

Jane B. Singer, Alfred Hermida, David Domingo, Ari Heinonen,
Steve Paulussen, Thorsten Quandt, Zvi Reich, Marina Vujnovic

PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM

Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers



 WILEY-BLACKWELL

**JANE B. SINGER, ALFRED HERMIDA,
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Participatory Journalism

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The authors have elected to donate all their proceeds from the sale of this book to Reporters Without Borders / Reporters Sans Frontières (<http://www.rsf.org>, <http://en.rsf.org>), a non-profit organization committed to press freedom around the world.

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Finally, we must thank you, our readers and the readers of these and other online newspapers, for all that you bring to “participatory journalism.” The future of this collective enterprise rests on you and your contributions, and we believe you will enrich it beyond measure.

Authors' Note

This book is the result of a research project carried out by eight researchers in eight languages and in ten different countries, over a period of several months in late 2007 and early 2008. Among us, we talked one-on-one with nearly 70 journalists, at more than two dozen leading national newspapers, about user contributions to the newspaper-affiliated website. The appendix, beginning on page 192, provides more details about what we did and how we did it.

Each chapter contains information gathered by all of us, asking similar questions of our interviewees and steering our newsroom conversations in the direction we collectively decided would be most interesting and illuminating.

To turn this mountain of quotes into a book, each of us took the lead in crafting one thematic chapter that explores a particular aspect of our topic in detail. Jane Singer, with the assistance of Alfred Hermida, then worked to integrate each of these chapters into what we hope is a cohesive whole that is easy and enjoyable to read as a unified package. We did not want our own individual voices to drown out the voices of the journalists whom you will “hear” throughout the pages that follow.

However, we have included the names of each lead author in the Table of Contents and at the start of each chapter to highlight the individual effort and perspective that went into each section of the book.

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Introduction

Sharing the Road

The English words “journalism” and “journey” are cousins. Both stem from the Latin word *diurnalis*, which means “daily.” Over time, one came to mean a daily record of transactions, while the other was used to describe a day’s work or travel. Today, journalism is on a journey into uncharted territory – and the road is crowded with all manner of travellers.

Only very recently has the entrenched idea of a concrete daily record, prepared by people dedicated to its compilation, begun to lose its usefulness. A printed product may still appear just once a day, but as newspapers have moved online, they have evolved into something far more fluid and amorphous. The twenty-first-century newspaper is essentially never complete, neither finished nor finite.

Nor are journalists the only ones determining what gets recorded. A great many other people also contribute content, representing their own interests, ideas, observations and opinions. That content comes in a steadily expanding volume and variety of forms and formats – words, images and sounds, alone or in combination, turning the online newspaper into an open, ongoing social experiment.

This book is about the journey of the journalistic enterprise through an increasingly collaborative present and into a collective future that you will share, whether or not you ever set foot in a newsroom. It explores how newspaper journalists are handling the transition to a world in which vast numbers of strangers contribute directly to something that those journalists alone once controlled. The story is still being written, and you are the ones writing it.

Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers, First Edition.

Jane B. Singer, Alfred Hermida, David Domingo, Ari Heinonen, Steve Paulussen, Thorsten Quandt, Zvi Reich, and Marina Vujnovic.

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1.1 Participatory Journalism

Many terms have been coined to describe the contributions to online newspaper content from those whom media critic Jay Rosen (2006) describes as “the people formerly known as the audience.” Some call it “**user-generated content**.” Others prefer “**citizen journalism**.” One scholar likes the term “produsage” to highlight the blending of producing and consuming information (Bruns 2008; 2005).

Our choice, though, is “**participatory journalism**” because we feel it captures the idea of collaborative and collective – not simply parallel – action. People inside and outside the newsroom are engaged in communicating not only *to*, but also *with*, one another. In doing so, they all are participating in the ongoing processes of creating a news website and building a multifaceted community.

Others like this term, too.¹ Back in 2003, online journalist and commentator J. D. Lasica defined “participatory journalism” as a “slippery creature” but offered a range of examples, some of them associated with mainstream media offerings and others not. Among the former, which are the focus of this book, he included **comments**, discussion **forums** and user **blogs**, along with reports (including visual ones), reviews and articles supplied by readers (Lasica 2003).

Those sorts of contributions remain very much part of today’s participatory journalism, and they have been joined by newer forms of contributing, such as **reputation systems**, **micro-blogs**, **social networking sites** and more. Indeed, new participatory formats appear all the time; by the time you read this, there will be a dozen new examples that don’t even exist as we write.

Since Lasica made his list, people outside the newsroom have contributed to a steady stream of material published on media websites (and, of course, elsewhere, as well) around the world. In a fundamental way, news has become socially engaging and socially driven, as millions of people not only create news but also share it (Pew Research 2010).

Ordinary people have captured and published, in words and images, stories of global impact, including the results of terrorist attacks on the commuters of Madrid and London, the abuse of prisoners at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison, the lethal chaos surrounding elections in Iran, and the devastation caused by tsunamis, floods and earthquakes. They also have provided intimate looks within the smallest of communities, sharing local and even personal information and ideas in depth and detail. They have carried on millions of topical conversations through discussion forums, comment threads and blog posts. In all of these online activities and many more, they have taken on roles and carried out functions that sound quite a bit like, well ... journalism.

In the same year that Lasica offered his definition of participatory journalism, Chris Willis and Shayne Bowman connected the rise of what they referred to as both “we media” and “participatory journalism” to the changes facing traditional

newsrooms. “The venerable profession of journalism finds itself at a rare moment in history where, for the first time, its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by not just new technology and competitors but, potentially, by the audience it serves,” they wrote (Willis and Bowman 2003). The subtitle of our book, “Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers,” suggests that this challenge remains a central one for journalists today.

Gatekeeping has been defined as “the process by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped, and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by news media” (Shoemaker *et al.* 2001: 233). But when journalism becomes “participatory,” the volume of transmitted information rapidly surges to flood levels, swamping traditional approaches to winnowing and the like. How newspaper journalists are thinking about and dealing with the change is a recurring theme in this book.

1.2 Why Look at Newspaper Websites?

Journalists produce content for all sorts of platforms and products, of course. They work for lots of different kinds of employers – including themselves – as the numbers engaged in increasingly entrepreneurial versions of the craft continue to grow (Shedden 2010). However, we have chosen to focus on journalists employed by companies that print (on sheets of paper), a traditional newspaper and maintain a website affiliated with that newspaper.

We made that choice for a number of reasons. First is the historical longevity of newspapers and their demonstrated ability to adapt successfully to other monumental changes in communications technology throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The newspaper industry has survived everything from the advent of the telegraph in the early 1800s to that of the **mobile** telephone a century and a half later – with landline telephones, film, radio, broadcast and cable television, and more in between. As a result, the culture of newspaper journalism is simultaneously – and somewhat paradoxically – the most deeply rooted and the most flexible of all **newsroom cultures**. This seemed to us an interesting backdrop for the current challenges posed to journalists by an open and interactive network.

The second reason is that despite the many and ongoing changes in the ways that people access information, leading newspapers generally retain an authoritative role as providers of “the news of record” – certainly in the eyes of their own employees, but also in the eyes of many other social and political leaders. Although print circulation has been declining steadily in many Western nations, particularly the United States (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010), the medium is likely to remain a staple for opinion leaders into the foreseeable future (Meyer 2008).

And the third reason for focusing on newspapers is that in the brief history of online media, newspapers have generally been the first to innovate, and with

a few exceptions – the BBC in the UK and National Public Radio in the United States spring to mind – they have done so more extensively than their magazine or broadcast counterparts. Although their critics have pointed out, not incorrectly, that newspapers have missed a great many opportunities over the past two decades, those innovations have been quite significant indeed for the people whose jobs, roles and self-perceptions have been fundamentally shaken. Their reactions and responses form the heart of this book.

1.2.1 Online Newspapers

Changes never occur in a vacuum, and these are no exception. The news industry in the early twenty-first century faces a strikingly severe economic crisis, and the occupation of journalism has been buffeted by changes in newsroom structure, organization, tasks and working conditions (Deuze 2010; Fortunati *et al.* 2009; Ryfe 2009; Gade 2008).

“Even before the recession, the fundamental question facing journalism was whether the news industry could win a race against the clock for survival: Could it find new ways to underwrite the gathering of news online, while using the declining revenue of the old platforms to finance the transition?” the authors of a recent report about U.S. media said (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009). They were not especially optimistic about the answer, particularly for the newspaper industry, described in 2009 as being “in something perilously close to free fall” (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism and Edmonds 2009).

While the revenue from online news is not booming, its usage is. Journalists who write for newspapers, in particular, have far more readers now than at any time in the past. Traffic to newspaper websites has grown enormously in the past few years, as their familiar and (at least to some extent) trusted brand names have successfully made the transition to the Internet.

The websites of some national papers, including many of the ones discussed in this book, routinely attract tens of millions of readers every month – far more than they have in print. They are not the same kinds of readers – the print kind tend to be more regular readers, and they are much more likely to see more than just the one or two items that the click-in-click-out crowd sees. But they are consumers of the newspaper product nonetheless.

There are not, however, far more journalists working for these newspapers than before. On the contrary, at a great many papers, considerably *fewer* people are in the newsroom than were there a decade ago. The journalists who remain typically generate content for both the print and online products, as well as other platforms such as mobile. And they are working – in various ways, with varying attitudes and with variable results – with some of those millions of readers and their contributions, from comments to photos to blog posts and more.

This cacophonous world of participatory journalism is an exciting place but one that is still largely unfamiliar to many of these journalists. This book, based

on the insights and the early adventures of top-level professionals at some of the democratic world's biggest and best newspapers, will help you prepare for the adventure on which you are about to embark.

1.2.2 Participatory Journalism in Online Newspapers

This book is about participatory journalism in online newspapers. It draws on lengthy interviews with 67 print and online editors, and other journalists at about two dozen leading national newspapers in ten Western democracies. A full list and a brief description of each newspaper and its website, along with a list of interviewees (by job title in order to preserve the confidentiality that some requested), is provided in the appendix at the back of the book.

The fact that all are democracies is important because of the premise underlying this form of government: It rests on a public that is both informed about matters of civic importance and, importantly, able to talk about those matters with other citizens. Journalists have always seen themselves as fundamental to the democratic role of informing the public (Gans 2003), and that perception is a key aspect of a broadly shared journalistic culture. Today, the shift of journalism from a lecture to a conversation (Gillmor 2006) highlights the second requirement, too. Indeed, this connection between discourse and democracy (Habermas 1989; Dewey 1927) has been highlighted over many centuries and in many cultural contexts, and it surely is no less valid in our times.

This book is unusual in incorporating perspectives from journalists in so many different countries, even countries that broadly share a political ideology. It would have been logistically much easier, of course, to write a book based on interviews with journalists in a single nation, with a shared political, economic and legal culture informing their work. Journalists do think about their roles within the context of those aspects of their own society. And although website **users** can access a site from another country as easily as one from their own, the traffic to most (though not all) of the newspapers in our study comes mainly from within their national borders. These citizens also construct their identities and social roles within a particular national context.

That said, we are interested here less in the national culture than the professional one – the culture of journalism, at least as it is understood by practitioners in relatively free and open societies. All over the world, the nature of an unbounded, participatory network is challenging traditional journalistic practices, policies and self-perceptions. Our interviews did suggest some national idiosyncrasies (as well as some personal ones), and you'll read about them as you go along. But we also found a great deal of similarity among journalists in the various countries in the ways they thought about themselves, their products and their audiences. Those similarities suggest to us that the fundamental change currently under way transcends national boundaries, and it is the nature of that change that we will explore together in the pages of this book.