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# **Journalism as Social Networking: The Australian *youdecide* project and the 2007 Federal election**

**Terry Flew and Jason Wilson**

## **ABSTRACT**

The increasing prevalence of new media technologies and the rise of citizen journalism has coincided with a crisis in industrial journalism –as the figure of the “journalist as hero” is fading, new media forms have facilitated the production of news content “from below” by citizens and “pro-am” journalists. Participation in an action-research project run during the 2007 Australian Federal Election, *youdecide 2007*, allowed the authors to gain first-hand insights into the progress of citizen-led news media in Australia, but also allowed us to develop an account of what the work of facilitating citizen journalism involves. These insights are important to understanding the future of professional journalism and journalism education, as more mainstream media organizations move to accommodate and harness user-created content. The paper considers the relevance of citizen journalism projects as forms of R&D for understanding news production and distribution in participatory media cultures, and the importance of grounded case studies for moving beyond normative debates about new media and the future of journalism.

## **KEYWORDS**

Journalism, citizen journalism, Australian politics, elections, action research, new media, Internet, online journalism.

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## **Journalism as Social Networking: The Australian *youdecide* project and the 2007 Federal election**

Citizen journalism has been an emerging phenomenon of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that has arisen at the intersection of the Internet and digital media technologies, a perceived crisis in news values and professional journalism, and the demand for online participation, social networking, self-expression and interaction characteristic of the era of 'Web 2.0' or the 'participative Web' (Benkler, 2006; Musser and O'Reilly, 2007; OECD, 2007). Citizen journalism has been defined by Rosen (2008) as what happens 'when the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another' (Rosen 2008) and by Bowman and Willis (2003) as 'the act of a citizen, or a group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information' (Bowman and Willis 2003: 9). Gillmor (2006) has argued that whereas conventional 'Big Media ... treated the news as a lecture', new models of citizen journalism in a Web 2.0 environment involve evolution towards 'journalism as a conversation or seminar', as 'the lines will blur between producers and consumers ... [and] the communications network itself will become a medium for everyone's voice' (Gillmor, 2006: xxiv).

Identifying a progressive potential for the new journalism models, Atton (2004) argued that such journalism should aim 'to invert the "hierarchy of access" to the news by explicitly foregrounding the viewpoint of ... citizens whose visibility in the mainstream media tends to be obscured by the presence of elite groups and

individuals’, and that alternative news media practices had potential scope for ‘challenging the status of the journalist as the sole “expert” or definer of “reality”’ (Atton, 2004: 41). Exploring the wider implications of such developments, Couldry (2003) identified the potential significance of citizen journalism and other alternative media initiatives based around user-generated media as lying in their capacity to accumulate organizational and economic resources that could generate ‘new hybrid forms of media *consumption-production* ... [that] would challenge precisely the entrenched division of labour (producers of stories versus consumers of stories) that is the essence of media power’ (Couldry, 2003: 45).

Much of the discourse surrounding citizen journalism has tended to be normative. There a considerable academic, professional and popular literature on the affordances of social media technologies, the economic travails of traditional news media, the crises of authority of professional journalism, and the perceived ‘democratic deficit’ that warrants the development of new forms of digital news media that generate content and comment ‘from below’ and reinvigorate the public sphere. What has been missing thus far have been grounded case studies on *how* citizen journalism initiatives generated from outside of the existing large news media organizations have operated, what their achievements have been, what issues and problems have emerged in practices with such projects, and what lessons there are for the future of journalism. There has been an over-reliance upon a small number of relatively familiar international exemplars, such as the *Indymedia* (Independent Media Centre) network and Korea’s *OhMyNews*. Otherwise, discussion has been dominated by polemics that either herald citizen journalism as being in the advance guard of a post-capitalist social networking media utopia (e.g. Quiggan and Hunter, 2008), or conflate citizen

journalism with blogging and, on the basis of very particular counter-factual cases, argue that these new digital media practices operate in an amoral, fact-distorting and ethics-free zone, in apparent contrast to professional journalism (e.g. Knight, 2008).

In this paper we provide an overview of an Australian citizen journalism project called *youdecide2007*, which operated as an online news and opinion site during the period leading up to and shortly after the Federal election of 24 November, 2007. *Youdecide2007* was an action research initiative undertaken as the first phase of a project funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) to investigate the innovative possibilities of digital communication to reinvigorate public participation in Australian politics. Funded through the ARC's Linkages grants program, which promotes interaction between academic researchers with industry and government around common research questions, it has involved researchers in the Creative Industries Faculty at the Queensland University of Technology working with industry partners such as the Australian multicultural public broadcaster the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), the information technology business Cisco Systems Australia and New Zealand, online publishers The National Forum (publishers of *On Line Opinion*), and public affairs think-tank The Brisbane Institute.<sup>1</sup> The researchers and industry partners have a shared interest in the capacity of Web 2.0 technologies and social networking media to increase the porosity of boundaries between media organizations and the audiences and communities they serve, and the potential of the 'participatory web' to bolster the quality and diversity of citizen inputs into policy networks and the political decision-making process. The project aimed to develop online resources that had the potential to promote greater citizen participation in Australian public policy and the political sphere, and sought to examine the

relationship between innovations in digital journalism and emergent forms of political communication. The project has also been a case study in *practice-led research*, as it is based upon a cycle of developing and promoting online resources, evaluating their impact in the Australian mediasphere and public sphere, and providing insights for further initiatives in citizen journalism and online political communication.

### **New media and the emerging crisis of professional journalism**

At a conceptual level, the *youdecide2007* project was informed not only by the debates surrounding citizen journalism and the perceived crisis of authority of mainstream news media, but also by an analysis of the interaction between the layered nature of impact of new media technologies and how the Internet has been transforming journalism as a professional practice. Lievrouw and Livingstone (2005) have argued that, in order to identify the Internet and related digitally networked technologies as ‘new media’, and not simply extensions of existing communications technologies, there is a need to conceive of media as having three interdependent elements:

- (1) *artefacts or devices (technologies)* that enable and extend our ability to communicate;
- (2) *communication activities and practices* we engage in to develop and make use of these technologies;
- (3) *social arrangements, institutions and organizational forms* that develop around the use and management of these technologies.

In other words, we need to think about the Internet and new media not simply as convergent communications technologies, but as social technologies having a wider impact upon communication practices and societal institutions. David (1999) argued that it may take up to a generation for the longer-term socio-economic impacts of new technologies to become apparent, as there is invariably a disjunction between the emergence of a new techno-economic paradigm – new media in the first and second senses identified by Lievrouw and Livingstone – and the development of social, legal, regulatory and institutional frameworks that can accommodate the new technologies and practices which they enable, or new media in the third sense that Lievrouw and Livingstone understand it.

While journalists understood the impact of the Internet as a disruptive technology quite quickly, the extent of the disruption on news gathering practice and news media organizations more generally has been underestimated for many years. Media theorists such as Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983) correctly ascertained that journalists would quickly identify the potential for the Internet to enhance their professional capacities. It provided vastly expanded access to information, new distribution channels, and the scope to better verify and triangulate information sources. The 1990s saw news organizations respond by developing online news sites, but these were often little more than a re-purposing of existing news developed for other media formats, or what was known as ‘shovelware’ (Pavlik, 1996), with little thought given to how to develop online media as anything other than as an adjunct and poor cousin of the established print or broadcast media product (Bogart, 1999). Computer-assisted reporting (CAR) emerged as the harbinger of an age of ‘precision journalism’, whereby journalism could become a more scientific practice as the truth-claims of

journalists could now be triangulated through thickets of verifiable online data (Cox, 2000). More open and civic-minded responses were found with the rise of *public journalism* (also known as civic journalism), which aimed to enhance journalism's social responsibility remit by 'encouraging citizens to engage each other in a search for shared values' (Glasser, 2000: 683). Even here, however, the underlying assumption remained that there existed a unique and powerful professional grouping – journalists – who may or may not use the new media to better serve their audiences or readerships, but that the choices of how to respond to the demands of the citizenry essentially rested with the journalistic profession itself.

Daniel Hallin's *We Keep America on Top of the World* (1994) captured some of the dimension of the emerging crisis of professional journalism. Hallin argued that the period from the 1960s to the late 1980s was one of 'High Modernism' in American journalism; 'an era when the historically troubled role of the journalist seemed fully rationalised, when it seemed possible for the journalist to be powerful and prosperous and at the same time independent, disinterested, public-spirited, and trusted and beloved by everyone, from the corridors of power around the world to the ordinary citizen and consumer' (Hallin, 1994: 172). The 'journalist as hero' had a clear image in the popular consciousness, as Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford portrayed the *Washington Post* journalists Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward in the 1976 film *All the President's Men*, about the reporting of the Watergate scandal and the resignation of Richard Nixon. Hallin noted, however that there were inherent problems with journalists seeking to fill this vacuum in political institutions and public debate. First, journalists were often 'too close to the powerful institutions whose actions need to be discussed' (Hallin, 1994: 175). Second, the commercial nature of news made it

difficult for journalists in large, mainstream organizations to veer too far from what they perceive to be ‘public sentiment’, or to get too far offside with any major political entity, for fear of losing audience or market share. Third, the journalistic ideal of objectivity tended to generate a focus upon ‘attributions, passive voice constructions, and the substitution of technical for moral or political judgments ... largely designed to conceal the voice of the journalist’ (Hallin, 1994: 176). In response, Hallin argued for new forms of journalism that aimed to be in dialogue with the wider public rather than ‘mediating between political institutions and the mass public’, and a professional practice where ‘the voice and judgment of the journalist ... [are] more honestly acknowledged’ (Hallin, 1994: 176).

Hallin’s diagnosis of a perceived crisis for journalism, arising from a growing disconnect between journalism as an organized and institutionalized professional practice and the audiences and communities it intends to serve, was developed at precisely the point where the mass popularization of the Internet was occurring, but it was almost a decade before its full implications began to permeate the culture and organization of journalism and news media. The technological developments associated with the rise of citizen journalism have been occurring at a time when claims to the uniqueness of journalism as a profession have been identified as being narrowly grounded, often circular in their mode of argumentation, and thus highly contestable. Zelizer (2005) has argued that journalism has to be ultimately understood as a culture, and those who self-define as journalists ‘employ collective, often tacit knowledge to become members of the group and maintain their membership over time’ (Zelizer, 2005: 200). Other definitions of what constitutes journalism and journalists – as a profession, an industry, an institution or a craft – are, for Zelizer,

inadequate, as they always present boundary issues as to who is included and excluded. By contrast, the cultural definition clarifies why, how and by whom definitions emerge about who exists within the centre or the margins of journalism, by linking the boundary issues back to the culture of journalism itself, and the ‘connections [which] are made that link internal mind-sets about how the world works with the external arrangements by which social life is set in place’ (Zelizer, 2005: 201).

Deuze (2005) develops a similar argument in proposing that journalism is ultimately an occupational ideology shared among those who self-classify as journalists. Ideology is understood here in the dual sense of being ‘a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular group, including – but not limited to – the general process of the production of meanings and ideas within that group’, and as a process whereby ‘the sum of ideas and views – notably on social and political issues – of a particular group is shaped over time, but also as a process by which other ideas and views are excluded or marginalized’ (Deuze, 2005: 445). Deuze tests this hypothesis by identifying five common claims that are made about journalism both by journalists themselves and by those who research journalism as a profession, and testing these against two potentially disruptive influences upon journalism: multimedia, or the impact of new media technologies, and multiculturalism, or the implications of greater acknowledgement and incorporation into everyday practices the recognition of cultural diversity in modern societies.

Table 8.1

### Journalism as a Professional Ideology: Deuze's Analysis of Change

#### Factors

<b>Core elements of journalists' professional self-definition</b>	<b>Underlying concepts and applications in practice</b>	<b>Impact of new media technologies</b>	<b>Impact of multiculturalism</b>
<i>Public service</i>	Acting as 'watch-dogs' or 'alert services' to the wider public	'The public' is increasingly using new media to tell its own stories	Need to actively seek new angles and voices from undiscovered communities
<i>Objectivity</i>	Need for neutrality, fairness, impartiality and 'professional distance' from sources	Interactivity presents the journalist with multiple and conflicting points of view	Need to move from binary ('both sides of the story') to multiperspectival approaches
<i>Autonomy</i>	Freedom from censorship, whether by governments, companies or colleagues	Collaborative production models increasingly become the norm	Need for more community-based reporting and awareness of entrenched social inequalities
<i>Immediacy</i>	Information needs to be produced and disseminated quickly in order to have value and currency	Reflection, complexity and ongoing editing and updating of news becomes possible, involving users in the process	Speed tends to negate recognition of diversity, in terms of newsroom cultures, sourcing, and how news is distributed
<i>Ethics</i>	Need to be guided by a formal code of ethics as collectively agreed to by one's peers in the organisation and/or relevant professional body	New media tend to evoke an 'ethics on the run', as online site moderation cannot mirror an internally derived organisational ethic/culture	Issues about what is/is not 'suitable' content become more complex as societies become more diverse, and mechanisms for dialogue need to be established

Source: Deuze, 2005.

## **The 2007 Australian Federal election and the *youdecide2007* project**

The 2007 Australian Federal election presented itself as a suitable occasion in which to test some of the possibilities of alternative models of online citizen journalism. Even in countries without fixed electoral terms, such as Australia, the timing of an election retains some degree of predictability, meaning that the considerable pre-planning and marshalling of resources that needs to go into site development can occur over a defined project management time frame. It is also known that elections tend to coincide with spikes in visits to Web sites, particularly those associated with political news, information and debate. Moreover, the project team had some experience with understanding the relationship between the Internet and election campaigns, most notably through the involvement of Graham Young, a partner investigator on the project, who as editor and founder of *On Line Opinion* had developed web sites for previous Federal and Queensland state elections, as well as having previously been a Vice-President and campaign director for the Queensland Liberal Party.

The insights that we hoped to glean from the *youdecide2007* site were fourfold. First, we knew that running a citizen journalism site would provide rich information on the likely *audience*, or what Axel Bruns has termed the “producers” (Bruns 2005, 2008) for such initiatives, and further understanding about the dynamics of citizen journalism communities. Second, this practical initiative also allowed experimentation with *new forms of news coverage*. In *youdecide2007*, the project team was interested in trying out emerging models of online news, including the site-

level aggregation of hyper-local content sourced at the level of the electorate or constituency. In this way we aimed to provide a “bottom-up” counterpoint to the “presidential” narratives of the mainstream media, as well as exploring a hunch that the national focus of media election coverage obscures the significance of electorate-based issues that are decisive in determining the final results. Third, we were aware that running a citizen journalism site offered a “royal road” to understanding what the work of facilitating citizen journalism consists in. Through reflecting on our work in building and running the service, we hoped we would be able to speak to changes in the nature of media work as news goes online, and as ‘the people formerly known as the audience’ (Rosen, 2006) are brought within the fold as contributors to independent and commercial news production. Finally, a key area of interest for the project team was in discovering what kinds of *relationships* exist, or are possible, between independent, online news media (including citizen journalism initiatives) and mainstream media news services.

The relationship between mainstream media and the ‘blogosphere’ itself became an issue of growing importance during the course of 2007. With Kevin Rudd becoming leader of the Australian Labor Party in late 2006, it was apparent that a change of government was not only possible but likely, as there was hostility with particular Liberal-National Party government policies, such as the “Work Choices” industrial relations legislation, and a sense that the government and its leader, John Howard, had been in government for too long as it went into its eleventh year in office. The Howard government was responding by drawing out the election date to as late as possible, and running what was pretty much a ‘permanent campaign’ through 2007. This in turn fanned ongoing tensions between the national newspaper *The Australian*,

which had positioned itself since 2001 in particular as the national newspaper for conservative thought-leadership, and a blogosphere that tended to be politically left-of-centre. The key point of dispute was around interpretations of polling data, with blogs such as *Larvatus Prodeo*, *The Road to Surfdom*, *Mumble*, *Crikey* and *Possum's Pollytics* consistently taking *The Australian*, and particularly its chief political correspondent Dennis Shanahan, to task for what were seen as attempts to put a positive 'spin' for the Coalition government on polling data that was consistently indicating an election victory for Labor. These tensions bubbled over in what has been described as the 'July 12 incident' (Flew, 2008), when an editorial in *The Australian* denounced bloggers as 'woolly headed critics' and 'sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper' (*The Australian*, 2007). The editorial, titled 'History a better guide than bias', defended *The Australian's* political coverage, and argued that many bloggers were members of the 'one-eyed anti-Howard cheer squad' and are 'out of touch with ordinary views'. In relation to the analysis of opinion polls, it was argued that 'unlike [online political commentary site] *Crikey*, we understand Newspoll because we own it.' *The Australian's* response, which seemed to have little echo elsewhere in the Australian media, indicated that at least some of the leading political commentators were beginning to resent the challenge to their authority to interpret and pass on political information. This in turn pointed to an interesting tension between the 'insider' culture of national political reporting and the new challenges being posed by those 'outsiders' using the Internet and their own knowledge to post alternative interpretations on their blogs.

The *Youdecide 2007* website and its support systems were designed for hybrid purposes. Partly, we needed to address the pragmatics of building a working online citizen journalism community: our site needed to be able to host multimedia content, facilitate community interaction, be user-friendly, allow the processing of content in a way that suited staff and users, and ensure that we met all legal and ethical obligations. This was particularly important as we had a link with the Special Broadcasting Service, which has its own Charter and Codes of Conduct issues, as well as its answerability to parliament on questions ranging from bias to morality, arising from its status as a public broadcaster. The site needed to be developed within a relatively short time frame and within the constraints of the project's resources. Besides working well as a service, it also had to enable subsequent research in each of the project's key areas of interest.

These principles were translated into a working site that was launched in September 2007, well before the campaign proper and the November 23 election. An open-source content management system, *Joomla!* was employed, and heavily customized to allow the submission of multimedia content through the public areas of the site as well as editorial work in the "back end". Statistics modules were included so that user activity could be tracked during and after the site's active life. The aggregated-hyperlocal, electorate-level model for our coverage informed the design and layout of the site – "hard" news content was near the top of the front page, and opinion pieces and media releases were further down. The site had static pages linked to from the front page, which contained technical and legal information, explanations of the initiative, details on licensing and privacy, and guidance in journalistic practice. Users were able to comment on stories, and recent comments were flagged on the front

page. The site required those wishing to post to register as citizen journalists, and a Manual for Citizen Journalists was prepared by Jason Wilson to be downloadable as a PDF, with the contents of this Manual being approved by the legal division of SBS.

Prior to launching the site, the *youdecide2007* initiative was publicized through a *Facebook* page, which attracted 250 members, as well as a *YouTube* video; letters were also sent to political organizations and to journalism and media schools at Australian universities. Through its active life, the site got around 2000 registered users, and published 230 stories. These stories came from 50 of Australia's 156 electorates, and citizen journalists submitted print, video, audio and photographic materials. At its peak, the site attracted over 12,000 readers a week, and according to our Nielsen Net Ratings statistics and monitoring of traffic counters like *Alexa.com*, throughout the election period it was receiving more traffic than all major political parties' sites except the Australian Labor Party.

There was also a *You Decide* television program that ran for 30 minutes on Brisbane community television channel *Briz31* on Friday nights, and the six programs were also downloadable from the site or from *YouTube*; the program was estimated to attract 12,000 viewers a week in its early Friday evening slot, which is about half the audience of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Stateline* program that also runs on Friday evenings. *Youdecide2007* received significant coverage in the mainstream media, with stories about the site in *The Age*, ABC Radio National, various local ABC radio stations, local newspapers and Fairfax Online. In addition, three of the project participants (Axel Bruns, Barry Saunders and Jason Wilson) were invited to establish a blog site on the ABC's *Unleashed* web site, which encouraged

opinionated blogging from multiple sources. The site, called *Club Bloggery*, provided a running commentary on news media coverage of Australian politics, and has continued after the Federal election.

The item on *youdecide2007* that received the most hits (about 2000 overall) was an interview with Peter Lindsay, the Liberal member for Herbert (a North Queensland electorate based around Townsville), who said in an interview with project team member Jason Wilson that ‘mortgage stress’ was primarily the result of young people lacking financial management skills and getting into debt too easily. Noting that when he was younger, if you could not afford furniture you would sit on a milk crate until you could, the story became known as “Crate-gate”, and Lindsay’s remarks were referred to by then Opposition leader Kevin Rudd in the House of Representatives. *Youdecide 2007* broke stories that were picked up by the national press, most notably the “crate-gate” story, and the project team was able to send our most accomplished citizen journalist, Kevin Rennie from Broome, WA, in the electorate of Kalgoorlie (the world’s largest electorate) to the National Tally Room in Canberra on election night. Although ambitions for such services tend to be high, *youdecide2007* was considered a successful effort as a citizen journalism service, especially in the Australian context, where little has previously been attempted in this area.

**Journalism as social networking: Content work, networking, community work and technical work**

An underlying principle of the *youdecide2007* site was that engaging and diverse content could be generated through a model of *journalism as social networking*. Drawing on Deuze's (2005) typology above, we can identify features of this as including public co-production of news, interactivity between journalists, their readers and their sources, collaborative production models, ongoing editing and revision of news based upon new information, and the need for site managers to develop an 'ethics on the run' in managing online site interaction. It sits within a wider context of what Bruns (2008) has termed *produsage*, which entail a fundamental shift in all forms of media production from the industrial production value chain of *producer > distributor/outlet > consumer* with a clear division of roles and tasks and a final product towards a model characterized by open participation, non-hierarchical community co-production, continuous process and revision of digital artefacts rather than final products, and communally-generated and owned content (Bruns, 2008: 23-30). In relation to news production, relevant concepts include Hartley's (2000) notion of journalism as *redaction*, or the continuous editing of content generated from multiple sources, Leadbeater and Miller's (2004) focus upon the *pro-am*, as 'innovative, committed and networked amateurs working to professional standards' (Leadbeater and Miller 2004: 9), and Miller's (2007) concept of the *preditor*, a term that describes 'new media employees who perform both production and editorial roles' Beckett (2008) has argued that in such an environment 'the networked journalist has to become comfortable with the idea of social networking ... [and] the journalist's job will be to ensure every opportunity to have "amateur" input at every stage of the process' (Beckett, 2008: 53).

An important distinction needs to be made between networked journalism and crowdsourcing. The term *crowdsourcing* refers to accessing ideas and content that was previously performed in-house through the Internet in order to ‘tap into the latent talent of the crowd’, as well as reducing business costs (Howe, 2006). In relation to crowdsourced journalism initiatives, such as the citizen journalism project Assignment Zero developed by *WIRED* magazine and New York University professor Jay Rosen, have identified that what in practice occurs is better understood as ‘pro-am’ or ‘semi-pro’ journalism, where the editorial and production expertise of professional journalists exists alongside larger scale public contributions. *WIRED* contributing editor and crowdsourcing advocate Jeff Howe describes this as the ‘dirty little secret’ of crowdsourcing more generally:

Crowdsourcing projects are generally characterized as being the product of a few super-contributors and a mass of people who contribute some minor bits. I've heard this called the "dirty little secret of open source," the fact that most of the heavy lifting is done, not by the crowd per se, but by a few select individuals from within the crowd. I'd like to posit another rule: Any crowdsourcing project must install one go-to guy (or girl) who will thanklessly toil day and night to keep the project on the rails.” (Howe, 2007)

Howe remarks that anyone in such a role might variously be expected to ‘customize [software], play Webmaster, manage the content on the site and play point person for a wide variety of volunteers and contributors’ (Howe, 2007). Beyond coordination, “go-to” people must work to make up for shortcomings in the way that untrained citizens

report the news. Marc Cooper, senior editor of online news site *Huffington Post*, has made a similar observation:

Where we've had the biggest problem [in citizen journalism initiatives] is assuming that untrained citizen reporters can quickly and adequately replace professional and trained reporters... We do ourselves a lot of damage if we underestimate the training and professional rigors of journalism. I'm talking about the standards and training that go into building a journalist. Journalists don't just come off the shelf. (quoted in Glaser, 2008)

Increasingly, international experience suggests that for citizen journalism services to prosper, a relatively small core of professionals need to work on content, coordination and training, and become core actors in a broader community effort (c.f. Simons, 2008).

The *youdecide2007* project revealed four key dimensions of professional practice that are central to any form of networked journalism that seeks to engage the public as citizen and contributors. These are *content work*, *networking*, *community work* and *technical work*. Although these forms of media work can be conceptually in practice they tend to overlap, and in the small teams that typically characterize such projects outside of the large news media organizations, networked journalists must carry out all of these forms of work.

## **Content work**

The first dimension is *content work*, which describes all aspects of producing and facilitating original content for a citizen journalism service. This includes editing *and* making content – both ensuring that user-submitted stories meet legal, regulatory, ethical and quality requirements; and providing original content that conforms to conventional news values and drives community growth. This resembles traditional journalism, but it differs in its aims and the context in which it is carried out. Rather than delivering news content to a website which is ‘just another channel’ for journalists’ output (Mattin, 2005), networked journalists as content workers are focused – even in their own content-making – on sustaining a news generating online community.

The primary area of content work is the editorial supervision of citizen journalists’ contributions. Editing needs to focus both on legal and quality issues. Citizen journalism does not exist in a legal vacuum. Some citizen journalism advocacy tends to assume U.S.-style free speech provisions, but laws and regulations can vary widely between jurisdictions, and untrained journalists may not be aware of what makes some material problematic. Editing according to Web 2.0 principles – with user voting or post-moderation – offers only limited or erratic protection from litigation or prosecution for the publishers or legal owners of online news sites. Such legal considerations go to questions of sustainability: not pre-editing user-generated material risks putting a service, its employees and its community at risk of severe financial penalties or even more serious forms of legal sanction. These are dangers for both commercial and public service media: in the *youdecide2007* project, we had to device and manage a contributions framework that would not do damage to the reputation to the Special Broadcasting Service as one of our industry partners through association.

The need for user submissions to be legally checked means that an editorial team must be trained and competent to assess the legal risk inherent in any story, at least to the level of a working journalist.

Beyond legal concerns, depending on the nature of the service, there will often be a case for editing user submissions for accuracy and clarity of expression. It is possible to put structures in place that allow users themselves to make judgments about the quality of articles after they appear, and it is not appropriate to demand work of professional quality from amateurs, since part of the rationale for citizen journalism must include citizens' right to free speech and self-expression. But *youdecide2007* users themselves often expressly asked for editorial help, and it could be seen as a courtesy to contributors to assist with correcting simple errors, or making suggestions about how stories can be made more effective.

It is telling that enduring and successful citizen journalism initiatives like *OhMyNews* and *OhMyNews International* edit both for legal concerns and quality, in the same way we did when producing *youdecide2007*. *OhMyNews* spells out on its website the reasons for rejecting stories, and asks contributors to adhere to a code of ethics and a reporter's agreement in submitting material for the site, and as much as 30 percent of daily submissions are rejected for various reasons such as poor sentence construction, factual errors, or lack of news value (Lasica and Lee, 2007).

Staff also need to write stories of their own, to help to draw a community to the site, provide models of practice for citizen journalists, and get attention for their initiative in the broader mediasphere. During the life of *youdecide2007*, the core team generated

“seed content” to ensure the site did not launch as an empty shell, but also in the hope that stories would guide citizen journalists in developing their own material. Project team members continued to make contributions throughout the life of the site, partly in order to guarantee a steady flow of content, but also to set some form of benchmark to prospective contributor around expectations of content quality. When we came to assess the impact of citizen-generated content versus staff-generated content, it was found that “pro” content written by project team members had played a crucial role in drawing readers and contributors to the site. The graph below shows the popularity of stories published to the site, in terms of unique page visits, and distinguishes between “pro” and “am” content. It shows that the most-read stories were generated by the pros: eight of the site’s ten most visited stories were produced by staff members, most notably those arising from “Crate-gate”, which was in many ways a classic “gotcha” journalism story. An interesting contrast was that citizen-generated stories tended to receive more comments than staff pieces. But it does show that part of the site’s “stickiness” – its ability to drag in readers who may be potential contributors – was attributable to pro content. There are many possible explanations for this, but we might consider that staff stories more nearly approximated the production and news values of industrial journalism. Tellingly, the only stories we managed to “break” in the wider mediasphere were staff-generated. The presence of a team who had skills across multimedia and digital journalism was invaluable in producing high-quality news content, which did not provide the rationale for the site, but assisted in drawing the community that did.

**Figure 1****Hits on Published Items, *youdecide2007* – staff contributions compared to citizen contributions**

See attached.

## **Networking**

The second dimension of networked journalism is *networking*. It is necessary for pros to enhance the connectivity of their service with a range of people and other outlets in the networked news environment (Beckett, 2008). Under the rubric of networking is making advantageous connections with existing, established news outlets, ensuring that content is delivered and sourced across a number of platforms, and entrepreneurially mobilizing online and personal networks to build community and bring users and their content to a site. The nature of online publishing and citizen journalism demands that the service is conceived of not simply as one of potentially many channels for citizen-led content, but as relationally integrated in a broader ecology of mainstream and independent news.

The most immediate problem for any citizen journalism initiative must work is the difficulty of getting attention, and the need to draw the “produser” audience it needs in order to be viable. On-site content needs to be repurposed and republished to give stories and the service a higher visibility. Existing contacts can be tapped for content, participation, or simply to spread the word about a service. Getting noticed requires establishing collaborative relationships, especially with dominant sectors of the mediasphere. Although the mainstream media or “MSM” attains the status of a folk devil with some bloggers and citizen journalists, mainstream journalism, with its mass audience, remains the best way of getting information to potential readers and users. The mainstream media can help citizen journalism services survive and prosper: rather than viewing them with suspicion, it is incumbent on the managers of citizen

journalism sites to make and cultivate contacts among professional journalists and political operatives. In the case of the “Crate-gate” story on *youdecide2007*, contacts that the interviewer had within the Australian Labor Party were used to ask them directly for a reaction to Mr. Lindsay’s comments that were then recorded and published. This was in turn fed up through succeeding echelons of the Labor Party, traveled into the Parliament, and then cascaded out through the outlets of the mainstream media. This produced further contacts when media outlets called us to confirm the story, or to ask about *youdecide2007* as a project. As a result of this, several pieces were published in which the site itself was the story, which in turn brought more visibility and more users.

Content, too, may be “networked” and re-used across platforms to raise the visibility of citizen journalism services. The licensing arrangements used by a particular site are important here, and without a Creative Commons licence, or some arrangement that allows wider republication, content may not be portable. But if arrangements for re-use are in place, material can be ported across a number of platforms. At a minimum, reposting videos to *YouTube*, using social bookmarking services like *Digg* to draw searches to the site, reposting on social networking services like *Facebook*, and using trackback links to relevant blog entries will all get added value from a story. In the case of *youdecide2007*, we were also able to repurpose content for our weekly community television program, and the program was then posted onto *YouTube*.. Making contact with bloggers who are writing in the area that the service is covering can also yield high-quality content from experienced writers, and republication can also benefit the original authors by giving them a bigger readership and building

reputation. Pushing out and pulling in content across the networked news environment is crucial to making a site both visible and viable.

### **Community work**

Community work includes all efforts to bring people to their service, and to keep a community engaged with on-site site content and with one another. The provision of a certain level of community service for users is not only the best way to influence the tone of stories and debate on the site, but also the best way to promote user retention and the growth of communities. The assumption that a site based on user-generated content will naturally develop its own emergent ethos can obscure the fact – brought home by *youdecide2007* – that users have needs that site staff are best placed to cater for. Users do not bring equal levels of skill, experience or (unfortunately) goodwill to any user-generated content platform, and need pros to act as educators and honest brokers.

Users' needs can be broadly divided into three categories: (i) training; (ii) site-specific information; and (iii) mediation. *Training* involves passing on all of the digital and informational literacies required for participating in a service, at whatever level of involvement. This might involve teaching users how to post content, how to register or comment, or how to use linked off-site technologies like digital editing technologies or *YouTube*. It may involve coaching users in producing compelling news. *Site-specific information* can include clarification of the nature and purpose of the service, explanations of intellectual property arrangements, or details on editing processes. Some users may lack the “soft skills” of communication that smooth online

interaction, which is why *mediation* is also important, through activities such as defusing “flame wars” in comments threads, respond to objections about the thrust of specific stories, and, when required, making decisions to ban particularly offensive users.

There is a particularly important need to cultivate “super-contributors” within this community that relatively small group who provide the bulk of the content for any service. Such users often quite properly come to have feelings of ownership over the initiative to which they have contributed so much material, which may in turn lead them to claim a certain familiarity with the professional core members of a service, and to communicate frequently with them. Even if they do not take the initiative in this way, it is important that such “power users” feel welcome, and ensured that their efforts are appreciated, as they are after the professional staff themselves, the group who contribute the most to the ongoing life citizen journalism communities. For example, during the *youdecide2007* project, one “super-contributor” was rewarded with a trip to Canberra to cover election night at the Tally Room for the service.

### **Technical work**

As citizen journalism is driven by the affordances of Internet technologies, a good working knowledge of a range of digital technologies is essential in order to generate and edit content, raise the profile of a site across the networked media environment, serve and manage the user community, and assess the impact of the project. Generalising from the *youdecide2007* project, technical work can be divided into three elements: (i) on-site tech work; (ii) off-site tech work; and (iii) meta-tech- work. *On-*

*site tech work* covers all technical aspects of bringing content and users to the core service, and includes assisting with web design and making the site user-friendly, both for users at the front-end and staff at the back-end. The *youdecide2007* project used the *Joomla!* content management system for a range of purposes, including posting and editing multimedia content, managing user registrations, moderating comments, and communicating directly with users. *Off-site tech work* is a more diverse category that includes the range of technological literacies needed in order to generate content for the site, promotion of the site across the networked news environment, as well as the ability to capture and edit digital still images, video and audio to ensure that the site carries multimedia content. *Meta-tech-work* includes making use of data generated about facts like site and server activity, users, and links for assessing the impact and effectiveness of the services.

## **Conclusion**

Four concluding observations can be made about the experience of developing and running the *youdecide2007* citizen journalism site during the 2007 Australian Federal election. The first is that, while citizen journalism sites may be at the margins of overall news consumption, the production practices that are evolving through such sites are moving to the centre of how journalism as a professional practice is increasingly being undertaken. The merging of content origination (news writing) and content organization (editing) roles, or the rise of the “preditor” as Miller (2007) has termed it, the need to work with highly fluid online social networks to generate content and conversation online, the building of sustainable user communities, and high levels of technical proficiency with online tools and technologies, are all now

central to journalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Project for Excellence in Journalism, in its comprehensive study of major U.S. newspapers, found that specialist roles such as editors and staff photographers are in terminal decline, and the positions that are growing in size and importance are those of staff bloggers, multi-skilled mobile journalists (“mo-jo’s”), videographers, Web designers and writers of specialist micro-sites targeted at particular interest communities, as the newspaper and the Web site increasingly merge into a single product (PEJ, 2008).

Second, the relationship between mainstream new media and independent online citizen journalism and blog sites is far more porous and permeable than either Web 2.0 evangelists or the debunkers of such trends as simply a fad (or worse) assume. The nature of the Web as a network is that it operates more like an ecology than it does as separate and discrete channels, structures and professions. Independent online news media sites can build not only audiences but communities of users who engage, not only with the sites, but with the practice of journalism itself: successful citizen journalism sites can be viewed as a form of ‘R&D’ for the shape of future news production and distribution. At the same time, practices that have traditionally been associated with professional journalism, such as concise and engaging writing, time-dependent delivery of content and stories, editing that draw the reader or viewer to the story, and the cultivation of valuable sources and contacts, remain vital to journalism in any form, and the large news media outlets remain the most important publicity and promotional sources for new online initiatives as they seek to build communities (Thurman 2008).

Third, the sharing of experiences is vital to the development of citizen journalism, and all initiatives need to be viewed as works in progress. The “Assignment Zero” project demonstrated the limits of crowdsourcing news that lack a common focus or theme, and *youdecide2007* also showed that ‘pro-am’ online journalism requires an ongoing role for small team of trained professionals to manage not only the recruitment of citizen journalists, but the nature of how they contribute and participate in such sites. It was also found that while a Federal election would seem to be a suitably narrow and focused topic around which to promote and manage citizen engagement, there may be even more promising opportunities in sites that are even more specifically engaged around an event or subject area.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the rise of citizen journalism, and networked journalism more generally, has many implications for the future of journalism as a professional practice, and how journalism education and training should be developing. Journalism education has long been structured around replicating the traditional newsroom environment, on the assumption that replicating the professional ideology of journalism in the university environment could somehow serve to regulate the supply of labour to the industry thereby maintaining or enhancing the status of journalism as a profession akin to architecture or medicine (Hartley, 1996, Carey, 2000). This aspiration to a regulated professional status through credentialing and training in established industry practice, which was never particularly secure in even the most ‘high modernist’ moments of limited-source news media and strict separation between news producers and consumers, is now in free fall in the Web environment, and journalism education is in serious catch-up with what is happening throughout the Web. We would therefore reject as unduly complacent claims that ‘journalists will adapt to the Internet, in the

same ways they embraced the telephone, the telegraph and the printing press (Knight, 2008: 123). We would instead share the more grounded observations of Deuze (2006) that ‘instead of having some kind of control over the flow of (meaningful, selected, fact-checked) information in the public sphere, journalists today are just some of the many voices in public communication’ (Deuze, 2006: 155-156). Learning from citizen journalism initiatives will be an important part of what will define journalism as a professional practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>2</sup> Subsequent to *youdecide2007*, a smaller project was developed around the Queensland local government elections in March 2008, called *Queensland Decides 2008*, with the support of the Local Government Association of Queensland. This site attracted as many visitors as *youdecide2007* on a much smaller production and promotional budget.

We would attribute the relative success of *Queensland Decides 2008* to four factors: (1) the ease with which the site architecture developed for *youdecide2007* could be repurposed once the original development work had been undertaken; (2) the greater enthusiasm for participation among mayoral candidates than Federal election candidates, as they work with much smaller budgets and mostly without major party affiliation; (3) the ability to identify genuinely ‘hyper-local’ issues and the level of government that has responsibility for them (e.g. high-rise development in a coastal area, rather than climate change, interest rates or the future of schools), and (4) the poor quality of coverage in mainstream media, such as the Queensland-wide newspaper, *The Courier-Mail*.