sources and critics will over time gain prominence.

The fourth challenge arises from the nature of human cognition. This challenge stems from the fact that the larger the number of alternative explanations presented to a person, the less confidence the person has in any one of the explanations. This finding is robust across multiple domains of intellectual activity and is independent of subject area. Hence the credibility of any given source is reduced by the existence of alternative and provisional interpretations, no matter actual validity. Accordingly, the mere fact that citizen journalists and blogs are presenting alternative data and interpretations (assuming that they are read), means the influence and authority of the mainstream outlets will be reduced. (This theory has been well understood for centuries by dogmatists and dictators; they do not like their audiences hearing alternative views.)

The fifth challenge is related to who ultimately has not only a voice but also power. As suggested by this brief analysis, voice can lead to power. This was noted above when discussing the cooptation of bloggers, or the use of citizen journalists as a catapult for political careers. Hence, blogs and other forms of citizen journalism can become important tools in the contest over political representation as well as in eroding the control of traditionally dominant elites over the narratives of society. Of course one way for elites to respond to the challenges of bloggers is to repress them through jailing, fines and covert attacks. Another way is to compete with them directly. Yet perhaps cooptation is the most attractive course for those in power who are under assault by citizen journalists and

other denizens of the social media sphere. At the same time, if those in power choose this course of action, it will be fraught with risks. The coopted parties may not want merely to share power but may seek to push out those who initially invited them in.

Beyond these five issues, it is worth pondering a sixth issue, suggested by John Pavlik.⁵³ He has noted that generally speaking in the West, it is opinion and reaction to news stories that dominates the blogosphere. These western blogs tend not to offer original reporting per se (though there certainly is some reporting done via blogs) but rather more commonly offer comment and opinion. This is different than what Western mainstream/professional journalists see as their role, which is to provide objective and “hard” news. At the same time, journalists are seemingly increasingly injecting opinion into their reporting.⁵⁴ Thus the role of the blogosphere may be more commentary than reporting/citizen journalism. The result is that there is increasingly a blended model in which commentary is harder to separate from news. It is worth considering to what extent these trends may also be occurring in the non-Western world of blogs.

Social networking media in conjunction with news blogs and citizen journalists are affecting not only the reporting of news but also the stability and legitimacy of dominant media outlets and governing elites. As a result, the controlling narrative of governance is challenged, and political elites are exposed to new forms of public challenge and accountability. The impact of socially networked citizen journalism reaches still further, affecting ultimately the stability of governments and the destiny of society. Yet, on the other side of equation, social networking media also provides political elites with powerful tools to influence public opinion, monitor opponents, and express its own viewpoints.

Conclusion

At the outset of this article, I argued that traditional journalism needs democracy and that social media harms traditional journalism. Therefore it would be logical to conclude that social media harms democracy. However, such a conclusion would miss the major theme I have sought to develop. In the course of this article I suggested that although traditional journalism does support democracy, some of its most vaunted achievements, such as the Watergate scandal revelations, were less the work of investigative journalism than it was insiders divulging secret information to journalists. Social media has provided some important revelations as well, such as the misrepresentations of network journalists (in the Dan Rather case), and which were often based on either crowd sourcing or the detailed investigations of a dedicated citizen journalist. Thus my main argument is that social media does erode the traditional democratic role of journalism, but is also able to supplement and substitute for it through its own activities. Many of the quotidian news reporting of newspapers can be offloaded to social media without great harm to democracy at either the state or national level.

Among the most likely consequence of the rise of social media vis-à-vis newspapers is the coalescence of micro-groups to discover problems and corruption among opponent groups, which will then seek to criticize and limit their opponents in light of these

discoveries. The subsequent looming fractionalization will require organizations to displace resources currently devoted to other areas instead to the fighting off of the package from outside groups and the propagation of their views (most notably via social media) to influence stakeholder groups. If this prediction is correct, the future is bright for those engaged in policy analysis and the multiple levels of strategic communication campaigns.

From the viewpoint of social change, blogs and citizen journalists are provoking change in who has control over social resources. A crucial nexus is the popular understanding of governmental activities and purposes, which raises varying levels of challenges for countries depending on the level of freedom of expression. For “high-freedom of expression” countries, such as the US, these are nettlesome challenges, but not existential ones. For “low-freedom of expression countries,” such as China or many of those in the Middle East, grave challenges arise in terms of social stability and the distribution of resources. The assumption is that, over the long term, additional competition for social narrative will benefit society. The unfolding of this assumption through new media technology, such as Internet blogging and citizen journalism, bears careful and continuing scrutiny. Serious people will remain profoundly concerned with the squaring of democratic values, free expression of ideas and changing sources of information and ideas.

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