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CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND EVERYDAY LIFE: A case study of Germany's myHeimat.de

Dr Axel Bruns

Much recent research into citizen journalism has focussed on its role in political debate and deliberation. Such research examines important questions about citizen participation in democratic processes – however, it perhaps places undue focus on only one area of journalistic coverage, and presents a challenge which only a small number of citizen journalism projects can realistically hope to meet.

A greater opportunity for broad-based citizen involvement in journalistic activities may lie outside of politics, in the coverage of everyday community life. A leading exponent of this approach is the German-based citizen journalism Website myHeimat.de, which provides a nationwide platform for participants to contribute reports about events in their community. myHeimat takes a hyperlocal approach but also allows for content aggregation on specific topics across multiple local communities; Hannover-based newspaper publishing house Madsack has recently acquired a stake in the project.

Drawing on extensive interviews with myHeimat CEO Martin Huber and Madsack newspaper editors Peter Taubald and Clemens Wlokas during October 2008, this paper analyses the myHeimat project and examines its applicability beyond rural and regional areas in Germany; it investigates the question of what role citizen journalism may play beyond the political realm.

KEYWORDS citizen journalism; community; hyperlocal; *myHeimat*; participation; politics

Introduction: Beyond the Usual Politics

The impact of citizen journalism on the established journalism industry, and its role in the future news media mix, remain key topics in current journalism studies research, not least also in the context of the current crisis facing many news organisations around the globe – this is evident not least from the substantial number of ‘citizen journalism’ monographs and collections published over the past few years (see e.g. Paterson & Domingo, 2008; Boler, 2009; Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Neuberger, Nuernbergk, & Rischke, 2009; Gordon, 2009; Russell & Echchaibi, 2009; Meikle & Redden, forthcoming). Except for a relatively small number of notable exceptions, much of the research and wider public discussion surrounding the citizen journalism phenomenon has employed a relatively narrow definition of the term, however – for the most part, researchers have focussed on citizen journalism projects which provide mainly *political* news and commentary, and on their role in influencing the political process especially in countries like the U.S.

Such research made important contributions by highlighting the role of citizen journalism publications as a corrective to mainstream news media whose quality of coverage has been found wanting on a number of occasions, and by indicating the emergence especially of a younger group of news consumers who have turned away from print newspapers and seek their news predominantly online, and here no longer necessarily only from ‘reputable’, well-established news organisations. At the same time, however, this focus on political news has perpetuated an existing distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news which has tended to privilege the political over most other forms of news reporting, and pushed into the background other areas of the news which may benefit just as much from a broader range of news outlets and contributions from non-professional journalists.

Further, an unresolved contradiction remains at the heart of the ‘citizen journalism’ concept: while on the one hand, citizen journalism has unquestionably enabled more ‘citizens’ (understood here in the first place as ‘non-journalists’) to participate in more journalistic processes, including especially news commentary, on the other hand this has so far failed to translate into participation

by a more representative cross-section of the overall citizenry. Due in part also to the public and scholarly focus on citizen journalism as political news, the majority of participants in citizen journalism appear to be what Coleman (2006) has described as ‘political junkies’ (PJs) – citizens who already had a keen interest in political matters, and have engaged with citizen journalism projects as vehicles for their political participation and expression. While valuable in their own right, then, such citizen journalism sites mainly provide an outlet for the already converted – citizens already interested in civic participation – rather than introducing more previously uninvolved members of society to active participation in public matters.

Part of the problem in this context is likely to be that highly valued, ‘hard’ news topics provide only limited opportunity for meaningful participation beyond the mere voicing of personal opinion: ‘hard’ news is considered hard not least because an in-depth understanding of current political issues is required in order to contribute meaningful commentary or generate new insight from a close reading of existing information. In order to engage in this form, one must become a PJ, and preferably be embedded in a social milieu which guarantees access to other PJs. While detailed studies of the demographics of major citizen journalism Websites have yet to be undertaken, this suggests that active participants are likely to be drawn mainly from a relatively narrow group of participants, most likely based in state and national capitals.

One approach to broadening the base for citizen journalism beyond this group – especially also on a geographic level – has been to explore hyperlocal citizen journalism models. Internationally, several successful hyperlocal citizen journalism projects – covering local politics – are in train, and a recent project in Australia, *Youdecide2007.org*, successfully deployed a platform enabling users to report on the individual local electoral races in the 2007 Australian federal election, providing coverage of the election well beyond the mainstream media’s focus on the contest between the major party candidates for Prime Minister (see Wilson, Saunders, and Bruns, 2009).¹

Such projects provide a space for citizen journalism participants who may be at a considerable remove from national politics, but nonetheless have meaningful contributions to make by reporting on (and from) areas of which they have immediate, first-hand knowledge; *Youdecide2007*, for example, was able to shine a light on political issues in highly remote areas such as the northwest Australian electorate of Kalgoorlie, which would otherwise be almost entirely absent from mainstream political coverage. Nonetheless, even projects such as this perpetuate the privileged positioning of political news over other topics. A citizen journalism which aims for a truly broad-based level of participation by the citizenry may need to explore other avenues.

From Citizen Journalism to Community News?

The German participatory news Website *myHeimat.de* provides a useful – and importantly, successful – model for another form of citizen journalism. Launched in its present form in 2005, the site is structured as an aggregated hyperlocal news site: users specify their home location (their *Heimatort*) as they register for the site, and are presented with recent user-generated news items from their local area on subsequent logins. They are also able, however, to search for content from other regions, or to browse site content by topic and other characteristics rather than by location. This provides a space for the development and maintenance of multiple on-site communities around shared local origins, but also offers a platform for the nationwide coverage of news and events from diverse local perspectives, and for the development of interest groups based on shared interests beyond local identity. Developed and launched in Augsburg near Munich, *myHeimat* retains a strong focus on this region as well as on a number of other areas where it partners with local print outlets; it has been able to attract some 20,000 users who are distributed across nearly all of Germany,

¹ Axel Bruns was a Chief Investigator of the ARC Linkage project which developed *Youdecide2007*, in partnership with public broadcaster SBS, *The National Forum*, and Cisco Systems.

however. The following analysis of the *myHeimat* project is based substantially on interviews which were conducted in October 2008 with *myHeimat* founder Martin Huber, CEO of Gogol Medien (the company operating *myHeimat*), and Peter Taubald and Clemens Wlokas, editor and deputy editor-in-chief of the *Heimatzeitungen*, a group of local newspapers, based in Garbsen near Hannover, that are produced by the Madsack publishing house which is a publishing partner for *myHeimat*.²

Compared to the sites which are more commonly studied by citizen journalism researchers, *myHeimat* at first appears decidedly apolitical – in keeping with the (hyper)local focus of the site, its user-generated content ranges from news reports about local events and community activities to stories on local history and photojournalism from the region, but also addresses topics such as local planning, council services, and related themes. *myHeimat* may therefore be better described as ‘community news’ than ‘citizen journalism’ in the sense that has been established in recent publications – but as Huber notes,

we have discovered that it’s often those themes which are simple, but relevant to everyday life, which are crucial to people in the region, and so ultimately we have a very user-oriented approach. ... We don’t so much have a journalistic perspective, under an assumption that we know what is of interest to the people, but we trust in the fact that the wisdom of the many, in the respective regions ..., will know best what is relevant.

This, he notes, also helps ensure the quality of the content contributed by *myHeimat* users:

we really want those topics, too, which are specific to the [local] microcosm, because: the further away from the everyday world those topics are, the harder it is for the citizen reporter to communicate them. If I step outside my door and go to the next playground, and it’s dirty and not serviced by the council, then I can communicate that very well; even as a lay person, especially as someone affected by it, I have a strong incentive to address the topic – ... ultimately I don’t need the aptitudes and abilities that a journalist has. The further it is away from me, and at least when it’s Obama-McCain, then perhaps I can have a personal opinion, but the question is, in competition with other offerings, can I reach a certain level with that topic, or does it remain a subjective individual opinion as it’s already available in a thousand blogs in the long tail?

Where higher-level politics does reappear on *myHeimat*, then, is where it intersects directly with the local – most of all (in parallel with projects such as *Youdecide2007*) in the context of local elections or the local contests in state elections. In Bavaria, Huber notes,

this has worked very very well, and we had a few mayors and mayoral candidates who ran their political blog through *myHeimat*, which we were very very happy about, because a debate and a dialogue took place on the small scale, which ultimately is part of our vision That’s an approach which has something of a basic democratic element, and an inclusion [of citizens] – or a revival of inclusion, of participation, of self-expression – in all things, including in politics. If not on an everyday basis, then at least at key points, like mayoral elections.

More central to *myHeimat* are not such isolated political events, however, but everyday community reporting – Huber’s vision was to create a site “which is entirely made by the region for the region”. As is the case with many other citizen journalism initiatives, this responds in part also to shortcomings in the established media landscape:

² Interviews were conducted in German, and translated by the author.

Germany in particular is for the most part very monopolistic, as far as local media are concerned, ... and that carries the threat that some user needs, some reader needs aren't ... attended to or regularly incorporated into products in the way the customer would like it to. In the past, there were relatively high barriers to entry to creating a proper product – at the local, daily level.

Notably in this context, the *myHeimat* initiative originated not with a local newspaper, but with Gogol Medien, an Augsburg-based IT company. This lack of journalistic background helped rather than hindered the site's development, Huber believes: "journalistically, content-wise, we stay out of it, and merely offer a platform which provides for elegant community exchange." He sees his staff as moderators and animators of the community process, especially in its early stages, who "time and again accompany, advance, enable, and nudge ... users, but ... on the other hand also never predetermine content aspects." This community-building process is crucial:

simply to make clear, 'this is open and anyone can participate', that's something that you have to impress [on users] and for which we have to give an appropriate push. You have to set a very low threshold, so that users don't need to start with a contribution consisting of a page of text – plus ten images, ready to print with a gripping headline – but can begin simply with a snapshot, with a brief impression.

And we notice clearly that people follow a learning curve on the platform, where they do in part begin with a snapshot, with an impression, with an image, and then step by step learn to operate [the system] and gain confidence. ... And that really needs to be supported, that's nothing these people are familiar with from 30 to 40 years of media consumption. ... That's a very different approach or a very different understanding of such a product from what a traditionally educated journalist does.

As participants have followed that learning curve, however, quality content and a strong sense of community have emerged, most of all in those regional *myHeimat* communities where a substantial, critical mass of users is active on the site. Huber describes a typical distribution of activity across the community:

there are people who are relatively rarely or very moderately active, there's a third who are moderately active, there's a third or a quarter who are hyperactive, sometimes with an enormous amount of articles – a distribution that is similar to what's known in many communities.

Once a critical mass of highly active local users has been reached (which Huber sets at around one to five percent of the total population, that is, above 100 users for most small German towns), community dynamics tend to set in which for the most part enable the community to take care of its own affairs. "Once the community has internalised" *myHeimat's* overall rules and values, Huber says,

its self-cleaning powers come into force, and more and more controversial topics can be dealt with And we see very clearly by now that it works very very well to let controversial topics run their course. But you have to understand this very clearly, it simply needs some time until this works – I would be very sceptical, I don't think this would work right from the start when the community isn't large enough yet and doesn't have the momentum.

The ability of the mature *myHeimat* communities in various localities to manage their own affairs and police their interactions with minimal moderatorial interference from *myHeimat* staff – which stands in stark contrast to perceptions of social media especially in the mainstream media industries

– stems in good part from two key factors: the online community's overlap with the local *offline* community, and the fact that the overwhelming majority of *myHeimat* users are registered under their real names rather than under a pseudonym. “One of the fundamental values of a community is transparency, authenticity, openness”, Huber notes, and estimates that

90 to 95 percent of the people are there with their real names, with their photos And additionally, of course, there's a possibility in the regional community, when you're stepping outside your door in the real world, that you're confronted with [the things you've written], and have to stand for it just as if I'm telling someone face to face or at the pub. The central point is not to create a virtual community, but to represent a real existing one and to achieve a connection with reality. ... And so we have far fewer disruptors here than in classical [pseudonymous, online] fora.

From Online to Print

Another substantial incentive – especially so perhaps in smaller regional towns – which may encourage constructive community participation is the possibility that users may see their content in print. In a number of German regions where *myHeimat* has been able to attract a critical mass, Gogol Medien and its regional partners now regularly publish local magazines and newspaper inserts which use the content contributed through the online platform. According to Huber – who suggests that “the real excitement comes from the attached print component” –, as at October 2008,

in Bavaria and Suebia ... there are 18 magazines, with a circulation of 138,000 copies, then there are the pages in the local newspapers around Hannover [in Lower Saxony], which have a circulation of 130,000 copies, and by now the third or fourth magazine in Hannover The newspapers in the city of Hannover, *Hannoversche Allgemeine* and *Neue Presse*, are also starting to publish content ... on Thursdays, and that's another 100,000, 150,000, or for the *Neue Presse* 200,000 units, but only once a week.

Further additional print publications have been added since the time of the interview. This is a remarkable development especially since Gogol Medien had not been a newspaper publisher in its own right, and initially began publishing these local magazines without backing from an established print publisher.

A number of different publishing models exist for these publications. In *myHeimat's* home state of Bavaria, Gogol pursued a free publication model which saw magazines distributed directly to households or made available at newsagents and other collection locations – “the approach is relatively open, and deliberately open, in terms of conversion into print, which means that you can explore the whole bandwidth” of possible models, Huber notes. Much as their content is drawn from hyperlocal communities, these magazines are financed in part by what could be described as hyperlocal advertising: they provide an advertising venue for local businesses for whom even city and regional newspapers reach too wide and nondescript an audience. Larger businesses also advertise in these publications, however. What remains important in this step from online to print, Huber points out, is that

this maintains certain fundamental elements: that transparency is maintained; that it remains visible somewhere where it all comes from, so that the user or author is acknowledged appropriately, and feels valued; but that the feedback loop is closed, too, and that the understanding is maintained that things which are posted to *myHeimat* may potentially go to print.

Another model for print publication has emerged from *myHeimat*'s growing cooperation with existing news organisations – and here in particular with the Hannover-based newspaper publisher Madsack and the editors of its local newspapers for the region surrounding Hannover, the *Heimatzeitungen*. This cooperation emerged from an initiative to develop an online presence for the various papers published by the *Heimatzeitungen*, and has subsequently been further cemented with the Madsack group becoming a shareholder in Gogol Medien. As editor-in-chief Peter Taubald describes it,

we thought, if we don't create a classic news portal, under the masthead of the newspaper, then maybe it would be good if we place all the reader contributions – ... mainly from associations – ... on the Internet, and create something like a reader newspaper in our newspaper. The working title was *meineheimat.de*, and that was already taken ... , and we were looking for domain names [and found *myHeimat*] ... and then we cried "it's been done already, damn..."

And most of all, we found that they were doing a good job. ... We had plenty of ideas, like everyone else, but it all costs money ... and that's exactly what Gogol Medien does: create [print] magazines from the Internet content and earn money in the conventional advertising market, and we thought that's great. So first we met with them and agreed to cooperate, and now the shareholdership.

Launched on 23 April 2008, cooperation between *myHeimat* and the *Heimatzeitungen* has been mutually beneficial: in the first place, the newspaper has served as a suitable vehicle for promoting participation in the online platform, leading to some 5,000 user registrations within the first six months of operation alone (some 1,200 of these registered users had contributed content by late October 2008). Similar to the magazines in Bavaria, regular *myHeimat* pages in the various editions of the newspaper which are published for different towns in the Hannover region re-publish the best user-generated online content from the region, and thus provide further motivation for participants; in selecting this content and organising local advertising around it, the project is also able to draw on the journalistic and business expertise of the *Heimatzeitung* organisation, of course.

Especially the journalistic aspects of this collaboration, however, needed some time to get underway, as deputy editor-in-chief Clemens Wlokas notes:

our colleagues watched this with a sceptical eye especially during the first months. ... We had something in Burgdorf where a street had subsided. This wasn't a small corner, but a larger area, because a water mains had broken and a lot of water had escaped, and that story was in the [online] community first. So in the editorial meeting we said, we should have a look, and why didn't we find out about this before? But it still took two, three days until it was properly in the paper – and then on the title page, because it really was headline news. A huge story.

But our colleagues said, we can't look at the [online] community as well – we have the press release, police meetings and so on; to check the community for what they're posting, to evaluate this, is it a topic for us or not... Why are they forcing another type of reality on us?

So we said, this *is* reality – if the users think this is important, then we have to check for ourselves, is this an interesting piece that we need to redevelop? Not just the way the community see it, of course – we have the chance to research, to interview others, to evaluate, to comment; we have our journalistic means of dealing with it.

Taubald adds:

we think it's great that we have our discussion, because we say that it doesn't matter whether we do *myHeimat* or not, because the phenomenon that people are communicating

in this form is there anyway, and we must respond to it in some way. If the result is that you can read things which are of local interest, and of interest to a [local] newspaper, online first, and then later they show up in a daily newspaper, then the daily newspaper loses its value. This means that we must produce content of a quality that is clearly distinct from anything else. ...

I'm glad that we've done what we've done, because this requires us in our role as editors-in-chief, with the newsroom staff, to much more strongly think about how to deal with these times. I think this is a debate which touches all newspapers ... and which we must lead intensively.

But, Wlokas notes,

for us there are always two pillars, community and competence, which complement one another, which influence one another, but which do not replace one another. This was a concern in many newsrooms, that publishers who no longer want to spend money on expensive newsrooms now take citizen journalists as *ersatz* content producers to obtain content cheaply and put papers on the market without employing a newsroom. That's not at all what we do – we wouldn't even think about it, because the connection, the cross-fertilisation, the two pillars, that's important, that's essential.

What Taubald and Wlokas describe here, then, is a live example for a hybrid pro-am model of journalism (cf. Bruns, forthcoming) that draws on crowdsourcing to identify stories and bring to light further background information, but which further enhances this material through journalistic processing. As Huber describes it,

if there are 300, 400 citizens in the region [who are registered on *myHeimat*], and they only need to be dormant, but if something happens, then there's a network of correspondents, that's amazing for such a region, and it's fast and it's authentic.

The content generated by this network of citizen reporters, then, is processed by journalists who are acting in a curatorial role at least as much as they work as reporters in their own right, in line with Taubald's definition of the role of the journalist in today's media environment: "journalists are there to cut an aisle of understanding through the jungle of information."

The Limits of *myHeimat*'s Hyperlocal Model

To date, *myHeimat* has been most successful at developing a critical mass of community participation in a number of regional areas in Germany – first of all around Augsburg, where it was founded, and in neighbouring regions in the state of Bavaria, and since early 2008 especially also in the region around Hannover in Lower Saxony through the efforts of the *Heimatzeitungen* team. Additional Madsack publications in other German states have now also begun to pursue the *Heimatzeitung* model, but are at earlier stages of development.

While it is possible to observe a tendency for participation in the site to grow gradually, both within individual towns and villages and by skipping from one town to its neighbours, a number of limits to such growth have also become obvious. *myHeimat* has so far failed to attract a substantial level of participation in major cities – notably including the state capitals Munich and Hannover in spite of their central location within the site's two most active regions. Site staff note that at present, the site is most successful at attracting contributors from regional and rural areas, and suggest that for residents in such areas there is a very different sense of local connection than for the inhabitants of major cities. In the regions, residents identify strongly with *their* town or village – and while, as Taubald notes,

offline the perception of Hannover is of course also divided into different suburbs, relying on this suburban identity alone online doesn't seem to me to be working – because interestingly, those people who are from Hannover or write content about Hannover are writing very warmly about Hannover *in general*. Nice things about Hannover for them are for the most part those things which people from Hannover or many tourists also find nice – city hall, the Berggarten, the Maschsee lake. How do I find out about the playground in [the suburb of] Bothfeld? ...

You can't do what you do here in the [Hannover] region, where the communities are more closed and unified: people in these communities think, first of all I'm from Burgdorf, then nothing, and then to some extent perhaps I'm from Hannover. It's not the same in the city, they're all from Hannover, and there's no-one really from Bothfeld.

Anecdotally, Taubald and Wlokas also point to marked differences even in the Hannover region itself, outside the city: here, takeup of *myHeimat* has been notably greater in the older, more organically grown surrounding cities than in those communities which over the past decades have developed mainly as leafy estate villages for Hannover's upper classes. Speaking for Munich, Huber agrees that these different levels of identification with the local area impact on the viability of the *myHeimat* model:

in our opinion, of course the effects and the microcosm in a small town are different from a metropolis. If I look at Munich, there are significantly more new residents, who may only be here for some time and who have newly arrived; there is more fluctuation and change; and there is significantly more nomadism and cosmopolitanism, so that there are different effects than in a small town of 20,000 inhabitants, which is at the upper level of a size where everyone knows everyone else. ... We're in the process of looking at this, can it be translated to city quarters, to suburbs; where is the analogy to the metropolis?

At the same time, even if widespread take-up in the major cities so far remains out of reach for *myHeimat*, then, this still leaves substantial room for growth for its community, he notes:

Germany is a very attractive market, because Germany has some 80 million inhabitants, of whom 30 million live in cities of up to 30,000 inhabitants – this means that this is a very attractive segment.

(A different question, however, is whether it will be possible to translate the *myHeimat* model to other, differently structured nations – for example to Australia, where the vast majority of the population is concentrated in a handful of major cities.)

Conclusion

myHeimat presents one of only a small number of successful examples for broad-based citizen journalism (or perhaps more appropriately, community news) projects which have emerged internationally. The viability of this model – at least for regional and rural communities – is demonstrated not least also by the growing support and cooperation between *myHeimat* itself and the *Heimatzeitungen* and other journalistic publications; indeed, late in 2008, the *Heimatzeitungen* won a European Newspaper Award for their role in this initiative (Warnecke, 2008).

Most centrally, the project points to a possible future beyond the repetitive journalists-vs.-blogger wars which continue to plague journalism practice as well as journalism studies – it provides a model for pro-am journalism approaches in which both sides have valuable contributions to make. Such new models will take some time to establish, as the *myHeimat* experience itself demonstrates,

and Huber's appreciation for his collaborators in Hannover are instructive in this context: "if they were all like this in the industry, the structural transformation would happen much more quickly."

What was already evident even before the current financial crisis, but what has been made even more urgent by it, is that for better or for worse the transformation must, and will, happen. At worst, it may lead to the disappearance of many professional journalism institutions without sufficient replacement, a future where – as Wlokas has described it – citizen journalists are harnessed as cheap *ersatz* content producers by commercial news operators; at best, it may lead to the development of sustainable hybrid models which combine the best of professional and citizen journalism to free up paid journalism staff to create content, add value to citizen journalism content, and curate the combined product.

From this perspective, the fact that Gogol Medien has recently licenced the platform which is used to run *myHeimat* as a basis for the 'participatory newspaper' *Gießener Zeitung* may be seen as the first step towards a broader proliferation of *myHeimat*'s and similar pro-am models. As Huber puts it:

It's a very interesting aspect that ... the effect of this approach reaches much further than only to the original products which are based on it. ... A single citizen reporter on *myHeimat* probably doesn't even know how they indirectly manage to make the newspaper better, by creating competition or introducing new thinking.

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Bio

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