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The expansion and contraction of the journalistic field and American online citizen journalism, 2000–2012

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ABSTRACT

While previous research has considered patterns of homogeneity and heterogeneity in the journalistic field, existing literature has largely ignored the factors that contribute to the growth and contraction of the field. Using citizen journalism (CJ) as a case study, we examine how four forces – organizational population dynamics, technological innovations, exogenous political events, and endogenous disruptions elsewhere in the field – shaped the growth of CJ over time and, consequently, the journalistic field. Using a snowball sampling method, we collected a “near-population” of U.S.-based, English-language CJ sites ($n = 1829$) to measure yearly density and rates of foundings and mortalities. The population of CJ sites increased through most of the period, foundings declined after a spike in 2005, and mortalities rose dramatically after 2010. The results provide evidence that organizational population and technological change affected the size of the population of CJ sites, while political upheaval and disruptions within professional journalism held less sway.

1. Introduction

To say that citizen journalism (CJ) has generated recent interest is an understatement. The phenomenon has inspired dozens of thinkpieces in the mainstream media (Gillmor, 2004), attracted substantial funding from non-profit foundations (Lewis, 2011; Schaffer, 2007), and provided the grist for a small industry of academic studies (e.g., Carpenter, Nah, & Chung, 2013; Waisbord, 2014; Wall, 2015). Scholars and popular commentators have celebrated CJ's potential to shift power over popular discourse to the people, to resist some of the troubling patterns in professional journalism, and to pick up the slack in communities where newspapers have disappeared (Schaffer, 2007). Even critics of CJ, who have shown that CJ sites are not usually an adequate replacement for newspapers, attribute great cultural weight to the form (Fico et al., 2013).

Inclusive, equitable, and civil deliberative discourse are essential to any democratic society (Habermas, 1989). For Habermas (1989), in the ideal “public sphere,” people of all sorts would engage in rational-critical discourse as part of civil society. With a disregard of status and the willingness to engage across differences, individuals and groups would determine the agenda and move toward collective action (Dahlberg, 2005). More recent adapters of Habermas' thinking have conceptualized the Internet, blogs, message boards, and other online communities as holding the potential to revive the public sphere (Benkler, 2006; Dahlberg, 2001).

By contrast, modern commercial media tends to echo elite preferences, “pre-structuring” public discourse (Habermas, 1989) and failing to provide the “mobilizing information” necessary for civic engagement (Lemert, 1981). Habermas' hope for democratic discourse lay with civil society, not a professionalized class of journalists.

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The great enthusiasm for CJ from many quarters stems from its potential to be part of a reinvigorated space for equitable and inclusive democratic deliberations (Benkler, 2006; Gillmor, 2004), to challenge “industrial journalism,” and to reconceive what journalism ought to be (Anderson, Bell, & Shirky, 2012; Deuze, 2003; Rhinesmith et al., 2011; Waisbord, 2014). The promise is that CJ might disrupt and transform the journalistic field, pulling it into civil society, where it could be governed by a new set of values and routines (Vos, Craft, & Ashley, 2012).

There is good reason to be skeptical of the loftiest claims about CJ. Research has shown substantial professionalization within CJ, with many sites adopting the organizational structures and routine practices of professional journalism (Carpenter, 2010, 2008; Lindner, Connell, & Meyer, 2015). Nonetheless, even among researchers recognizing its limitations, there seems to be a consensus that “citizen journalism is now an essential part of news gathering and delivery around the world” (Wall, 2015, pg. 1). For its boosters, CJ’s primary contribution is to expand, diversify, and democratize the journalistic field (Carpenter, 2010, 2008; Goode, 2009).

Several studies have explored how political media (Rohlinger, 2007), blogs (Vos et al., 2012), and “debate ensemble” formats in French media (Benson, 2009) contribute to heterogeneity in the journalistic field. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1993) field theory, this literature has shown how the journalistic field acts a “site of struggle,” where different types of news outlets vary in their levels of cultural capital and provide different types of news coverage. Alternative forms of media, like political media, debate ensemble formats, tweets, and blogs have shown some capacity to provide more inclusive, civil, critical coverage with greater dialogue and deliberate discourse across difference (Barnard, 2016; Benson, 2009; Rohlinger, 2007; Vos et al., 2012).

While previous research has considered patterns of homogeneity and heterogeneity in the journalistic field (Benson, 2006), existing literature has largely ignored the factors that contribute to the growth and contraction of the journalistic field. CJ is an organizational population nested within the journalistic field. Its expansion contributes to the growth of the broader journalistic field as a whole. And it can exert influence in the field only when the population has the strength in numbers to be seen as legitimate by other agents in the field. Consequently, the case of CJ offers an opportunity to bring together the very different theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu’s field theory and organizational population ecology to better understand the conditions that lead to expansion and contraction of organizational populations within the journalistic field.

The current paper contributes to our understanding of the journalistic field by documenting the population of English-language, U.S.-based citizen journalism sites online from 2000 to 2012 and by exploring social and historical dynamics that may have contributed to the form’s growth and subsequent decline. We begin by discussing existing literature on field theory and organizational population ecology. We also review research on the emergence of CJ, noting a number of important factors that may have contributed to CJ’s expansion and contraction as a part of the wider journalistic field. We introduce an innovative dataset constructed from the most exhaustive sample of CJ sites to date and use the data to chart organizational foundings, mortalities, and density. In doing so, we consider which factors seem likely to have had the largest impact on the rise (and, perhaps, fall) of CJ.

2. Literature review

2.1. A population in a field

Bourdieu’s (1998, 1993) field theory holds that fields are social spaces structured by exogenous (e.g., the market, historical events, technological changes, etc.) and endogenous forces (e.g., features of culture like norms and values). In fields, actors and organizations of varying strength compete to define, dominate, and maintain the field. Bourdieu considered fields including sport, politics, and fashion (Bourdieu, 2005, 1984), but, media scholars in recent years have drawn particular attention to his notion of a “journalistic field” (Barnard, 2016; Benson, 2009, 2006; Krause, 2011; Rohlinger, 2007; Vos et al., 2012).

Within the journalistic field, a shared “system of presuppositions” known as *doxa* leads to some level of homogeneity (Bourdieu, 2005, pg. 37). These presuppositions can include patterns of organizational structure, journalistic practices, status hierarchies, and beliefs about journalistic ethics. At the same time, Bourdieu (1993) sees fields as fundamentally “sites of struggle” defined by two poles. The “heteronomous pole,” representing forces external to the field (usually discussed in existing literature in terms of economic forces), and the “autonomous” pole, representing forms of cultural capital particular to the field (e.g., the type of serious investigative reporting that wins awards), are at odds. Individual journalists and media outlets occupy positions between the two poles, with intellectual publications like *The New Yorker* hewing toward the autonomous pole, and market-driven, “if it bleeds, it leads” news clustered close to the heteronomous pole. In this way, the journalistic field is both homogenous via its shared *doxa*, but also defined by the heterogeneity that exists between the two poles.

The journalistic field is not static. New entrants to the field create possibilities for change, shifting the field toward one pole or another. As Vos et al. (2012) write, “the journalistic field is perhaps now more than ever subject to transformation because of the influx of new agents in the age of the internet” (pg. 3). In a content analysis of media criticism by bloggers, Vos et al. (2012) find that the bloggers largely accepted the *doxa* of the field, critiquing traditional media by traditional standards rather than attempting to disrupt or transform cultural capital within the field.

Existing research has attended to the role of new entrants in producing heterogeneity within the journalistic field, while largely ignoring the factors that contribute to the changing size of the field. One reason for that is because fields, as Bourdieu conceived of them, are messy. Unlike studies of organizational populations, where researchers count the number of similar organizations (e.g., daily newspapers), fields are made up of dissimilar and sometimes hard to measure parts. The journalistic field includes newspapers

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