



# Amateurs striving for news production. Can they compete with professional journalism?



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## ABSTRACT

With the rise of Web 2.0 the discussion about professional journalism changing radically or even becoming obsolete in the future has intensified. Up to now, empirical findings mainly stem from research on (micro-)blogging and show its complementary rather than equivalent function compared with professional journalism. Amazingly, the performance of collaborative amateur news websites with an explicitly journalistic approach has rarely been studied so far. Therefore, this paper compares the coverage of German Wikinews with a professional German mass media website and finds significant differences in various dimensions. It thus contributes to the growing empirical evidence and literature on citizen journalism.

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## 1. Introduction

Since Web 2.0 technology has simplified online publishing and empowered nearly everyone to distribute any texts, videos and photos to a potentially global audience, some authors have anticipated a fundamental shift in how journalism will be practiced in the future. As Dan Gillmor puts it, 'technology has given us a communications toolkit that allows anyone to become a journalist at little cost and, in theory, with global reach' (Gillmor, 2004, p. 7). What does such a vision mean for professional journalism? Could it soon be replaced by private blogs, user driven wikis and discussion forums, resources that are often referred to as 'citizen journalism'? Do amateurs have the potential to take on the role of journalists? Such questions have been discussed passionately in the past few years. In this context most attention has been paid to weblogs (e.g. Domingo & Heinonen, 2008; Lowrey, 2006; Papacharissi, 2007). Besides, the microblogging service Twitter is gaining more and more attention by academic research (André, Bernstein, & Luther, 2012; Neuberger, vom Hofe, & Nuernbergk, 2010; Poell & Borra, 2012). Meanwhile, relatively little is known about the news production on amateur wikis, where articles are written by a collective of users without any professional editorial staff acting as gatekeepers or editing material. For journalism studies, this becomes particularly relevant when such wiki-sites are explicitly dedicated to current

news reporting and committed to a journalistic approach. What kind of reporting do such collaborative citizen journalism websites offer? Which topics and news values are predominant? How close is their coverage to professional journalism? Before answering these central questions we will outline how the term 'citizen journalism' is used in academic literature. On this occasion, it seems to be necessary to clarify what role journalism is playing in general within society. In a next step, we will review which phenomena are usually considered manifestations of citizen journalism and report the main findings of the corresponding state of research. After doing so, we will present a study examining the content offered on the collaborative news website Wikinews, which is explicitly dedicated to news reporting and journalistic standards, but has scarcely been investigated yet in this context. We thus contribute new empirical evidence to the growing literature on citizen journalism.

## 2. Citizen journalism – a cloudy term for various phenomena

An increasing amount of online content, ranging from weblog entries to news comments on the websites of traditional media, is currently labeled as 'citizen journalism'. Therefore, it is not surprising that the term 'citizen journalism' is also used very inconsistently in academic literature. It sometimes refers to amateur contributions to mass media (submission of images, posting of comments, entries on discussion pages of news media websites, etc.) or describes any user-generated content available outside of news media websites (e.g. personal weblogs, discussion forums, etc.). In this latter sense it is used increasingly as a synonym for amateur publications *without* any involvement of professional journalists

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(e.g. Carpenter, 2008; Goode, 2009; Nip, 2006; Thurman & Hermida, 2010). This is the definition of the term we will use in this paper, too. Hence, citizen journalism is practiced *independently* and beyond the realm of professional journalism. Considering its difference from the mainstream media production model, it can be situated close to alternative or autonomous media (Atton, 2009). In contrast, the growing efforts of mass media to engage their readership to produce some content as well as these contributions themselves are mostly denominated as ‘participatory journalism’ (e.g. Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007; Paulussen et al., 2008; Singer et al., 2011; Thurman, 2008). This engagement of the audience may therefore comprise different degrees of user participation (e.g. re-actively commenting on published news stories vs. actively submitting pictures or articles), but the control and decision about what is published and how it is presented remain in the hands of professionals (Joensson & Oernebring, 2011; Singer et al., 2011). Participatory journalism thus can be seen as an adaptation of professional journalism to new media practices in the net. Hence, the distinction of these two types of manifestations – citizen journalism in the sense of independent *amateur publishing* on the one hand, participatory journalism in the sense of *citizen or amateur participation in professional journalism* on the other hand – is rather important. Focussing on citizen journalism in particular, it then becomes relevant whether it could be seen as being functionally equivalent to professional journalism and therefore potentially become its substitute or not (Schoenhagen & Kopp, 2007, p. 300).

If we talk about citizen journalism and want to compare it to its professional counterpart, we also have to clarify the specific functions or merits of journalism in general. Following Jarren (2000, 2008) and Wagner (1995) journalism’s main function is to provide an up-to-date overview of the ongoing public discourse – by which society is perpetually generated and maintained (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) – and to serve as a platform for this discourse at the same time (Pietilä, 1992). Thus, journalism should mediate, in a concentrated form, the full spectrum of voices, interests, arguments and themes that exist within society and that are of general (i.e. not of individual or private) relevance. This continuous journalistic observation of society thus covers different sub-systems respectively thematic fields like politics, economy, culture, sports, etc. (Meier, 2007, p. 32). By means of a short literature review in the next section we will try to work out if this function is equally fulfilled by the broad range of online publications which are frequently labeled as citizen journalism.

### 3. State of research on citizen journalism

Most empirical evidence concerning citizen journalism originates from *weblog research*. In summary, it shows that weblogs act as a complement rather than a substitute for professional journalism (Neuberger, Nuernbergk, & Rischke, 2007). This applies both to bloggers’ predominant motives and to the topics typically covered in weblogs. Several surveys have confirmed that it is important for bloggers to keep records of their own lives, to verbalize their opinions and to work through their emotions and experiences (Efimova, 2004, p. 6; Lenhart & Fox, 2006, p. 7; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004, p. 43). This subjective nature has also been reported for weblog contents (Papacharissi, 2007). Bloggers’ selection of topics is determined by their personal concerns, their experiences or by the extent they are delighted with or annoyed by something (Armbrorst, 2006, p. 171). Accordingly, narrations and episodes of private life (often combined with photos) are among the most frequent topics, followed by stories about school or working life (Lenhart & Fox, 2006, p. 9; Schmidt & Wilbers, 2006, p. 13). Other surveys found a predominance of Internet-related topics, but they also highlighted that topics like politics or economy were hardly

covered (Neuberger, 2005, p. 86–87). If such articles appear at all they rarely contain ‘original news reporting’ but tend to ‘re-mediate the news reporting and commentary of mainstream news organizations’ (Haas, 2007, p. 138).

The lack of original reporting seems to be characteristic not only for the most common ‘personal’ blog type, but also for less frequent blog types such as ‘political’ blogs which may, however, reach a broader audience. Leccese (2009) found in an examination of the postings provided by the six most popular political US blogs that the majority of their hyperlinks led to mainstream media reports, meaning they heavily depended on the mass media agenda. Moreover, instead of providing an overview about political debates they mainly contained opinions and comments – resembling the contributions of newspapers’ ‘opinion columnists’ (Leccese, 2009, p. 585, 587). Assessing the relation between political weblogs and mass media from agenda setting theory, other studies confirm that traditional media are among the most cited sources in the political blogosphere (e.g. Meraz, 2009; Messner & Distaso, 2008). Hence, it is often argued that first-level agenda setting rather takes place from the outlets of traditional media to independent blogs than vice versa. Nevertheless, political blogs may play an important role in so-called second-level agenda setting as they can re-frame and resuscitate issues on the public agenda that have been covered by mass media before (Campbell, Gibson, Gunter, & Touri, 2010, p. 42).

Often described as micro-blogging, *Twitter* has attracted significant attention in the last years. Especially during the Mumbai bomb attacks in November 2008, the post-election protests in Iran in June 2009 as well as during the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011 the service became a focus of mass media news and commentaries (Arthur, 2008; Friedman, 2011; Weaver, 2010). It enables its users to send and read each other’s messages of up to 140 characters via desktop computer or mobile phone (Armstrong & Fangfang, 2010, p. 222). These ‘tweets’ of individuals or organizations are sent to followers automatically. Furthermore, one can search all tweets that have run through the *Twitter* service unless they have been sent as ‘direct messages’ to selected friends (i.e. like an email). Some claim ‘that what *Twitter* is doing is effectively journalism’ (Ingram, 2008) or consider it a ‘form of citizen journalism’ (Hermida, 2010, p. 300) because the service allows sharing information fragments very fast from anywhere. Assessing the journalistic value of *Twitter* one has to consider, however, that messages – either received through subscription or retrieved by personal search – are not sorted by importance, region or in any other way that makes factual sense, but appear in the chronological order they have been posted in. Additionally, the service does not differentiate between the expression of personal opinions or feelings on the one hand and information that is socially relevant to a bigger group of people on the other hand, nor are the accuracy and trustworthiness of the messages checked or guaranteed. These characteristics apply, for the most part, also to weblogs as mentioned above.

Empirical findings concerning *Twitter* are growing. Having analyzed more than 11.5 million *Twitter* accounts in 2009, Cheng, Evans, and Singh found out that 24% or one quarter of all tweets have been generated by machine bots, by computer programs that run the same task automatically and repeatedly. These bots are operated by sources such as hotels offering deals, regional weather services, financial aggregators and so on (Cheng et al., 2009). However, for an evaluation of *Twitter*’s journalistic potential it is more adequate not to give the same weight to every singular of myriads of tweets but to concentrate on those messages that are re-tweeted (i.e. forwarded) by a high number of people and therefore become publicly more salient within the twittersphere. These so-called re-tweets are thus deemed to be relevant by a greater audience (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010). *Twitter* collects the most re-tweeted messages in its top tweet lists for various countries. Given this fact, Neuberger et al. (2010) looked at the top re-tweets ( $n=963$ ) from

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