How citizen journalism websites are working in Australia: news and discussion

Abstract

A study of five websites in Australia in the general field of citizen journalism suggests there is an inverse relationship between the objectivity of stories on each site and the overall number of comments provided by audience members on the site, and that citizen journalism *without* objectivity can benefit the public good. There is also a preference among authors and participating audience members for stories which ranked highly for proximity of content to audience members, and for use of the site for discussion and social and political commentary rather than as a resource for news. Video and images were common but audio podcasts were absent. These findings, combined with earlier research, tend to support strategies by larger media corporations to start and encourage such participatory techniques as a way of building new, more viable audiences. This feature suggests a positive business outlook for these citizen journalism sites.

Key words: citizen journalism, media convergence, Australian journalism, participatory techniques, classical journalism, newsworthiness, objectivity, advocacy, commerciality.
Introduction

Annie Taylor
University of Queensland

John Cokley
Swinburne University of Technology

Introduction:

The future of journalism is the cause of much debate both in Australia and internationally (Latzer, 2009; see also Houston, 2010 & Bruns et al., 2011). Advancing technologies that enable instant news updates and increased audience participation in the news-gathering process has ensured that much of this debate is centred on the rise of citizen journalism.

A citizen journalist is defined here as any individual who participates in the conversation of news-making in a way that is deemed helpful and who is not a 'fake' citizen, that is, someone representing corporate interests (Gillmor, 2004: 11). Jay Rosen (2010) defines citizen journalism as occurring, 'when the people formally known as the audience employ the press tools in their possession to inform one another'.

Citizen journalism has created a challenge for those in the media industry who are divided about whether this challenge is bound to have positive or negative impacts on classical journalism. The impact of citizen journalism, whether positive or negative, is rippling around the media industry as falling revenues among media corporations prompt cost-cutting in their news production lines. Concerns have been raised among professional journalists that increasing competition from citizen journalists will decrease their opportunities for paid employment (Tilley & Cokley, 2008: 100) and evidence certainly exists to support these concerns (Beaubien, 2007: 17).

Moreover, the abundance of information that a rise in citizen journalism has created and a move from closed to open information systems is challenging the entrenched authority of political institutions and established media organizations (McNair, 2006). The ease and accessibility of self-publishing and the subsequent increase of debate and opinion means significant growth in the diversity of viewpoints available to news consumers (McNair, 2006: 201). Consequently the flow of information has become more frequent and difficult to predict and to contain (McNair, 2006: 202).

Our research examines five Australian websites which have emerged in the citizen journalism environment: Wikinews Australia, Typeboard, Indymedia, Online Opinion and Fitzroyalty. While the selection of these sites effectively excludes others from our study and thus begs the debate about what constitutes a citizen journalism website and whether these meet the criteria, we have taken the approach that the present selection allows us to interrogate the environment sufficiently well for the aims at hand. This issue is addressed further in the 'Method' section.
Review of current citizen journalism literature

Journalism is undergoing a transformation. New technological advancements have reduced the costs of publishing and – with a computer now equating to a printing press (Witt, 2004: 49) – individuals have immediate access to publishing suites. Along with this transformation has emerged the increasing audience expectation that a certain level of audience participation be permitted and indeed facilitated by the media (Deuze, 2006: 68). The Internet has served to authorize and intensify this trend.

Despite a momentary slump with the collapse of the Pew Centre for Civic Journalism in 2003 and the subsequent withdrawing of millions of dollars in support for citizen journalism projects, the citizen journalism trend was quickly revived with the creation of the Public Journalism Network (PJNet) (Witt, 2004: 49). Increasing convergence within the media industry has followed the continued development of the Internet, the explosion of digital television, the availability of wireless communication and the increasing capacity of next-generation networks to support citizen journalism. The trend has continued to burgeon, with the empirical evidence to support this argument readily available (Latzer, 2009: 416).

While media convergence is largely discussed as being both inevitable and desirable (Latzer, 2009: 415) debates surrounding the topic are ongoing. These debates lie mainly around the ethical dilemmas media convergence produces and the implications it has for professional journalism and classical journalism generally.

In a time of declining public trust in news, loss of advertising revenue, and an increasingly participatory, self-expressive and digital media culture, journalism is in the process of rethinking and reinventing itself (Bruns, Deuze & Neuberger, 2007: 322).

The long-standing argument that professional journalism is becoming redundant (Scott, 2005: 90) while mainstream media faces deterioration partly blames the overly partisan and amateurish practice of online journalism (Houston, 2010: 46). Online news sites, such as *Yahoo! News*, are certainly presenting a challenge for classical journalism (Palser, 2002: 62). Due to the ability of the Internet to republish and hyperlink, *Yahoo! News* needs no reporters and creates no stories, and yet in 2002, was the third most popular news website in the United States (Palser, 2002: 62). This is an illustration of the technological transformation that journalistic relationships are undergoing (Pavlik, 2004: 28).

The Internet, as a new participatory arena, has often set hopes high as a way of revitalising politics through its impact on the public sphere (Flew, 2009: 987). The Internet has provided new opportunities for the public to engage effectively in the deliberation of policy rather than being an inactive public, concerned primarily with watching and listening to the political elite decide how to act on its behalf (Coleman, 2005: 209). Additionally, it has presented new possibilities of advocacy forms of political participation (Dahlgren, 2005: 157). 'In the information age modern societies can ill afford a status quo which leaves large sections of the citizenry disenfranchised from participation in processes of journalistic and political deliberation' (Bruns, Deuze & Neauberger, 2007).

Those who support the trend of media convergence celebrate the demise of the news audience and the uprising of participation and interaction (Rosen 2006), viewing interactivity as central to this process and beneficial to accuracy in reporting (Pavlik. 2004: 28). The rise in citizen journalism means that the media system no longer runs one-way with high entry-fees and a small group of competing, elitist media organisations determining what an isolated audience receives (Rosen cited in Bird, 2009: 294, see also Atton, 2004: 40-41).

Richardson (1983) emphasises the importance of participation with three arguments: the fairness argument, the instrumental argument and the developmental argument. The fairness argument relates to the right of individuals to be involved in the making of decisions that affect them. The instrumental argument maintains that better decisions may result from broad participation and consultation. The developmental argument contends that citizens realise their potential for effective engagement and action through the acquirement of political skills dependent upon participation. Participation, therefore, is essential to policy processes and can provide a means for the creation of social capital from which democratic objectives begin (Considine, 1994: 130).

As suggested by Bruns, Deauze and Neauberger (2007) perhaps it is a fine balance between transparency and systems of control that holds the key to understanding creative yet professionally accountable forms of citizen news processes. They examine the rise of citizen journalism in four countries: Australia, The Netherlands, Germany and the United States of America, arguing that what they call 'participatory journalism', appeared as a response to perceived shortcomings in mainstream news coverage, for example *Indymedia,* which became an alternative means of covering the 1999 World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle and *OhmyNews*, as an alternative to the conservative mainstream press in South Korea (Kahney, 2003 cited in Bruns, Deuze & Neauberger, 2007: 3). They (p.20) conclude that despite the

success of participatory journalism it continues to remain dependent upon mainstream news organisations, whose output it reacts to and engages with. While, at the same time, mainstream news is increasingly taking note of what citizen journalists are saying (Ibid). Perhaps this is the most significant contribution to or effect upon classical journalism by citizen journalism; its ability to significantly add to the discussion on the responsibility of journalism as a contributor to the proper functioning of democratic societies (Massey & Hass, 2002 cited in Witt, 2004: 50).

Citizen journalism is being framed in both positive and negative terms. The former sees citizen journalism as a way of democratising journalism by moving the gate-keeping role away from an elite group with revenue and advertising investments; pluralising voices in the public sphere by providing new opportunities and outlets; and finally enabling *in situ* technologies to drive change among pre-existing classical media (Tilley & Cokley, 2008: 98). More negatively citizen journalism can be seen to devalue journalistic practises and the ethical and commercial worth of the profession, eroding the quality of information provided by creating a 'mirror ball affect' and undermining society by facilitating 'flogging' and 'astroturfing' (Tilley & Cokley, 2008: 98-99). Whatever the argument, and there appear to be many, media regulators are quickly coming to the realization that media convergence and subsequently citizen journalism is unstoppable.

In summary, the new scenario can be seen as exciting but possibly depressing (Bird, 2009: 294). It has historically been the responsibility of journalists to inform democracy, however, their future success now relies not only upon how well they continue to carry out this responsibility, but how well they encourage and facilitate conversations with citizens (Bowman & Willis, 2003). While journalists must acknowledge the benefits of convergence they must also recognize that its rise and the subsequent sharing of information and outsourcing of reporting has and perhaps will continue to lead to a decline in jobs for professional journalists (Bird, 2009: 294). The way we view journalism might need to change too, either as a profession that has reached its end or as a trade that is continually evolving and changing (Bruns, Deauze & Neauberger, 2007).

State of play: Australian citizen journalism

In light of the role blogging played in United States electoral politics, the 2007 Australian federal election was regarded as something of a test for the Australian blogosphere (Bahnisch, 2008: 9). Bloggers were faced with the implication that unless they played a central role in influencing the opinions of voters and contributed to public debate they would be dismissed as an ineffective form of public discourse (Ibid). The potential political sway of Australian bloggers was limited, however, by major Australian media

organisations who adopted 'rebadging' techniques, dubbing their columnists as 'bloggers' and opening the space for comments and public participation on their various websites (Ibid). This highlights a calculated decision by news media to colonise the online space by introducing commentary 'blogs' (Black, 2008) and other increasingly participatory techniques.

Moreover, the comparison with the United States ignored vast differences in political culture, everyday practises of participative citizenship, and the position of commercial media organisations (Bahnisch, 2008: 10). Two possible restrictions that have been identified as limitations on the impact of citizen journalism in Australia contrasted with that of citizen journalism in the United States are the relatively limited population of Australia and the indifference of mainstream Australian media in effectively engaging with online media (Young, 2008). However, research of the Australian blogosphere at the time of the 2007 Australian federal election (Bruns, et al., 2011: 280) suggests that, despite the above-mentioned restrictions, there were a handful of highly active, independent, unpaid bloggers contributing to public discourse. Furthermore, it has been suggested (Wilson, 2008) that the failure of the Australian Liberal Party to engage with the online media throughout their 2007 federal election campaign helped the Australia Labor Party underscore the difference between the two political brands. This suggests that citizen journalism has the potential to sway large voting populations within Australia.

During the height of another Australian political controversy, the 'Utegate' affair of 2009, monitors of the Australian blogosphere concluded that bloggers engaged more extensively with the entirety of the controversy than did mainstream news sites (Bruns, et al., 2011). Rather than simply focusing on the short-term political drama, the blogosphere discussed the long-term political implications of 'Utegate'; "blogs quite literally positioned 'Utegate' as a sideshow to the main business of national politics" (Bruns, et al., 2011: 282-283). This suggests that the Australian political blogosphere maintains its own perspectives on what it chooses as important discourse rather than mirroring the coverage of leading news corporations.

The hostility between mainstream media corporations and the citizen journalism arena in Australia has been blamed on the ignorance of mainstream journalists and the triumphalism of citizen journalists in providing an alternative to mainstream media (McKnight, 2008). It has been suggested (Wilson, 2008) that Australian policy bloggers are having some effect on the discourse of elite policymaking. The difficulty comes in defining and measuring the extent of this impact on the Australian media industry.

Method

In an attempt to understand the current 'state of play' of Australian citizen journalism, five websites in the environment of 'citizen journalism' were monitored over a period of seven days from September 10, 2011 to September 16, 2011. These websites were:

Wikinews Australia
Typeboard
Indymedia Australia
Online Opinion
Fitzroyalty

Each of these sites fits the broad definitions advanced earlier, that a citizen journalist is any individual who participates in the conversation of news-making in a way that is deemed helpful and who is not a 'fake' citizen, that is, someone representing corporate interests (Gillmor, 2004: 11) and sites where 'the people formally known as the audience employ the press tools in their possession to inform one another' Jay Rosen (2010). The number of websites reviewed and the duration of the review represent limitations on the scope of the results, and we have been mindful of this. The selection of the websites resulted from a web-based search using the terms 'citizen journalism Australia' and a review of current available literature in the field. While it is acknowledged that there might be other citizen journalism websites in Australia which we have not identified or selected, the current selection offers an indication of the field sufficient for the research purposes.

In Step 1 of our study, the content of these websites was interrogated for three variables: objectivity, advocacy and commerciality. By using these terms to assess the content of the above-mentioned websites a distinction emerged between what could and could not be classed as news.

Objectivity is a concept that is perhaps easier to define than it is to practice. Distortion, lack of objectivity and bias are certainly concepts that constantly assail the media industry (Myrick, 2002: 50 see also Hackett, 1984). Objectivity as defined by Oxford Dictionaries Online (2011) describes an individual or their judgment as 'not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing the facts'. It is the interposition of the human element of perceiving, processing and interpreting information through the prism of personal feelings and prejudices that determines individual objectivity (Myrick, 2002: 50). Objectivity then is a demand that is difficult for news organisations to fulfil, considering they are not only

institutions vying for economic survival but also institutions that are often used as political organs (Schudson, 1978: 3). Is it then something we can better expect from citizen journalists, unrestrained as they are by monetary factors? The possibility of objectivity is a hotly debated assumption (see O'Brien, 2007) and remains central to defining what constitutes journalism. The measure of objectivity adopted for this study was the inclusion of certain facts on which journalists' standard routines rely: 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where', 'how' and 'why'. The assumption here is that when writers adopt the 'inverted pyramid' style of reporting, that is, that the most important information is included early on in the story, the writer is subsequently required to make subjective judgements about which parts of the story are of greater significance (Thorsen, 2008: 945). 'This sequential representation can be understood as the hierarchy of credibility of sources within the text. As a consequence, the narrative structure carries both ideological and discursive importance in relation to defining an event from a neutral point of view' (Ibid). In our study, each story included on the front page of the five websites over the seven days was assessed on its inclusion or exclusion of: who, what, when, where, how and why. Stories that included all six factors early on, in keeping with the inverted pyramid style of reporting, were ranked highly for 'objectivity'.

Advocacy journalism is identified as a current trend in the media industry (see O'Brien, 2007) where the journalist becomes a part of the story and subjectivity takes precedence over objectivity. We counted the number of stories on each website which included links to campaigns or petitions or words which reflected 'calls to action'. There is an interface at this point between advocacy and the more standard journalistic techniques of seeking audience attention and agenda-setting but that link is outside the scope of this study.

Commercialised journalism as defined by McManus (1994: 1) sees news viewers or readers as customers, news as a product and circulation and signal areas as markets. McManus (1994) argues that market forces influence journalism at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels due to the invested interests of investors, advertisers, sources and consumers who drive the production process. We counted instances where stories included product recommendations, 'buy links' and unambiguous advertising content within editorial space. The clearest example of what we were counting are reports published by the Buchanan Group, which frames their content as product news. Buchanan owns platforms such as Adverlife, Zoot Review, MediFacts, Brand Power and Infotalk, and says it is at the forefront of 'information media branding' (The Buchanan Group, 2011) in Australia. Adverlife, as an example, claims to bring audiences "the latest product news" (Adverlife,

2011). Similarly, MediFacts provides information on the latest healthcare products, designed "to help you access optimum healthcare for your family and yourself" (MediFacts, 2011). The Buchanan Group claims to 'provide turn-key solutions in sales-driven third-party advertising,' informing, explaining and educating to enable consumers to 'make more informed choices in the products and services that they buy' (The Buchanan Group, 2011).

In Step 2 of our study, content of the five websites was measured for the journalistic news values of: consequence, proximity, conflict, human interest, novelty and prominence: '… news values of an event predict media coverage of the event, and the media coverage predicts audience attention to the event' (Lee, 2009: 175). We recognise that the definition of news values is a somewhat contentious issue. Journalists often claim to know instinctively what is news, however, identifying what is news is quite different from understanding what factors result in some information making news over other information (Masterton, 1998: 85). Various journalists and scholars have defined a variety of news values. Galtung and Ruge (1965) propose: frequency, threshold, disambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite people, reference to persons and reference to something negative, as news values. More recently, Harcup and O'Neill (2001) identified the news values of: power elite, celebrity, entertainment, surprise, bad news, good news, magnitude, relevance, follow-up, and newspaper agenda. Shoemaker, Danielian and Brendlinger (1991) more minimally in their *newsworthiness model* suggest that previously identified news values are encompassed by both 'deviance' and 'social significance'. 'Deviance' refers to news events that are either unusual (statistical deviance), threaten the status quo (social change deviance) or break social norms (normative deviance). 'Social significance' refers to events perceived as important to society, it has four dimensions: political, economic, cultural and public.

For this study we used Masterton's list (1998: 91): consequence, proximity, conflict, human interest, novelty and prominence. To identify these six news values Masterton questioned decision-making journalists in newspaper, agency and broadcast newsrooms and academic and industry based journalism schools in 151 countries. The findings of Masterton's research pointed to the necessity of three core elements for any information to become newsworthy, these are: interest, timeliness and clarity. Furthermore, the research narrowed down the so-called "Big Six" (Masterton 1998: 91) news values that are central criteria for newsworthiness.

Consequence, as defined by Masterton (1998: 92), is a measure of the number of people who will be affected by the content of a story. Consequence was ranked in Masterton's research as the most important news criterion of the six.
Proximity, is a measure of where information originates (Masterton, 1998: 94). Information loses its newsworthiness the further away from its target audience it originates.
Conflict encompasses any form of conflict to include differences of opinion, legal (court cases, crime), intellectual or psychological (protest) and psychical violence associated most commonly with warfare (Masterton, 1998: 95-96).
Human Interest is defined as people wanting to know about other people, regardless of their prominence, it is information that is almost always published because of emotion rather than the serious nature of the content (Masterton, 1998: 97).
Information under the criterion of novelty relates to things that are new, unusual or different (Masterton, 1998: 98). In other words, the man-bites-dog syndrome (Ibid).
Prominence is defined here as dependent upon who the information is about (Masterton, 1998: 99). The more socially or politically prominent the subject of the story the more newsworthy it becomes.

To measure the importance given to each of the six news values, each story on each of the websites over the seven days was coded with a score from one to five for each of the six aspects. The Likert scale attributes the highest value to the number five and the lowest value to the number one, with the values descending accordingly. The data collected over the seven day period was then consolidated and averaged to create a medium ranking for each website according to the proposed Likert scale. Timeliness was also measured on the 1-5 Likert scale. Five was assigned to information that was provided on the same day the site was monitored. Accordingly a rating of four, three and two was assigned for each subsequent day. One was assigned to stories older than four or more days.

Finally, as Step 3, we counted the number of comments on the main stories of each site and the inclusion or lack of, of multimedia, in the form of images, sound and video included among these stories.
Findings
Overview

This overview of the findings provides a comparative analysis of the findings for all six websites over the seven days of monitoring.
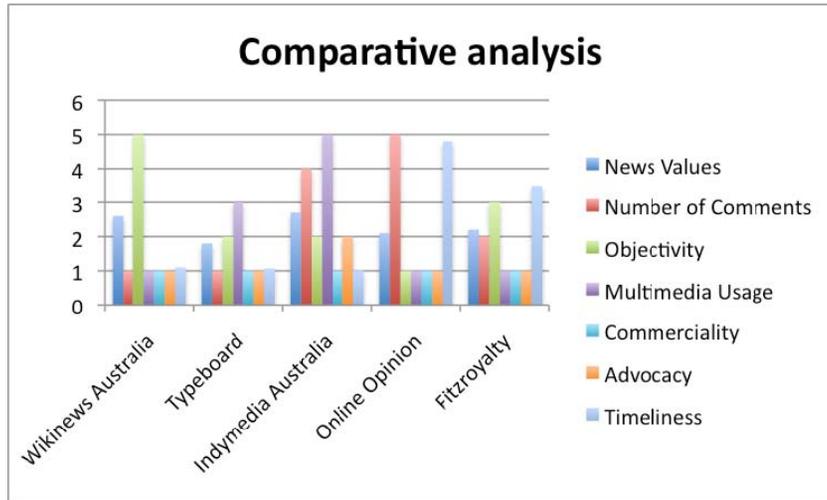
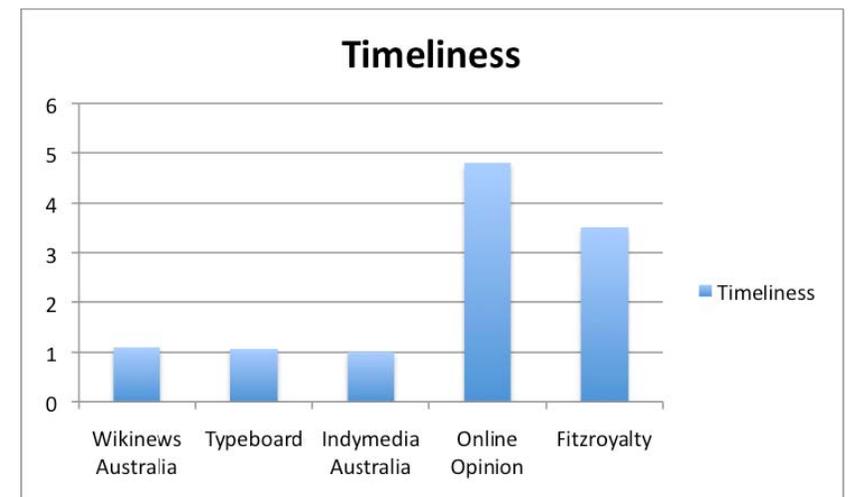(Figure two)

(Figure one)

Number of stories

Figure two shows the number of stories on the five websites over the seven days. This number is the total number of stories included on the main page of that site on the respective day. Whilst this is the total number of stories, not all websites updated their stories on a daily basis. The timeliness of these stories varied significantly.
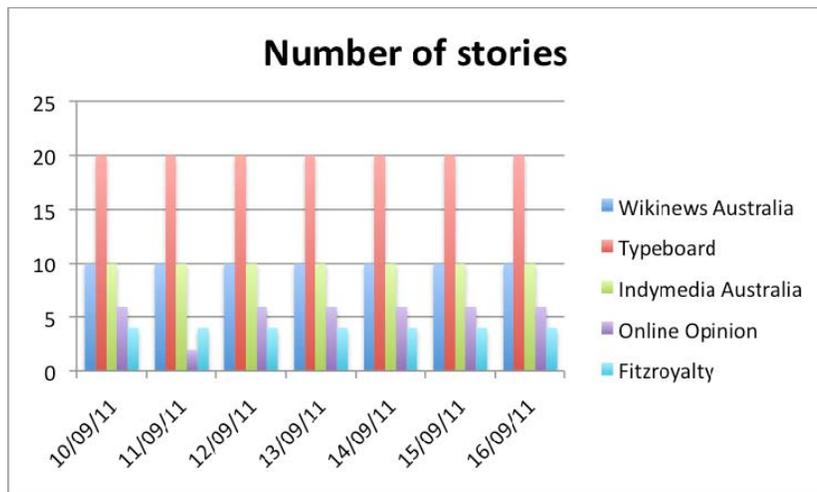
Timeliness

Online Opinion ranked far above the other websites in terms of timeliness with an overall rating of 4.8. Turnaround of stories on Online Opinion was daily, except for weekends. Fitzroyalty uploaded one new story per day giving it an overall timeliness rating of 3.5. Wikinews, Indymedia and Typeboard coded: 1.1, 1.01 and 1.07 respectively, all with a relatively slow turnaround of stories.


(Figure three)

Objectivity, advocacy and commerciality

The level of objectivity found in the five websites over the seven days was relatively low. As demonstrated in figure one the majority of information on the websites fell short of complying with the measure of objectivity proposed here, by failing to include information relating to the central: who, what, when, how, where and why of the story.

Wikinews Australia had the largest number of objective stories in relation to the total number of stories on the website with 50% of their stories complying with the aforementioned inverted pyramid. Typeboard and Indymedia Australia ranked similarly with around 30% objectivity. Of

Online Opinion's 38 stories only three satisfied the requirement for objectivity.

Interestingly for a hyperlocal news website, Fitzroyalty demonstrated the lowest amount of objectivity, with most information presented on the site concentrated on new pieces of wall art around Melbourne's Fitzroy or reviews of local eateries.
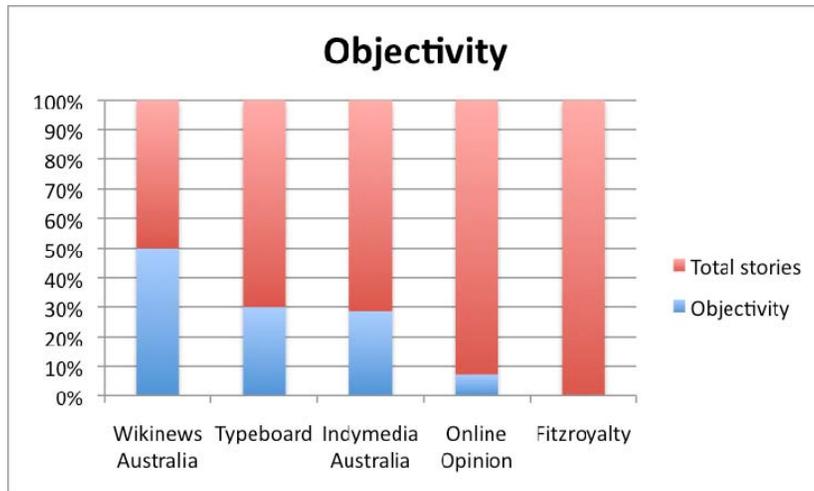

(Figure four)

Both commerciality and advocacy were relatively low in all five websites. Indymedia Australia ranked higher than the others in terms of advocacy with 42 of their 70 stories demonstrating some form of advocacy, primarily in the form of links to campaign websites and petitions.

The only hint of commerciality was on Typeboard with seven of their 131 stories over the seven days showing any level of commerciality and seven stories also demonstrating some form of advocacy.

Neither Wikinews Australia, Online Opinion nor Fitzroyalty showed any evidence of advocacy or commerciality.
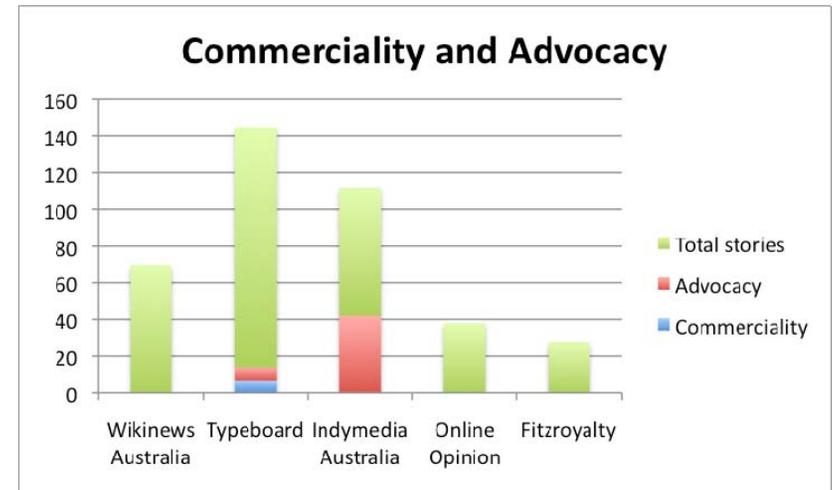
(Figure five)

Newsworthiness

Proximity was by far the most included news value in almost all five of the monitored websites, outranked by human interest only on Typeboard.

Indymedia Australia and Fitzroyalty displayed the highest amount of proximity both with a perfect score of five=high on the Likert scale, with stories predominantly originating in Australia. Wikinews Australia achieved 3.7, Online Opinion achieved 3.3 while Typeboard achieved 2.9 overall in terms of proximity.

Human interest ranked quite uniformly over the five websites. Wikinews Australia achieved 3.7, Indymedia Australia 3.2, Online Opinion 3.1, Typeboard 3 and Fitzroyalty 2.8.

With regards to conflict Indymedia Australia ranked highly with 3.9 out of a possible five. Wikinews Australia and Online Opinion both achieved 2.6, while Fitzroyalty and Typeboard achieved 1.5 and 1.4 respectively.

Consequence fluctuated quite dramatically across the five websites. Wikinews Australia achieved the highest score on the Likert scale with 3.2. Indymedia Australia achieved 2.6, Typeboard 1.7 and Online Opinion and Fitzroyalty 1.4.

Novelty and prominence were the lowest ranking news values, rating quite similarly across all websites. Fitzroyalty achieved 1.7 in terms of novelty, Online Opinion 1.1, Typeboard 1.07 and Wikinews Australia and Indymedia Australia both achieved the lowest score of 1.0. With regards to prominence Wikinews Australia ranked highest with 1.7, Online Opinion 1.3 and Typeboard, Indymedia and Fitzroyalty all achieved 1.0.
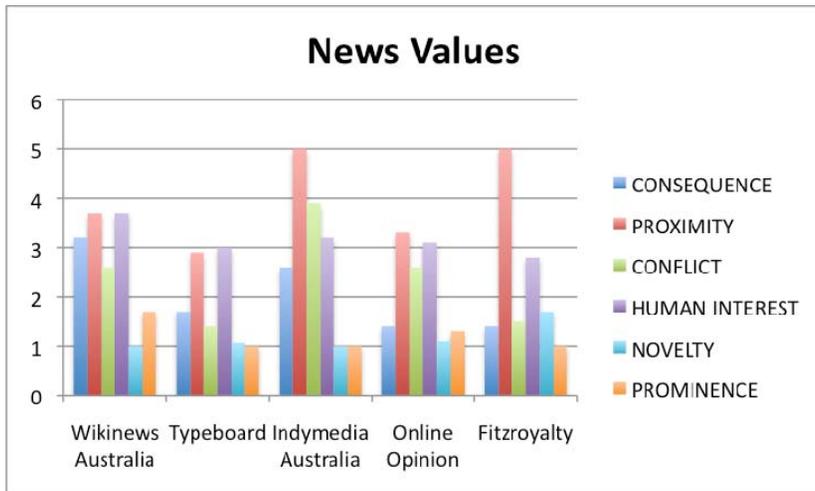
(Figure six)

Number of comments

Online Opinion was, by far, the citizen journalism website that received the highest number of comments with 376 comments over the seven days. Wikinews Australia ranked the lowest with zero comments. Indymedia Australia had 203 comments, Fitzroyalty had 76, while Typeboard had just 21. However, Online Opinion clearly demonstrated higher interactivity due to greater daily turnaround of stories and subsequent comments.
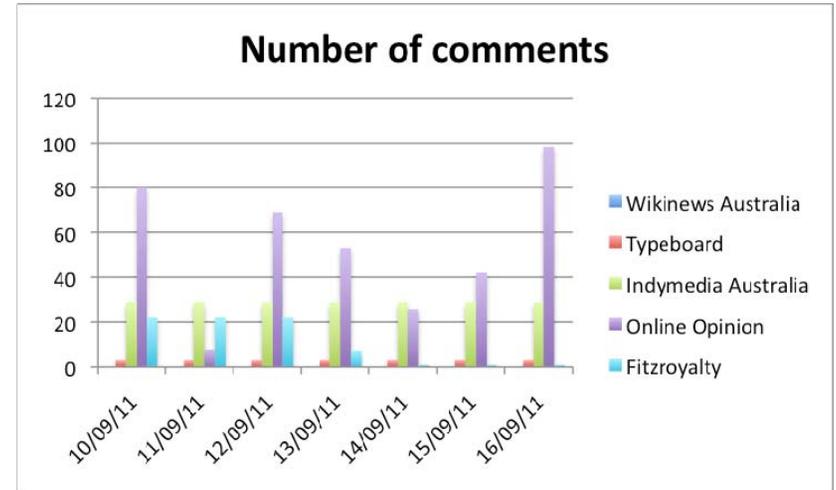
(Figure seven)

Use of multimedia

As figure four demonstrates images were, by far, the most popular multimedia tool used across all five websites. Indymedia Australia ranked highest with its use of multimedia with 175 images and twenty-one videos, with Online Opinion coming in last with just fourteen images and one video over the seven days.

Typeboard had made use of 45 images and 14 videos. Wikinews Australia had 35 images and no videos while Fitzroyalty had 31 images over the seven days.

As many of the websites did not update regularly, neither did the multimedia used in these websites so images and videos were often recounted. Numbers here have been given as total over the seven days.

Sound was not used in any of the websites at any time over the seven days.
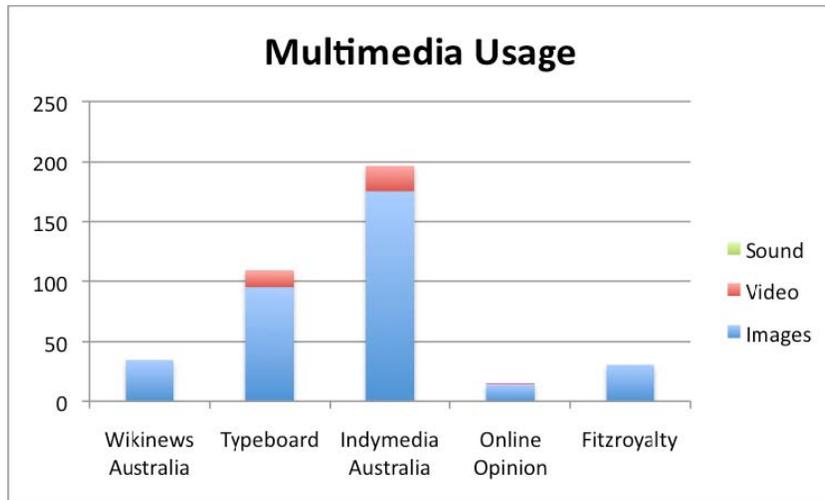
(Figure eight)

Discussion

Objectivity scores quite lowly across the five sites, with very few stories adopting the inverted pyramid style of writing identified as a requirement for subjective reporting (Thorsen, 2008: 945). However, advocacy and commerciality were also quite low.

Masterton's research ranked consequence as the most important news criterion (1998) but it was not given much importance by contributors to the five citizen journalism websites, coding at its best, at 3.2 and fluctuating considerably over the websites. Proximity, however, coded consistently high across all five websites, suggesting that citizen journalists are concerned more with their location or that they lack resources to compile information beyond their immediate circle. Lack of resources may also help to explain the similarly low coding of timeliness and the slow turn-around of stories.

Masterton (1998) identifies timeliness as a core element required for any information to become newsworthy. Turnaround of stories was poor in all websites except Online Opinion. This apparent lack of concern with news validity again points to the lack of economic competition citizen journalism websites face. Another possible explanation for the low coding of timeliness may be the limited audience pressure that citizen journalism websites face, constructed as they are, through citizen participation, compared to

mainstream news organisations. The slow turn-around of the majority of stories on the five sites suggests that audience demand for up-to-date information from citizen journalism websites is not evident and that those citizen journalists providing it are not willing or are unable to provide up-to-date information.

The lack of centrality give to the news values assigned importance by Masterton (1998) does present an interesting question however. Journalists often claim to know instinctively what information is newsworthy (Masterton, 1998: 85); citizen journalists, as suggested by this research, do not.

Results from Step 3 of our study suggest that audiences are using citizen journalism websites as a medium for discussion and commentary. While objectivity and timeliness scored poorly, it was the websites least concerned with news in its 'traditional' sense that generated the highest number of comments. Online Opinion received the highest number of comments of the five websites. The picture for Indymedia Australia and Fitzroyalty was similar: where objectivity was low the number of comments was high. Conversely, Wikinews Australia, the website that coded highest with regards to objectivity, received no comments across the seven days of monitoring. Conclusions and recommendations for further study

In the five websites examined we have identified an inverse relationship between the objectivity of stories on each site and the overall number of comments provided by audience members on the site. The less objective the stories – 'the more opinion' – the greater number of comments; the more objective or 'newsy' the stories, the fewer comments. Harking back to Richardson (1983) and Considine (1994: 130) who seem to agree on the value of participation for the policy process, this finding supports a conclusion that citizen journalism *without* objectivity can benefit the public good. Witt and Massey & Hass seem to concur (Witt, 2004: 50, citing Massey & Hass, 2002). Looking to the role Bowman & Willis (2003) suggest for journalists, of encouraging and facilitating conversations with citizens, and putting to one side the debates about ethics and participation, this also suggests a clear method for journalism websites to adopt as an audience growth mechanism. Depending on the weight of evidence, this tends to support strategies among 'Big Media' enterprises to rebadge their comment content as 'blogs' and colonise the comment sector as a way of growing audiences as noted by Bahnisch (2008: 9)

We have also discovered that contributors to each site are not using audio podcasts, strongly suggesting that radio journalists were not part of the citizen journalism 'scene' in Australia in 2011.
Recommendations for further study

This analysis of Australian citizen journalism websites fills a gap in the current literature surrounding the subject, offering a systematic analysis of what the websites provide, how they are received by audiences and opening the possibility for further research into the subject. This field of research may benefit further from an analysis of what factors influence citizen journalists in Australia. This may help to provide further insight into their newsgathering processes and explain why certain information is given precedence over other information.

Two potential studies present themselves: the first to be among radio journalists working as corporate, public service or otherwise 'professional' journalists, to discover their thoughts and opinions about participating in citizen journalism; the second to be a comparative study of 'mainstream' – publicly funded and commercial – journalism sites and these citizen journalism sites, to discover whether the inverse relationship between objectivity and comment traffic persists. A third also presents itself, as a result of the undoubted limitations of this research: An improved and expanded study would provide further insight into the interface between citizen and professional journalism in Australia.

References

Adverlife Australia. (2011). *What is Adverlife?* Retrieved October 1, 2011, from http://www.adverlife.tv/AUS/WhatIs.asp

Atton, C. (2004) *An Alternative Internet: Radical Media, Politics and Creativity*.
Edinbugh: Edinburgh University Press.

Australian Government: Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy. (2011). *The Convergence Review*. Retrieved October 1, 2011, from
http://www.dbcde.gov.au/digital_economy/convergence_review

Bahnisch, M. (2008). Political Blogging in the 2007 Australian Federal Election: Beyond Citizen Journalism and towards Civic Creativity. *Pacific Journalism Revie*w, 14 (2) 8-14.

Beaubien, G. (2007). TV news begins awkward dance with citizen journalism. *Public relations tactics*, 14 (6) 17.

Bird, E. (2009). The future of journalism in the digital environment. *Journalism*, 10 (3) 293.

Black, P. (2008 June). Reflection on citizen journalism, blogging and the 2007 election. Panel discussion, Between Commerce and Commons, CCi conference, Brisbane.

Bowman, S., and Willis, C. (2003). We Media: Introduction. Retrieved August 20, 2011 from http://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/weblog.php

Brown, Fred. (2005). Citizen journalism is not professional journalism. *The Quill,* 93 (6) 42.

Bruns, A., Burgess, J., Nicolai, T., Kirchhoff, L., & Highfield, T. (2011). Mapping the Australian Networked Public Sphere. *Social Science Computer Review*, 29 (3) 277-287.

Bruns, A., Deuze, M., & Neuberger, C. (2007). Preparing for an age of participatory news. *Journalism Practice,* 1 (3) 322-338.

Coleman, S., (2005). New Mediation and Direct Representation: Reconceptualizing
Representation in the Digital Age. *New Media and Society,* 7 (2) 177–98.

Considine, M. (1994). *Public Policy: A Critical Approach*. Melbourne: Macmillan.

Dahlgren, P. (2005). The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication:
Dispersal and Deliberation. *Political Communication,* 22 (2) 147–62.

Deuze, M. (2006). Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal
Components of a Digital Culture. *The Information Society,* 22 (2) 63–75.

Deuze, M. (2004). What is multimedia journalism? *Journalism Studies,* 5 (2) 139-152.

Flew, Terry. (2009). The Citizen's voice: Albert Hirschman's Exit, Voice and Loyalty and its contribution to media citizenship debates. *Media, Culture and Society,* 31 (1) 977-994.

Galtung, J., and Ruge, M. H. (1965). The Structure of Foreign News: The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers. *Journalism of Peace Research*, 2 (1) 64-90.

Gillmor, D. (2004). We the media: The ride of citizen journalists. *National Civic Review*, 93 (3) 58-63.

Hackett, R. (1984). Decline of a paradigm? Bias and objectivity in news media studies. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 1 (3) 229-259.

Harcup, T., and O'Neill, D. (2001). What is News? Galtung and Ruge Revisited. *Journalism Studies*, 2 (2) 261-279.

Houston, B. (2010). The future of investigative journalism. *Daedalus*, 139 (2) 45-58.

Kahney, L. (2003, May 17). Citizen Reporters Make the News. Wired News. Retrieved from http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2003/05/58856?currentPage=all

Latzer, M. (2009). Convergence Revisited: Toward a Modified Pattern of Communications Governance. *Convergence*, 15 (4) 411-426.

Lee, J.H. (2009). News values, media coverage, and audience attention: an analysis of direct and mediated causal relationships. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 86 (1) 175.

Massey, B., and Haas, T. (2002). Does making journalism more public make a difference? A critical review of evaluative research on public journalism. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79 (3) 559.

Masterton, M. (1998). A Theory of News. In M. Breen (Ed.), Journalism: Theory and Practice. Macleay Press: Australia

McKnight, D. (2008 June). Reflection on citizen journalism, blogging and the 2007 election. Panel discussion, Between Commerce and Commons, CCi conference, Brisbane.

McManus, J. (1994). *Market-driven journalism: let the citizen beware?* California: Sage Publications.

McNair, B. (2006). *Cultural Chaos: Journalism, News, Power in a Globalised World*. London: Routledge.

Medifacts Australia. (2011). *What is Medifacts?* Retrieved October 1, 2011 from http://www.mymedifacts.com/aus/WhatIsMedifacts.asp

Myrick, H. (2002). The search for objectivity in journalism. *USA Today*, 131 (2690) 50.

O'Brien, T. (2007). The elephant in the room: The age of advocacy journalism. *Public Relations Tactics,* 14 (5) 19.

Oxford University Press: Oxford Dictionaries Online. (2011). *Objective*. Retrieved October 1, 2011 from http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/objective

Palser, B. (2002). Is it journalism? *American Journalism Review*, 24 (5) 62.

Pavlik, J. (2004). A Sea-Change in Journalism: Convergence, Journalists, their Audiences and Sources. *Convergence*, 10 (4) 21.

Richardson, A. (1983). *Participation*. London: Routledge.

Rosen, J. (2006, June 27). The People Formally Known as the Audience. PRESSthink. Retrieved from http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html

Rosen, J. (2010, July 14). The Most Useful Definition of Citizen Journalism. PRESSthink. Retrieved from http://archive.pressthink.org/2008/07/14/a_most_useful_d.html (Accessed on October 1, 2011)

Schudson, M. (1978). *Discovering the news: a social history of American newspapers*. New York: Basic Books.

Scott, B. (2005). A contemporary History of Digital Journalism. *Television News Media*, 6 (1) 89-126.

Shoemaker, P., Danielian, H.L., and Bendlinger, N. (1991). Deviant acts, risky business and U.S. interests: The newsworthiness of world events. *Journalism Quarterly* 68, 781-795.

The Buchanan Group. (2011). *Advertising Solutions*. Retrieved October 1, 2011, from http://www.buchanangroup.com/corporate/Solutions.asp

Thorsen, E. (2008). Journalistic objectivity redefined? Wikinews and the neutral point of view. *New Media and Society*, 10 (6) 935-954.

Tilley, E., and Cokley, J. (2008). Deconstructing the Discourse of Citizen Journalism: Who Says What and Why It Matters. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 14 (1) 94-114.

Wilson, Jason. (2008 June). Reflection on citizen journalism, blogging and the 2007 election.
Panel discussion, Between Commerce and Commons, CCi conference, Brisbane.

Witt, L. (2004). Is public journalism morphing to the public's journalism? *National Civic Review,* 93 (3) 49-57.

Young, Graham. (2008 June). Reflection on citizen journalism, blogging and the 2007 election. Panel discussion, Between Commerce and Commons, CCi conference, Brisbane.

Ms Annie Taylor, BA, BJour, University of Queensland, School of Journalism & Communication, Australia

John Cokley PhD, Associate Professor in Journalism, Faculty of Life & Social Sciences, Swinburne University of Technology, Burwood Rd, Hawthorn, 3122, Australia, * corresponding author, jcokley@swin.edu.au Tel: +613 9214 8035