

# THINKING ABOUT CITIZEN JOURNALISM

## The philosophical and practical challenges of user-generated content for community newspapers

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*This study seeks to understand how community newspaper editors negotiate the professional complexities posed by citizen journalism—a phenomenon that, even in the abstract, would appear to undermine their gatekeeping control over content. Through interviews with 29 newspaper editors in Texas, we find that some editors either favor or disfavor the use of citizen journalism primarily on philosophical grounds, while others favor or disfavor its use mainly on practical grounds. This paper presents a mapping of these philosophical-versus-practical concerns as a model for visualizing the conflicting impulses at the heart of a larger professional debate over the place and purpose of user-generated content in the news production process. Moreover, these findings are viewed in light of gatekeeping, which, we argue, offers a welcome point of entry for the study of participatory media work as it evolves at news organizations large and small alike. In contributing to a growing body of literature on user-generated content in news contexts, this study points to the need for better understanding the causes and consequences of journalism's hyperlocal turn, as digitization enables newswork to serve increasingly niche geographic and virtual communities.*

**KEYWORDS** authority; community; gatekeeping; participatory journalism; professionalism; user-generated content

### Introduction

The digitization of the print newspaper has been an ongoing process now for well over a decade (Boczkowski, 2004). Yet, for the US newspaper industry in recent years, this extension of news production from print to online has taken on fresh urgency amid accelerating losses in readership and revenue in the core print product. As publishers and editors increasingly shift their operational focus to the Web (Paterson and Domingo, 2008; Singer, 2008; Thurman and Lupton, 2008), the transition is shaking up newspapers' paper-first paradigm, not only altering the life cycle of news production, but also presenting new and vexing challenges to journalistic norms and values (Deuze, 2005, 2008; Robinson, 2007; Singer, 2006, 2007). Perhaps chief among these is that in the online environment there is a greater expectation for end-user engagement with and control over content, thus blurring traditional boundaries and roles of news producers and news consumers (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006) and threatening to undermine the gatekeeping function so central to the professional purpose of the press.

Thus, in redeploying resources from print to online, newspapers not only have altered longstanding patterns of news production, but they also have opened the "gates,"

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in many cases, to user-generated content—enabling, if not always embracing, such things as comments, photos/videos, reader blogs, and even reader-assembled news articles. This evolving spectrum of user contributions to news content can be generically referred to as “citizen journalism” (Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Outing, 2005).<sup>1</sup> What arises, then, is a tension for newspaper journalism in the twenty-first century: the practical logic of building participatory platforms to attract greater communities of users, for economic survival as well as to foster greater civic dialogue, against the professional logic of retaining authority over information flow.

The rise of citizen journalism, and the assortment of challenges and opportunities it presents for newspapers in particular, has received increasing attention in the scholarly (e.g., Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Deuze et al., 2007; Domingo et al., 2008; Kovacic and Erjavec, 2008; Moyo, 2009; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Reich, 2008; Singer and Ashman, 2009) and trade press (e.g., Cooper, 2008; Quart, 2008), and perhaps nowhere more so than in the blogosphere charting journalism’s crisis in real-time (as a starting point, see Rosen, 2006, 2008). In most instances, however, the inquiry has focused on the extent to which large, mainstream news media have adopted practices of participatory journalism (e.g., Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Paulussen et al., 2007; Thurman, 2008). Seemingly lost in this discussion are community newspapers. Perhaps because their content is harder to gather, or because their size makes them less attractive to researchers, relatively little is known about how smaller newspapers are transitioning in the digital age—in particular, how they are incorporating (or not) elements of citizen journalism. Moreover, when the academic literature has acknowledged citizen journalism at smaller papers (such as in the case study of *Bluffton Today* by Deuze et al., 2007), it has done so by highlighting rather dramatic examples, without offering a more generalized perspective of “ordinary” community newspapers and their attitudes toward and adoption of user-generated (news) content.

More broadly, the democratization of media production online deserves further scrutiny to understand its effects on dialogue and participation in the public sphere (Haas, 2005), including the localized “publics” of rural communities. Indeed, this latter research is important because it is in rural settings, where there are fewer options for offline media and online use tends to be lower, that the community newspaper presumably has greater gatekeeping power—i.e., wider latitude in setting the community’s agenda and defining the terms of public discourse. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand how community newspaper editors deal with citizen journalism: i.e., what they think of it, how they might incorporate it into their organization’s newswork, and ultimately how they negotiate its challenge to their gatekeeping authority.

## Theoretical Context

### *Gatekeeping in the Digital Age*

Since gatekeeping was first applied to the news setting (Snider, 1967; White, 1950), studying the role of journalists as information arbiters has been one of the most enduring lines of communication research (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). Gatekeeping has been defined as “selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and otherwise massaging information to become news” (Shoemaker et al., 2008, p. 73), and more broadly as the “overall process through which the social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed” (Shoemaker et al., 2001, p. 233). In its early formulation, beginning with David

Manning White's (1950) seminal study, gatekeeping was rooted in its focus on the *individual*, emphasizing the lone newspaper editor's role in choosing what to print—or, in another context, the influence of a powerful publisher in shaping the news (Breed, 1955). In the decades since, Gans (1979) and others have shifted attention to the organizational level of influence, highlighting the extent to which newsroom routines and professional norms figure into the ultimate selection of news (Shoemaker et al., 2008, p. 77). More recently, scholars have applied the hierarchy of influences approach (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996) to study both the individual and routine levels to provide a more nuanced view of gatekeeping in comparative contexts of print and online (Cassidy, 2006).

Indeed, the emergence of a new medium for news has offered researchers a fresh angle from which to view the gatekeeping function. Singer (2005) has found that print-based routines remain salient in the online setting; meanwhile, others contend that the Web, by its very (distributed) nature, makes gatekeeping less relevant (Williams and Carpini, 2004) or shifts the paradigm toward one of "gatewatching," a form of collaborative filtering (Bruns, 2005). Our primary concern is not with *online* gatekeeping *per se*, but rather with the broader issue of editorial gatekeeping in an uncertain phase for newspapers and community journalism; nevertheless, it is important to recognize the emerging complexities for traditional gatekeeping channels in the digital era (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). In this study, we consider these challenges at the individual level of analysis (i.e., the editors themselves), but do so with a nod to the characteristics of social systems—namely the culture of newsroom editors, or the "we write, you read" mentality of modern journalism (Deuze, 2003, p. 220).

That journalistic attitude of autonomous expertise (Anderson, 2008) has long been part of the profession's ideology, which generally has incorporated five ideal-typical traits: public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethics (Deuze, 2005, p. 447). The implicit thread running through each is that professional journalists derive much of their sense of purpose through their *control* of information in their various roles as watchdog, gatekeeper, and guardian for society (see Singer, 2003). Deuze calls this "one of the most fundamental 'truths' in journalism, namely: the professional journalist is the one who determines what publics see, hear and read about the world" (2005, p. 451). The Internet and its attendant Web technologies undermine this core value in part because, in a digital environment of 1s and 0s, information is no longer scarce, hard to produce, nor difficult to publish. Hence the setting for a citizen(s) journalism.

Of course, user contribution to the news product has been around for far longer than the Web itself (e.g., in the form of letters to the editor), but in the online environment something fundamentally different has emerged: the ease of accessing, creating, and sharing digital information has created the right conditions for commons-based peer production (Benkler, 2006) across a range of media—including journalism and the online newspaper (Deuze, 2008; Witt, 2006). As the audience no longer need be passive observers online, readers increasingly can become co-creators with professionals in the news production process. Of course, such participation on an online newspaper site may exist more in potential than in actual practice, contingent as it is on two primary constraints: (1) the extent to which users are willing to contribute, and with varying levels of richness across a *continuum of participation* (e.g., from making comments on a news article to submitting full-length stories); and (2) the extent to which news organizations are willing to "open the gates," and with varying levels of editorial oversight across a *continuum of*

*gatekeeping* (e.g., from closely moderating comments to allowing reader collaboration in the reporting process).

### *Citizen Journalism*

Because it can vary so widely depending on its purpose and formulation, citizen journalism can be hard to define. For this study, we acknowledge the *participatory* (Deuze et al., 2007; Domingo et al., 2008) and *user-centered* (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008) nature of this phenomenon, and draw on the articulation of Rosen (2008): "When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's citizen journalism."

Just as the online domain has revived interest in gatekeeping research (Shoemaker et al., 2008, p. 78), participatory journalism has become a natural nexus for this kind of exploration: To what degree are journalists willing to make room for the active audience on their websites? In some of the earliest research, Boczkowski found that even online journalists adopted a "traditional" print mindset of gatekeeping, including a "disregard for user-authored content" (2004, p. 103). More recently, Domingo and his colleagues, in a broad-based international study of participatory journalism, found that while online newspaper users have more opportunities to contribute, they nevertheless have little control over news selection: "The core journalistic role of the 'gatekeeper' who decides what makes news remained the monopoly of professionals," even among comparatively "open" online newspaper sites they examined (Domingo et al., 2008, p. 335). Hermida and Thurman (2008) found that newspapers are nevertheless pushing forward with online venues for user-generated content, even as their editors express professional concerns over reputation, trust, and legal liability—not to mention the simple "value" of reader-created content. In similar fashion, Paulussen and Ugille (2008) discovered that, at news organizations of varying size, participatory journalism is developing "rather sluggishly," in large measure because of newsroom structures and routines. The evidence, therefore, indicates that gatekeeping remains a compelling logic through which to examine citizen journalism online.

### *Community Newspapers*

What remains less developed, however, is a focus of study on community newspapers, defined here as *newspapers serving a defined geographic community, often in a small city or rural setting*. Previous examinations of community newspapers have mainly involved analyzing technological innovations at newspapers in general, the aggregate conclusion being that smaller-circulation papers have lagged behind their larger peers in adopting websites and online interaction with readers. As Boyle (2008) concluded recently, circulation size was a primary predictor of a newspaper site's level of interactivity—a finding that tracks with the general diffusion of innovations in newspapers (Boczkowski, 2004). Therefore, it is important to recognize at the outset that many of the community newspapers under study here are years behind larger organizations in Web sophistication; nevertheless, the professional concerns in approaching digital journalism—be they legal, ethical or economic (Singer, 2008)—remain much the same.

Indeed, beyond mere adoption, the socio-cultural influence and economic implications of technology for community journalism are of greater importance here. For one thing, how smaller newspapers are responding to media trends should be of interest given

the relative success and societal position of community papers. The present crisis in the US newspaper industry has overwhelmingly affected the mid- to large-size metropolitan dailies, which saw average revenue declines of 15 percent in 2008, with declines accelerating in 2009 amid the recession. Meanwhile, for newspapers with circulation less than 100,000, revenues fell an average of 2 percent (Mutter, 2009), and at many smaller papers profit margins remain in the high teens (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). Community papers have largely been insulated from the competitive assault facing larger dailies—an assault brought on by a combination of the Internet, multiple local television newscasts, news radio, and specialty publications. By contrast, in America's rural communities, the local newspaper is often the best—and sometimes the only—source for local news. This, in turn, makes them a go-to source for local readers and advertisers. While major newspaper companies shed staff at unprecedented rates,<sup>2</sup> 83 percent of US community newspapers planned no job cuts in 2009 (Mutter, 2009). These national trends hold true in the state of Texas, where our study originates. While total statewide circulation has fallen during the past five years, the state's major dailies have borne 99 percent of the losses, even as the circulation of semiweeklies and weeklies has held steady or even grown in recent years.<sup>3</sup> Such commercial anomalies, coupled with community newspapers' natural place as local gatekeeper, lend compelling practical and theoretical importance to this study.

### Problem Statement

Participatory media production in general and the notion of user-generated news in particular present philosophical and technical challenges to the professional logic of journalism. This is especially true as reporters and editors take on and operate within their role as gatekeepers for public knowledge. While such concerns are most frequently researched at the level of major mainstream news media, this issue of conceptualizing gatekeeping in the digital era is perhaps better addressed in the context of community newspapers. For it is in rural communities, where sources for local news and information are more limited, that journalists presumably wield greater authority over public dialogue. Therefore, in seeking to understand how journalists negotiate gatekeeping at a time when the news gates have become more fluid and ambiguous, it is important to consider how community newspaper editors reason through this process. Thus, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: In general, what do community newspaper editors think of citizen journalism, and how likely are they to incorporate some variation of it in their news operation?

RQ2: How do community newspapers negotiate citizen journalism, as a philosophical concept and a practical concern, in their role as community gatekeeper?

### Method: Interviews with Journalists

Interviews have a long and rich history as a methodological tool for exploring the sensemaking of social actors, drawing out the rhetorical construction of their experience and perspective (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p. 173). In journalism research, this has been particularly true in seminal studies of news creators (Breed, 1955; Gans, 1979; White, 1950; among others) and in more recent work on authority (Robinson, 2007), framing (Lewis and

Reese, 2009), and emerging forms of newswork online (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Thurman and Lupton, 2008).

This study relies on interviews with top editors at 29 community newspapers (small dailies, semiweeklies and weeklies) around the state of Texas. Using systematic sampling methods, we selected 50 community newspapers using a comprehensive database of media contacts (organizations and individuals) maintained by Cision Media Source, a commercial service with nearly 80 years of experience. In building our sample, we stratified both by frequency of publication and size of circulation. Using a random-number generator online, we chose 25 of the 58 dailies and 25 of the 152 non-dailies (semiweeklies and weeklies),<sup>4</sup> and we only considered papers with circulations in the range of 2,500 to 25,000 to maintain a focus on smaller newspapers.

Editors were contacted with an introductory e-mail asking them to participate in the study, with follow-up requests by e-mail and phone. Ultimately, 29 of the 50 editors agreed to be interviewed by phone. The interviews ranged from 10 to 45 minutes in length, with an average time of about 15 minutes. Three graduate students and three undergraduate students were trained to conduct the interviews, which occurred primarily in two waves, in April/May and August/September 2008. The interviews were semi-structured: there was a defined battery of questions, but interviewers were free to explore certain topics more than others as dictated by the flow of conversation.

One concern was that these editors might not be familiar with the notion of citizen journalism, so we began the questioning by starting with a baseline norm, asking editors to reflect on their efforts (past, present and future) to connect with and engage their community. That discussion was followed by this question: "One of the ways that newspapers today are trying to connect with the community is to actually let readers create some of the content—such as submitting photos online, writing blogs on the newspaper website, or writing news stories for print and online. This trend has been called different things by different people, but usually it's referred to as 'citizen journalism,' or 'user-generated content.' How familiar are you with this trend?" This was followed with questions that sought to gauge editors' perspectives of citizen journalism and the application of user-generated content in their news operations.

Each of the interviews was recorded and transcribed, and the resulting texts were analyzed for keywords, phrases and passages that signaled the journalists' perspectives on the theoretical and practical implications of participatory news production. The ultimate aim was simply to understand: How are these editors *thinking* about citizen journalism?

## Results

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which community newspapers engage in forms of citizen journalism and to obtain an overall assessment of these papers' approaches to participatory news production. We expected the 29 sampled newspapers to align themselves more or less along a simple continuum from those who strongly disapprove of the use of citizen journalism to those who strongly approve of it. A careful reading of the interviews conducted with the editors of these community newspapers, however, revealed a more complicated alignment representing four relatively distinct perspectives on citizen journalism. Specifically, each newspaper tended to take one of four approaches toward the idea of participatory news production. Some editors either favored or disfavored the use of citizen journalism primarily on theoretical

(philosophical) grounds, whereas other editors favored or disfavored its use primarily on practical grounds (see Figure 1).

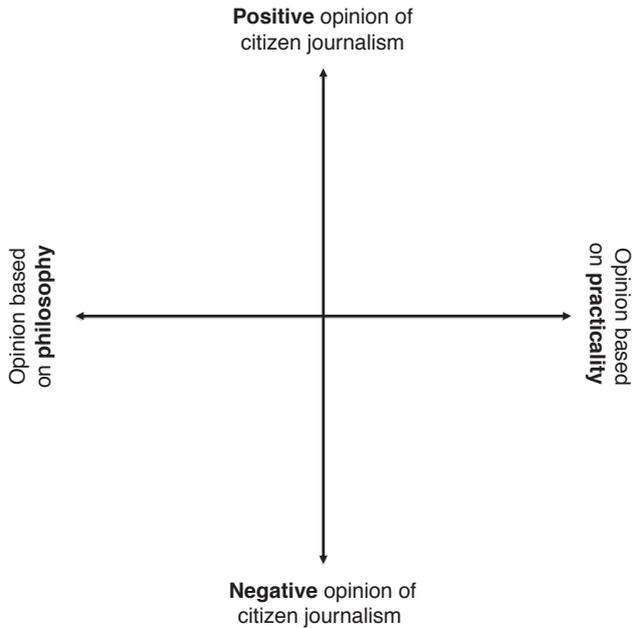
*Editors Who Disapprove on Theoretical Grounds*

A number of editors reject the notion of citizen journalism mainly as a matter of principle. These editors regard citizen participation as essentially incompatible with the news production process. These editors make a clear distinction between professionally trained journalists and everyone else, and they see journalism as the business of professionals only. These editors are not opposed to traditional forms of feedback, such as letters to the editor. Furthermore, most of these editors do not object to readers having the opportunity to comment online about items published either in the printed version of the newspaper or in its online version, if available. However, these editors tend to oppose anonymous comments, whether online or in the printed edition. While these editors tend to welcome ideas for stories submitted by citizens, they do not allow the citizens themselves to write the articles. All story ideas are handled by staff writers, not citizen journalists.

Typical of the sentiments expressed by newspapers in this group are the following:

Davis McAuley, editor of the *Bastrop Advertiser*, said of citizen journalism, "It does not make any sense. News is meant to be reported professionally, not through some random citizen . . . Journalism is a profession and it cannot be done by anyone."

Arthur Hahn, editor of the *Brenham Banner-Press*, said, "We have a comments section on our website but no citizen journalism, as such. We welcome suggestions from people, but we won't publish something written by someone who is not a journalist."



**FIGURE 1**  
Mapping patterns of newspaper editor perspectives on citizen journalism

Brian Knox, editor of the *Wise County Messenger*, said, "We've never really done it. I don't know if it's egotistical or what, but I guess we kind of feel like since we're the journalists we need to be the ones writing."

Carroll Wilson, managing editor of the *Temple Daily Telegram*, said, "There is no citizen journalism at our paper. We'd rather our reporters do their job . . . My publisher has no appreciation for that."

Daniel Walker, editor of the *Rockwall Herald Banner*, said, "I have an understanding of [citizen journalism] and, really, we just don't use it. We shy away from that . . . I think citizen journalism detracts . . . People see us as the authority news source."

Gerry L. Dickert, editor of the *Silsbee Bee*, said that the newspaper's editors and reporters "have to control the content . . . We have a good idea of what's newsworthy based on our experience . . . When you have people who are not professional journalists they don't have a grasp of the ethics involved . . . You risk diluting the news to hearsay and gossip . . . If you [a journalist] and I do a story, we talk to at least three sources. When we print something, we know it's as close to the truth as possible. [But] when you have a citizen who has a gripe about the police department, that's going to be as much opinion as fact. It affects the credibility of your organization."

### *Editors Who Disapprove on Practical Grounds*

A number of editors reject the notion of citizen journalism not on philosophical grounds but because they regard it as primarily unworkable. Some editors, for instance, said they would feel the need to corroborate any article produced by a citizen. These editors maintained that citizen journalism would overwhelm their already overworked staff, detracting from their reporters' primary jobs. Some editors said they had experimented with forms of citizen journalism but found them unwieldy and unsatisfying for a variety of reasons. Some said they became concerned about legal issues, such as being sued for libel. Others said they had trouble getting participation from beyond a small number of citizens, defeating the purpose of citizen journalism.

Typical of the sentiments expressed by editors in this group are the following:

Lillie Bush, editor of the *Mount Vernon Optic-Herald*, equated citizen journalism with opinion. She said, "I'm somewhat worried about [citizen journalism] because it's opinion . . . I'm concerned that . . . things can be construed as fact when there's nothing to back them up as facts." She said that to make citizen journalism factual and useful would require "some background checks," which would be onerous. "I think it would be pretty labor intensive," she said.

Tony Floyd, managing editor of the *Henderson Daily News*, said, "We experimented with it. We had a feature with a phone line where readers could anonymously leave comments about national, state and local issues, like a call-in blog." The newspaper stopped using it because of problems of slander. "My principal concern is that I see a lot of the *citizen* but not a lot of *journalism*. There's a lot of slander and personal anger or bitterness, but not news," he said. Floyd concluded, "I think it's irresponsible, and I'm not going to experiment with it again."

Paul Whitworth, publisher of the *Raymondville Chronicle*, said his primary concern was the limited number of citizens who participate, saying they “are the same people over and over, and usually someone who has a political viewpoint or agenda they want to express.” He added that “they can be mean-spirited. Some of them get pretty ugly, so we don’t encourage that type of citizen journalism. Anyone who wants to write a letter and sign a name can, but I don’t like anonymity. I like the use of editorial discretion.”

Carol Kothman, editor of the *Uvalde Leader-News*, said, “We have a website, but we don’t have a blogging feature on it. We don’t want it to be there. We don’t practice something like citizen journalism. There are so many potential problems that could arise out of it. Things like editing issues, liability problems—they can go unchecked with this sort of thing. Also, the whole practice would be degrading, since our paper has a standard, and crudely written articles can affect that immensely.”

### *Editors Who Approve on Theoretical Grounds*

Some editors regard citizen journalism as a distinct advancement over the way journalism has been practiced in the past. To these editors, journalism changes with the times and they perceive citizen journalism as a natural extension of traditional journalism, facilitated by technological changes that allow progress to take place. They regard citizen journalism as a way to connect better with their communities, and they make concerted efforts to engage citizen participation in a variety of ways that indicate a serious attempt at participatory news production. These efforts include mounting a website with strong interactive capabilities; encouraging citizens to submit stories, photographs, story ideas, and other items; welcoming reader comments; inviting local citizens with expertise on a particular topic to submit regular columns; giving readers the opportunity to participate in online polls; and allowing citizens to submit events for a community calendar. Some newspapers say they look to technological developments to allow them to expand their citizen journalism efforts further, such as giving citizens the capability of submitting video to the newspaper’s website. While some of these newspapers reported relatively minor problems with some of their citizen journalism efforts, they have not allowed these issues to dissuade them from pursuing other citizen journalism efforts. The newspapers in this group often expressed confidence that citizen journalism will continue to grow in importance.

Typical of the sentiments expressed by editors in this group are the following:

Rachael Benavidez, editor of the *Brownsville Herald*, said of citizen journalism, “I think it’s vital to engage a community that wants to have more ownership of their local media. I think that newspapers have been reluctant to embrace some forms of citizen journalism because I think that the first forms of citizen journalism were meant as a vehicle to maybe criticize the local media or be alternative media. So now the task of the traditional media is to evolve that citizen journalist instinct to be something that is collaborative and not counter-productive to what the local media efforts are.” Benavidez said her newspaper has partnered with a local university in “an experiment in promoting civic engagement in the community. We conduct community surveys. We conduct accountability exercises with local government. We hold community forums and debates with the university, and all of that stuff is interactive on the Web. Our readers can participate in the forum by submitting questions. They can watch it on streaming video. They can vote on the survey. They can do polls.” She said the newspaper extended the idea to a

program where all 78 schools in the county area voted online in a recent local election. "It's the kids participating in the process and we report their results along with live results, so I think that's a form of citizen journalism where they're speaking out, they're using the newspaper for accountability and other exercises and things. It's not traditional . . . but they all offer feedback and comment on the project and that gets published, as well."

Shelly Gormey, editor of the *Bay City Tribune*, said she thinks citizen journalism represents an important aspect of the future of journalism. "I think journalism will not be replaced by it," she said, "but it will be supplemented by it." She said that "with tools like citizen journalism, actual journalism will be well-assisted." She said her newspaper employs citizen journalism "every chance it is possible. We have people getting involved and contributing."

Greg Little, publisher of the *Gonzalez Inquirer*, said of citizen journalism, "The way I perceive it right now is it's a great thing . . . I think it's in some respects the wave of the future. The biggest thing is getting younger people involved. Our circulation continues to go up but it's not from younger people. It's because we're doing a better paper and it's the older crowd. We've got to figure out a way to get the younger people involved and I think that's the way to do it . . . The unique thing that we offer is we're the only place in town where you can get the news. You can't get it off the television. You can't get it from online except for our website. So, in some ways, we have a captive audience . . . All you hear about is the death of newspapers. In a lot of cases it's true: the big daily newspapers are losing readers . . . You can get the news anywhere. But for the smaller papers I think that's the way we'll survive . . . We're the only place they can get what they need . . . So I think smaller papers are actually at a bigger advantage right now."

Jessica Hawley-Jerome, managing editor of the *Bandera Bulletin*, said of citizen participation in the production of the news, "We're always open. We have an open-door policy. We're always encouraging [readers] to bring us information and news that's important to them, either as a group entity or as individuals." She gave examples of the newspaper's efforts to get citizens to participate in the news. "If we have any active military who are coming home either on leave or for good, come tell us what you did." "We even have students, student journalism. We encourage 4-H leaders<sup>5</sup> . . . to contribute [monthly] and they'll get a byline in the paper. Elementary school students . . . they have their own byline . . . We clean it up as much as we can but still leave it in the style that they wrote it so that it's their words, it's their style and we always encourage stuff like that." Furthermore, she said: "Last year we ran a teen-to-teen column. We had a panel of four teenagers and we gave them an issue each week and each teenager contributed their perspective on whatever that week's issue was."

### *Editors Who Approve on Practical Grounds*

Some editors take a decidedly pragmatic approach to the use of citizen journalists, without focusing much on the ways it might influence the news production process, either positively or negatively, or the ways it might influence community engagement in local affairs. These editors tend not to view citizen journalism as a way to encourage citizens to participate more in their community, or as a way for the newspaper to connect better with

its readers. Instead, these editors tend to regard citizen journalism as a useful way for a newspaper with a limited staff and budget to obtain news that it otherwise would not acquire. Looking for sensible methods to improve their newspaper's ability to surveil the environment, these editors approach citizen journalism as a workable solution to their primary function. To these newspapers, citizen journalists mainly help them cover their communities.

Typical of the sentiments expressed by editors in this group are the following:

DD Turner, managing editor of the *Marshall News Messenger*, said the newspaper relies heavily on material it receives "over the transom." The paper has "community pages for our outlying areas and that stuff is mostly submitted by the townspeople, or the school districts, and such. We have those. A lot of sports stuff is brought into us . . . As long as they're willing to be edited, that's fine . . . Because we're a small paper, it allows us to get stuff in that we wouldn't be able to send a reporter to." Turner said, "We really don't have any programs in place to encourage it . . . [but] I don't think it's bad for the paper, at all. Like I said, it gets you into areas where normally, especially for small papers like us, where we don't have the personnel to go . . . As far as what we do here, we edit it, just make sure there's nothing libelous that can come back and haunt the paper."

Mark Gwin, editor of the *Smithville Times*, said, "We focus on local news and try to cover the community as much as there is to cover, but we don't have any initiatives to involve the community." Furthermore, he said his newspaper has no plans to try to find ways to connect better with the community. At the same time, however, "We involve citizens extensively. It is very much a part of our paper. We have columnists writing about nature, humor, gossip, etc. There are about nine of them, I think. These citizen contributors are very important. They bring about unique angles of coverage . . . It's especially important for local papers such as this one because we need help in covering everything that's required to be covered. It becomes impossible for us to get to every piece of news on our own."

Karen Saught, editor of the *San Saba News and Star*, said of initiatives to involve the community in the production of the news, "No, we don't do any of those things. We are more concerned about staying on top of the news. That's the only way we engage the community." However, Saught said she thinks citizen journalism is the future of journalism: "Yes, it has to be. There is so much more to cover and [only] so many people who are in a position to cover it. So, I believe it is."

Richard Nelson, editor of the *Jacksonville Daily Progress*, said of his paper's efforts to connect with the community, "We occasionally do a 'man-on-the-street' type thing to get more informed perspectives on our community. Plus, we have letters to the editor that are quite essential and, nowadays, we even have blogs on our website." Despite his paper's limited efforts along these lines, Nelson said he favors citizen journalism: "Yes, we are fine with citizen journalism . . . If someone is willing to take on responsibility and identify themselves, then we are fine with it . . . This sort of thing would help [the newspaper] penetrate more into the community happenings."

Robert Wright, editor of the *Mexia Daily News*, said he believes his newspaper connects well with the community: "We're community-oriented. I know we miss some things on our limited staff [but] we're pretty well-connected, especially with schools and sports. We do pretty good, given that we don't have many people." He said, "I always find the time

to cover the school board or the city council. Those are two big stories in town. I won't press anybody into service or request anyone to cover those kinds of stories. But if someone comes to me with a feature, sometimes I'll say, 'That's a pretty good story. Why don't you write it up and I'll put it in the paper.' I'll give people bylines." Wright said, "If it's of human interest, we'll use it. Sometimes I'll rework it. I do want to make sure it's readable."

Tom Hawkins, editor and publisher of the *Groesbeck Journal*, said of citizen journalism, "I think we're very involved in it. I think we do a good job of letting people participate in the paper, in the content of the paper . . . I think anytime you get input from your readers, it's good." However, Hawkins said, "We don't really make much of an effort to get citizens involved, but we get it anyway. I think it's hard to explain. Every newspaper has its own personality and people have always had ease submitting things to us, and we pretty well take most of their information . . . We're pretty short on staff."

Chris Lundstrom, editor of the *Jackson County Herald-Tribune*, said, "We are hindered by our small staff. Yes, we have huge ideas of things we would like to do but . . . our time limits us from covering as many things as I would like to do. I would like to go to more events and reach out." Lundstrom sees citizen journalism as a way to alleviate the problem, saying, "Newspapers are struggling to survive in this new world of online journalism, their staffs are being cut, and I think if they're able to get articles generated by people on the outside . . . I think that's probably not a bad idea, as long as the people are able to write . . . We do have stringers that cover our sports because we can't get to all of them and we do encourage that. We are not averse to having guest journalists . . . The main thing is it has to be relevant to the people here in Jackson County."

## Analysis and Discussion

We do not want to leave the reader with the impression that all 29 editors fit securely into one of the four quadrants of the citizen journalism model (see Figure 1). Some editors were more neutral in their positions than others. Some editors explicitly expressed conflicted positions, and indicated that they were struggling with the place of citizen journalism at their newspaper. While an attempt was made to locate editors within one quadrant, membership in each group was not mutually exclusive, with some editors falling mostly into one category but straddling another. This was especially true regarding the theoretical–practical dimension. In some cases, it was difficult to decide whether an editor was being (un)favorable toward citizen journalism for mostly theoretical or practical reasons. In those cases, we tried to identify editors with the group that appeared to represent their position most strongly. Risking the threat of forcing the 29 editors into a Procrustean bed, we identified seven editors who rejected citizen journalism primarily on theoretical grounds, four editors who rejected it primarily on practical grounds, nine who approved of citizen journalism mostly on theoretical grounds, and nine who approved of it mostly on practical grounds (see Table 1).

While some editors regard citizen participation in the news production process as anathema to sound journalism, other editors see it as a central component of the future of journalism; and while some editors recall with regret failed citizen journalism efforts of the past, other editors appear eager to experiment in the future with new ways to try to make citizen journalism work in their newsrooms. Regardless of their position, though, one thing is clear: editors of community newspapers are *thinking* about citizen journalism.

**TABLE 1**  
Populations of the selected communities, and a mapping of editor opinions

Newspaper (city in Texas, USA)	Map*	Circulation	City	County
<i>Bandera Bulletin</i>	AH	3,500	1,208	20,197
<i>Bay City Tribune</i>	AH	5,200	17,805	37,024
<i>Brownsville Herald</i>	AH	15,559	172,806	387,210
<i>Del Rio News-Herald</i>	AH	4,852	36,582	48,029
<i>Fort Bend (Rosenberg) Herald &amp; Texas Coaster</i>	AH	7,179	32,978	509,822
<i>Gonzales Inquirer</i>	AH	4,000	7,359	19,210
<i>Paris News</i>	AH	9,302	26,083	49,255
<i>Port Isabel/South Padre Island Press</i>	AH	4,860	8,020	387,210
<i>Salado Village Voice</i>	AH	2,500	4,024	276,975
Average		6,328	34,096	192,770
<i>Groesbeck Journal</i>	AP	3,600	4,296	22,421
<i>Jackson County (Edna) Herald-Tribune</i>	AP	4,000	5,798	14,093
<i>Jacksonville Daily Progress</i>	AP	3,900	14,253	48,169
<i>Marshall News Messenger</i>	AP	6,687	23,872	63,504
<i>Mexia News</i>	AP	3,000	6,606	22,421
<i>Round Rock Leader</i>	AP	6,000	96,992	373,363
<i>San Marcos Daily Record</i>	AP	6,464	50,373	141,480
<i>San Saba News &amp; Star</i>	AP	2,700	2,549	5,968
<i>Smithville Times</i>	AP	3,100	4,421	72,248
Average		4,383	23,240	84,852
<i>Bastrop Advertiser</i>	DH	5,400	7,823	72,248
<i>Brenham Banner-Press</i>	DH	5,626	15,098	32,034
<i>Burnet Bulletin</i>	DH	3,200	5,706	43,689
<i>Rockwall County (Greenville) Herald-Banner</i>	DH	8,283	25,674	73,810
<i>Silsbee Bee</i>	DH	6,200	6,786	51,597
<i>Temple Daily Telegram</i>	DH	19,007	58,330	276,975
<i>Wise County (Decatur) Messenger</i>	DH	7,015	6,275	57,589
Average		6,913	17,039	85,005
<i>Henderson Daily News</i>	DP	6,039	11,599	48,568
<i>Mount Vernon Optic-Herald</i>	DP	3,100	2,805	11,094
<i>Raymondville Chronicle &amp; Willacy County News</i>	DP	3,400	9,501	20,513
<i>Uvalde Leader-News</i>	DP	5,453	16,222	26,581
Average		7,268	17,137	72,415

\*AH, agrees on philosophical grounds; AP, agrees on practical grounds; DH, disagrees on philosophical grounds; DP, disagrees on practical grounds (See Figure 1).  
Source: www.city-data.com, compiled from US Census, state and municipal data.

It is worth noting that in these interviews none of the editors ever mentioned the word “gatekeeping,” and yet the concept was an implicit thread running through much of their reasoning. This was true both in arguments for and against citizen journalism at the community newspaper level. For editors opposed to citizen journalism, they emphasized the importance of safeguarding the integrity of what passed through their gates pre-publication—of guarding traditional routines of newsgathering and reporting, and of truth-value and legal protection that could only be ensured under the steady hand of trained professionals. Meanwhile, for editors who supported citizen journalism, they saw real practical advantages and philosophical reasons for easing restrictions at the gate in

order to make the news more of a participatory process than a static product. They believed that this, in turn, would make the news itself more meaningful and thus more effectual, for commercial and/or civic purposes. As one editor put it: "We're always open. We have an *open-door* policy" (emphasis added). The spatial metaphor of gatekeeping, therefore, offers a welcome point of entry itself for the study of participatory news production as it evolves at news organizations large and small alike.

### Conclusions and Limitations

Ultimately, the complexity in attempting to categorize these editors—mapping them onto a pro-con/philosophy–practicality matrix—provides what is likely this study's most obvious but nevertheless important finding: that community newspaper editors have widely different opinions about and rationales for rebuffing or embracing citizen journalism. While clear delineations generally emerged along practical and ideological continua, editors' positions were not mutually exclusive, nor did one strain of thought emerge predominant. Additionally, the intensity of editors' opinions varied substantially, and could not always easily be captured in a relatively short interview. Nevertheless, our representation in Figure 1 offers a novel and promising model, like that of Domingo et al. (2008), for visualizing the competing and complementary interplay of participatory and traditional modes of journalistic work.

While it might be difficult to generalize these findings to the nearly 1500 daily newspapers in the United States, let alone to community news organizations around the world, it is nevertheless apparent that editors interviewed in this study expressed professional concerns (of objectivity, accuracy, ethics, and so on) shared by colleagues at larger organizations—even as news professionalism itself becomes a more cross-national phenomenon (Reese, 2008). In the cases in which community editors guarded against citizen participation, it was overwhelmingly because of concerns over the quality and integrity of contributions, much like Hermida and Thurman (2008) found in the British press. In cases in which citizen journalism was embraced—out of enthusiasm or necessity or both—some contributors were carefully selected for their expertise or ability to extend the community reach of the paper, and were often still subject to an editor's review. This pattern of modified gatekeeping was evident in the work of Domingo et al. (2008).

Finally, while it is true that the community newspapers studied here are qualitatively different from larger news media, the relative success of smaller papers—both commercially and in retaining their gatekeeping influence—calls for further study. As the Web allows news to become increasingly hyper-local and hyper-personal, tailored to niche enclaves of interest and individuals' distinct concerns, it will be essential to better understand how journalism operates at the very local level; how it serves communities, both real and virtual; and how it negotiates participatory forms of media production *vis-à-vis* longstanding norms of professional control.

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## NOTES

1. While scholars often refer to the emergence of user-generated news content as *participatory journalism* (e.g., Deuze et al., 2007; Domingo et al., 2008), for this paper we will primarily use *citizen journalism* because it is the more commonly understood term in the newspaper trade discourse—and, as such, it was used in our interviews (e.g., editors were asked what they thought of *citizen journalism*, not *participatory journalism*).
2. For the latest figures, see [www.stateofthedia.org](http://www.stateofthedia.org) and [www.graphicdesignr.net/papercuts](http://www.graphicdesignr.net/papercuts).
3. Source: <http://www.texaspress.com/index.php/publications/messenger/messenger-archives/93-circulation-drops-in-2007-semis-keep-best-record>.
4. We oversampled daily newspapers in order to achieve a fairly balanced representation of daily and non-daily newspaper editors in our sample. As it turned out, of the 29 editors we interviewed, 12 were from daily newspapers and the other 17 from non-dailies.
5. 4-H is a youth organization affiliated with the US Department of Agriculture.

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