Select Issues with New Media Theories of Citizen Journalism

“Journalists have to begin a new type of journalism, sometimes being the guide on the side of the civic conversation as well as the filter and gatekeeper.” (Kolodzy 218)

“In many respects, citizen journalism is simply public journalism removed from the journalism profession.” (Barlow 181)

1. Citizen Journalism — The Latest Innovation?

New Media theorists such as Dan Gillmor, Henry Jenkins, Jay Rosen and Jeff Howe have recently touted Citizen Journalism (CJ) as the latest innovation in 21st century journalism. “Participatory journalism” and “user-driven journalism” are other terms to describe CJ, which its proponents argue is a disruptive innovation (Christensen) to the agenda-setting media institutions, news values and “objective” reportage.

In this essay I offer a “contrarian” view, informed by two perspectives: (1) a three-stage model of theory-building (Carlile & Christensen) to evaluate the claims made about CJ; and (2) self-reflexive research insights (Etherington) from editing the US-based news site Disinformation between November 1999 and February 2008. New media theories can potentially create “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger) when their explanations of CJ practices are compared with what actually happens (Feyerabend).

First I summarise Carlile & Christensen’s model and the dangers of “bad theory” (Ghoshal). Next I consider several problems in new media theories about CJ: the notion of ‘citizen’, new media populism, parallels in event-driven and civic journalism, and mergers and acquisitions. Two ‘self-reflexive’ issues are considered: ‘pro-ams’ or ‘professional amateurs’ as a challenge to professional journalists, and CJ’s deployment in new media operations and production environments. Finally, some exploratory questions are offered for future researchers.

2. An Evaluative Framework for New Media Theories on Citizen Journalism

Paul Carlile and Clayton M, Christensen’s model offers...
one framework with which to evaluate new media theories on CJ. This framework is used below to highlight select issues and gaps in CJ’s current frameworks and theories. Carlile & Christensen suggest that robust theory-building emerges via three stages: Descriptive, Categorisation and Normative (Carlile & Christensen). There are three sub-stages in Descriptive theory-building; namely, the observation of phenomena, inductive classification into schemas and taxonomies, and correlative relationships to develop models (Carlile & Christensen 2-5). Once causation is established, Normative theory evolves through deductive logic which is subject to Kuhnian paradigm shifts and Popperian falsifiability (Carlile & Christensen 6).

Its proponents situate CJ as a Categorisation or new journalism agenda that poses a Normative challenged and Kuhnian paradigm shift to traditional journalism. Existing CJ theories jump from the Descriptive phase of observations like “smart mobs” in Japanese youth subcultures (Rheingold) to make broad claims for Categorisation such as that IndyMedia, blogs and wiki publishing systems as new media alternatives to traditional media. CJ theories then underpin normative beliefs, values and worldviews. Correlative relationships are also used to differentiate CJ from the demand side of microeconomic analysis, from the top-down editorial models of traditional media outlets, and to adopt a vanguard stance. To support this, CJ proponents cite research on emergent collective behaviour such as the “wisdom of crowds” hypothesis (Surowiecki) or peer-to-peer network “swarms” (Pesce) to provide scientific justification for their Normative theories. However, further evaluative research is needed for three reasons: the emergent collective behaviour hypothesis may not actually inform CJ practices, existing theories may have “correlation not cause” errors, and the link may be due to citation network effects between CJ theorists.

Collectively, this research base also frames CJ as an “ought to” Categorisation and then proceeds to Normative theory-building (Carlile & Christensen 7). However, I argue below that this Categorisation may be premature: its observations and correlative relationships might reinforce a ‘weak’ Normative theory with limited generalisation. CJ proponents seem to imply that it can be applied anywhere and under any condition—a “statement of causality” that almost makes it a fad (Carlile & Christensen 8).

CJ that relies on Classification and Normative claims will be problematic without a strong grounding in Descriptive observation. To understand what’s potentially at stake for CJ’s future consider the parallel debate about curricula renewal for the Masters of Business Administration in the wake of high-profile corporate collapses such as Enron, Worldcom, HIH and OneTel. The MBA evolved as a
sociological and institutional construct to justify management as a profession that is codified, differentiated and has entry barriers (Khurana). This process might partly explain the pushback that some media professionals have to CJ as one alternative. MBA programs faced criticism if they had student cohorts with little business know-how or experiential learning (Mintzberg). Enron’s collapse illustrated the ethical dilemmas and unintended consequences that occurred when “bad theories” were implemented (Ghoshal).

Professional journalists are aware of this: MBA-educated managers challenged the “craft” tradition in the early 1980s (Underwood). This meant that journalism’s ‘self-image’ (Morgan; Smith) is interwoven with managerial anxieties about media conglomerates in highly competitive markets. Ironically, as noted below, Citizen Journalists who adopt a vanguard position vis-à-vis media professionals step into a more complex game with other players. However, current theories have a naïve idealism about CJ’s promise of normative social change in the face of Machiavellian agency in business, the media and politics.

3. Citizen Who?

Who is the “citizen” in CJ? What is their self-awareness as a political agent? CJ proponents who use the ‘self-image’ of ‘citizen’ draw on observations from the participatory vision of open source software, peer-to-peer networks, and case studies such as Howard Dean’s 2004 bid for the Democrat Party nominee in the US Presidential election campaign (Trippi). Recent theorists note Alexander Hamilton’s tradition of civic activism (Barlow 178) which links contemporary bloggers with the Federalist Papers and early newspaper pamphlets.

One unsurfaced assumption in these observations and correlations is that most bloggers will adopt a coherent political philosophy as informed citizens: a variation on Lockean utilitarianism, Rawlsian liberalism or Nader consumer activism. To date there is little discussion about how political philosophy could deepen CJ’s ‘self-image’: how to critically evaluate sources, audit and investigation processes, or strategies to deal with elites, deterrence and power. For example, although bloggers kept Valerie Plame’s ‘outing’ as a covert intelligence operative highly visible in the issues-attention cycle, it was agenda-setting media like The New York Times who the Bush Administration targeted to silence (Pearlstine). To be viable, CJ needs to evolve beyond a new media populism, perhaps into a constructivist model of agency, norms and social change (Finnemore).

4. Citizen Journalism as New Media Populism
Several “precursor trends” foreshadowed CJ notably the mid-1990s interest in “cool-hunting” by new media analysts and subculture marketeers (Gibson; Gladwell). Whilst this audience focus waned with the 1995-2000 dotcom bubble it resurfaced in CJ and publisher Tim O’Reilly’s Web 2.0 vision. Thus, CJ might be viewed as new media populism that has flourished with the Web 2.0 boom.

Yet if the boom becomes a macroeconomic bubble (Gross; Spar) then CJ could be written off as a “silver bullet” that ultimately failed to deliver on its promises (Brooks, Jr.). The reputations of uncritical proponents who adopted a “true believer” stance would also be damaged (Hoffer).

This risk is evident if CJ is compared with a parallel trend that shares its audience focus and populist view: day traders and technical analysts who speculate on financial markets. This parallel trend provides an alternative discipline in which the populism surfaced in an earlier form (Carlile & Christensen 12). Fidelity’s Peter Lynch argues that stock pickers can use their Main Street knowledge to beat Wall Street by exploiting information asymmetries (Lynch & Rothchild). Yet Lynch’s examples came from the mid-1970s to early 1980s when indexed mutual fund strategies worked, before deregulation and macroeconomic volatility. A change in the Web 2.0 boom might similarly trigger a reconsideration of Citizen Journalism.

Hedge fund maven Victor Niederhoffer contends that investors who rely on technical analysis are practicing a Comtean religion (Niederhoffer & Kenner 72-74) instead of Efficient Market Hypothesis traders who use statistical arbitrage to deal with ‘random walks’ or Behavioural Finance experts who build on Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman’s Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky).

Niederhoffer’s deeper point is that technical analysts’ belief that the “trend is your friend” is no match for the other schools, despite a mini-publishing industry and computer trading systems. There are also ontological and epistemological differences between the schools. Similarly, CJ proponents who adopt a ‘Professional Amateur’ or ‘Pro-Am’ stance (Leadbeater & Miller) may face a similar gulf when making comparisons with professional journalists and the production environments in media organisations.

CJ also thrives as new media populism because of institutional vested interests. When media conglomerates cut back on cadetships and internships CJ might fill the market demand as one alternative. New media programs at New York University and others can use CJ to differentiate themselves from “hyperlocal” competitors (Christensen; Slywotzky; Christensen, Curtis & Horn). This transforms CJ from
5. Parallels: Event-driven & Civic Journalism

For new media programs, CJ builds on two earlier traditions: the Event-driven journalism of crises like the 1991 Gulf War (Wark) and the Civic Journalism school that emerged in the 1960s social upheavals. Civic Journalism’s awareness of minorities and social issues provides the character ethic and political philosophy for many Citizen Journalists. Jay Rosen and others suggest that CJ is the next-generation heir to Civic Journalism, tracing a thread from the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention to IndyMedia’s coverage of the 1999 “Battle in Seattle” (Rosen). Rosen’s observation could yield an interesting historiography or genealogy.

Events such as the Southeast Asian tsunami on 26 December 2004 or Al Qaeda’s London bombings on 7 July 2005 are cited as examples of CJ as event-driven journalism and “pro-am collaboration” (Kolodzy 229-230). Having covered these events and Al Qaeda’s attacks on 11th September 2001, I have a slightly different view: this was more a variation on “first responder” status and handicam video footage that journalists have sourced for the past three decades when covering major disasters. This different view means that the “salience of categories” used to justify CJ and “pro-am collaboration” these events does not completely hold. Furthermore, when Citizen Journalism proponents tout Flickr and Wikipedia as models of real-time media they are building on a broader phenomenon that includes CNN’s Gulf War coverage and Bloomberg’s dominance of financial news (Loomis).

6. The Mergers & Acquisitions Scenario

CJ proponents often express anxieties about the resilience of their outlets in the face of predatory venture capital firms who initiate Mergers & Acquisitions (M&A) activities. Ironically, these venture capital firms have core competencies and expertise in the event-driven infrastructure and real-time media that CJ aspires to.

Sequoia Capital and other venture capital firms have evaluative frameworks that likely surpass Carlile & Christensen in sophistication, and they exploit parallels, information asymmetries and market populism. Furthermore, although venture capital firms such as Union Street Ventures have funded Web 2.0 firms, they are absent from the explanations of some theorists, whose examples of Citizen Journalism and Web 2.0 success may be the result of survivorship bias. Thus, the venture capital market remains an untapped data source for researchers who want to evaluate the impact of CJ outlets and institutions.
evaluate the impact of CJ outlets and institutions.

The M&A scenario further problematises CJ in several ways.

First, CJ is framed as “oppositional” to traditional media, yet this may be used as a stratagem in a game theory framework with multiple stakeholders. Drexel Burnham Lambert’s financier Michael Milken used market populism to sell ‘high-yield’ or ‘junk’ bonds to investors whilst disrupting the Wall Street establishment in the late 1980s (Curtis) and CJ could fulfil a similar tactical purpose.

Second, the M&A goal of some Web 2.0 firms could undermine the participatory goals of a site’s community if post-merger integration fails. Jason Calacanis’s sale of Weblogs, Inc to America Online in 2005 and MSNBC’s acquisition of Newsvine on 5 October 2007 (Newsvine) might be success stories. However, this raises issues of digital “property rights” if you contribute to a community that is then sold in an M&A transaction—an outcome closer to business process outsourcing.

Third, media “buzz” can create an unrealistic vision when a CJ site fails to grow beyond its start-up phase. Backfence.com’s demise as a “hyperlocal” initiative (Caverly) is one cautionary event that recalls the 2000 dotcom crash.

The M&A scenarios outlined above are market dystopias for CJ purists. The major lesson for CJ proponents is to include other market players in hypotheses about causation and correlation factors.

7. ‘Pro-Ams’ & Professional Journalism’s Crisis

CJ emerged during a period when Professional Journalism faced a major crisis of ‘self-image’. The Demos report The Pro-Am Revolution (Leadbeater & Miller) popularised the notion of ‘professional amateurs’ which some CJ theorists adopt to strengthen their categorisation. In turn, this triggers a response from cultural theorists who fear bloggers are new media’s barbarians (Keen).

I concede Leadbeater and Miller have identified an important category. However, how some CJ theorists then generalise from ‘Pro-Ams’ illustrates the danger of ‘weak’ theory referred to above. Leadbeater and Miller’s categorisation does not really include a counter-view on the strengths of professionals, as illustrated in humanistic consulting (Block), professional service firms (Maister; Maister, Green & Galford), and software development (McConnell). The signs of professionalism these authors mention include a commitment to learning and communal verification, mastery of a discipline and domain application, awareness of methodology creation, participation in mentoring, and cultivation of ethical awareness. Two
mentoring, and cultivation of ethical awareness. Two key differences are discernment and quality of attention, as illustrated in how the legendary Hollywood film editor Walter Murch used Apple’s Final Cut Pro software to edit the 2003 film Cold Mountain (Koppelman).

‘Pro-Ams’ might not aspire to these criteria but Citizen Journalists shouldn’t throw out these standards, either. Doing so would be making the same mistake of overconfidence that technical analysts make against statistical arbitrageurs. Key processes—fact-checking, sub-editing and editorial decision-making—are invisible to the end-user, even if traceable in a blog or wiki publishing system, because of the judgments involved. One post-mortem insight from Assignment Zero was that these processes were vital to create the climate of authenticity and trust to sustain a Citizen Journalist community (Howe).

CJ’s trouble with “objectivity” might also overlook some complexities, including the similarity of many bloggers to “noise traders” in financial markets and to op-ed columnists. Methodologies and reportage practices have evolved to deal with the objections that CJ proponents raise, from New Journalism’s radical subjectivity and creative non-fiction techniques (Wolfe & Johnson) to Precision Journalism that used descriptive statistics (Meyer). Finally, journalism frameworks could be updated with current research on how phenomenological awareness shapes our judgments and perceptions (Thompson).

8. Strategic Execution

For me, one of CJ’s major weaknesses as a new media theory is its lack of “rich description” (Geertz) about the strategic execution of projects. As Disinfo.com site editor I encountered situations ranging from ‘denial of service’ attacks and spam to site migration, publishing systems that go offline, and ensuring an editorial consistency. Yet the messiness of these processes is missing from CJ theories and accounts. Theories that included this detail as “second-order interactions” (Carlile & Christensen 13) would offer a richer view of CJ.

Many CJ and Web 2.0 projects fall into the categories of mini-projects, demonstration prototypes and start-ups, even when using a programming language such as Ajax or Ruby on Rails. Whilst the “bootstrap” process is a benefit, more longitudinal analysis and testing needs to occur, to ensure these projects are scalable and sustainable. For example, South Korea’s OhmyNews is cited as an exemplar that started with “727 citizen reporters and 4 editors” and now has “38,000 citizen reporters” and “a dozen editors” (Kolodzy 231). How does OhmyNews’s mix of hard and soft news change over time? Or, how does OhmyNews deal with a complex issue that might
require major resources, such as security negotiations between North and South Korea? Such examples could do with further research.

We need to go beyond “the vision thing” and look at the messiness of execution for deeper observations and counterintuitive correlations, to build new descriptive theories.

9. Future Research

This essay argues that CJ needs re-evaluation. Its immediate legacy might be to splinter ‘journalism’ into micro-trends: Washington University’s Steve Boriss proclaims “citizen journalism is dead. Expert journalism is the future.” (Boriss; Mensching). The half-lives of such micro-trends demand new categorisations, which in turn prematurely feeds the theory-building cycle.

Instead, future researchers could reinvigorate 21st century journalism if they ask deeper questions and return to the observation stage of building descriptive theories. In closing, below are some possible questions that future researchers might explore:

- Where are the “rich descriptions” of journalistic experience—“citizen”, “convergent”, “digital”, “Pro-Am” or otherwise in new media?
- How could practice-based approaches inform this research instead of relying on espoused theories-in-use?
- What new methodologies could be developed for CJ implementation?
- What role can the “heroic” individual reporter or editor have in “the swarm”?
- Do the claims about OhmyNews and other sites stand up to longitudinal observation?
- Are the theories used to justify Citizen Journalism’s normative stance (Rheingold; Surowiecki; Pesce) truly robust generalisations for strategic execution or do they reflect the biases of their creators?
- How could developers tap the conceptual dimensions of information technology innovation (Shasha) to create the next Facebook, MySpace or Wikipedia?

References


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