Routinization of charisma: The institutionalization of public journalism online
Joyce Y.M. Nip, Hong Kong Baptist University

When public journalism emerged in the late 1980s, local news outlets were, by and large, the channels through which people learned about the recent happenings of the world. By 2009, audiences in communication-rich countries had access to a global network of news information supplied not only by local news outlets, but also regional and global news suppliers, citizen journalism sites, and firsthand news sources such as government and corporate Web sites. Competition in the new environment has affected the way news is reported—normalized, personalized, dramatized, and fragmented (Bennett, 2008)—far from what public journalism suggests. Technologies in the new environment, however, provide opportunities for audience engagement, which could be used to achieve the goals of public journalism.

In an earlier explication I explored a “second phase” of public journalism with a typology of audience participation that consisted of five models: (1) traditional journalism, (2) public journalism, (3) interactive journalism, (4) participatory journalism, and (5) citizen journalism (Nip, 2005, 2006). The five models of audience participation varied in the extent and form of participation by ordinary people in news production, with citizen journalism involving the people to the greatest extent, and traditional journalism the least. Citizen journalism was used to refer to the practice in which the people were entirely responsible for gathering content, along with envisioning, producing and publishing the news product. Unlike in some other uses (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2005; Lasica, 2003), the term was distinguished from participatory journalism, where the audience played a role in the news making process framed by journalists. Another model, interactive journalism, allowed audience initiatives after the news was published such as adding story comments or clicking on links to find additional information. Public journalism, as a movement that experimented with a wide range of practices in engaging citizens, encompassed elements of interactive and participatory journalism.

Since then, many have expressed dissatisfaction with the terms “participatory
journalism” and “citizen journalism.” “User-generated content” has become a widely accepted way of describing what is produced. Many other terms of expression – notably network journalism (Bardoel & Deuze, 2001), professional participatory storytelling (Deuze, 2005), and pro-am journalism (Rosen, 2007) – have also been coined to describe the new form of participation of ordinary people in journalism. The people involved are sometimes called “produsers” (Bruns, 2005), reminiscent of the “prosumers” forecast by Alvin Toffler (1980). There is no shortage of categorizations of these new forms of audience participation either (e.g. Outing, 2005; Rosen, 2007).

Unlike those attempts that seemingly seek to exhaust the various combinations of relationships between journalists and audience in different work procedures and technology conditions (Outing, 2005, Rosen, 2007), the continuum I shall present explores a different framework. It does not aim to account for the technologies used, although I recognize their importance as enabling and constraining conditions for audience participation. It does not aim to differentiate the various work models that could exist among the amateurs, although such information is valuable for understanding the limitations and possibilities of audience contribution. Nor does it aim to incorporate the work procedure between journalists and audience, except when it is definitive of the relationship between the two parties. The key criterion used in demarcating the various modes of audience involvement is the degree of control by the news organization. In my view, this is the most fundamental factor that influences the role of the non-professionals in the journalism process, and hence the possibility of achieving the goals of public journalism.

**Seven modes of citizen connection in news making**

Depending on the relative control by the journalists and the citizens, the involvement of the people in news-making could take seven modes, as shown in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>Guided</td>
<td>Guided</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Professional | Professional | Citizen | Guided | Guided | Citizen | Citizen |
**Professional incorporation** (col. 1 in Fig. 1)

This is a practice used in traditional journalism, where journalists seek out and incorporate the views or experiences of ordinary people in reporting their stories. The views and experiences of the common people would not be accessible publicly, sometimes even not expressed privately, without journalists taking the initiative. In news stories, these incorporations usually appear as short direct quotes used to show the impact of government or commercial policies/measures on ordinary people.

**Professional co-option** (col. 2 in Fig. 1)

In this mode of connection, journalists follow up and re-purpose stories or comments published by citizens. The journalist takes the initiative to follow citizen-published content, and makes the decision of what to develop, and the direction of the development. In other words, citizen content is used as one of the sources for story discovery. The re-purposed content then forms part of the news product.

Professional co-option has become commonplace in Hong Kong and China. The second largest-circulation newspaper in Hong Kong, for example, *The Apple Daily*, has a team of reporters who monitor the popular online forums, blogs, and video sharing sites. Reporters use these online outlets to source stories that range from vandalism and bullying in schools to complaints about companies and government departments (Yip, 2008). Some newspapers in China, such as *Wuxi Daily*, and *Ram City Evening Post* contain special sections that publish stories sourced from citizen posts online.
Citizen response (col. 3 in Fig. 1)

Here, members of the audience take the initiative of responding to pieces published by journalists, journalists who produce the works, or other news users who produce content. This mode of participation is enabled by interactive journalism. A common form of this mode is comment boxes that follow news stories published online. Less customary are message boards and online chat sessions on current issues. Usually, the contributed content is published with only retrospective moderation: comments are edited or removed only when they violate standards such as use of vulgarity or threatening language. In this setting citizens are allowed to raise topics and have a higher degree of control of input, but their contributions remain as responses rather than original news content.

Guided professional reporting (col. 4 in Fig. 1)

At this level citizens may be involved in more than one stage of the news process, including shaping the news agenda, forming the story perspective, and providing information during reporting. In this mode, the news outlet offers a more open-ended opportunity for citizen participation. Thus, guided professional reporting seeks out considerably more citizen engagement than professional incorporation, although the journalists remain responsible for producing the work. For this to happen, news organizations need to have mechanisms in place that reach out to people for input. A common form is the call for readers to send suggestions on stories and topics, which would be pursued by journalists.

Guided citizen reporting (col. 5 in Fig. 1)

In this mode, journalists and citizens reverse their roles as in guided professional reporting. Here, citizens produce the work (news or commentaries), with the journalists doing the guiding. The guidance that is commonly given is topic suggestion. The assignment desk on MSNBC’s Citizen Journalists Report (http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6639760/), for example, suggests readers whose homes were damaged by Hurricane Katrina to send in their stories, videos and
photographs of the rebuilding of their homes. The guidance goes a little deeper when an angle is suggested for the pursuit of the story. On the 20th anniversary of the June 4th massacre in China, BBC’s “Have Your Say” (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/default.stm) sought reader comments on whether the demonstrations that eventually led to the massacre had any impact: “China has boosted security ahead of the anniversary of the killings. Did the protests change the country?”

*Citizen submission* (col. 6 in Fig. 1)

Citizens contribute entirely out of their own initiative sometimes without any journalistic prompting. Many photographs and videos of the 2004 Asian tsunami and 2005 London underground bombing were voluntary citizen submissions. As a regular mode of audience participation, citizen submission is normally solicited by news organizations for publication in spaces designated for such a purpose. Examples are CNN’s iReport (http://www.ireport.com/), MSNBC’s “FirstPerson” (http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/16713129/), Yahoo! News’ “You witness news” (http://news.yahoo.com/you-witness-news). The feature on BBC’s “Have Your Say” that asks: “Have you got a good story?” (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/your_news/7593687.stm) is another example.

Different degrees of input from professional journalists may apply: In some cases, citizen-submitted content is published without filtering or editing as far as possible; in other cases, selection and editing is made by journalists before publishing. The news organization provides the frame of presentation by giving it a headline, and letting it appear on a page under a classification of categories. Usually the citizen publishing space is distinctly separate from the journalists’ publishing space. Some citizen submissions become part of the news product through professional co-option.

*Citizen journalism* (col. 7 in Fig. 1)

This is the only mode in the typology that does not involve professional
journalists. While the phrase “user-generated content” may be a more comprehensive term, I prefer “citizen journalism” because of its association with public life. Citizen journalism could take the form of citizen media, such as citizen Web sites and proprietary blogs, or it could be content published on open media spaces such as blogs hosted by blog service sites, or messages posted on forums hosted by portal sites or online community platforms. Different from citizen submissions to news sites, citizen journalism is published without frames provided by either the individual professional journalist or a news organization.

The recent species of news operations run by entrepreneurs outside of mainstream media is often called citizen journalism. Many of them are hyper-local ones, but some are large national or transnational sites (e.g. merinews and OhmyNews). Most of them rely mainly on citizens who are paid little or nothing for their contributions, but also have professional editors who oversee the operations. Where these editors are not the entrepreneurs themselves, they tend to be paid full-time staff. OhmyNews, for example, had a staff of about 50 overseeing more than 26,000 citizen reporters (Gillmor, 2003). That is why they are more appropriately classified as citizen submission, not citizen journalism. (McBride’s chapter of this book describes several such operations in Chicago as well.)

**Aiming at public journalism in different modes of citizen connection**

Public journalism has three main goals: 1) to connect to the community; 2) to engage individuals as citizens; and 3) to help public deliberation in search for solutions (Nip, 2006). These goals are generally accepted by journalists, although the techniques used for achieving them have aroused controversy (Poynter Online, 2003). The act of giving opportunities to the audience to participate in news making is itself a democratic gesture, one which affirms and facilitates the exercise of the individual’s freedom of speech. In this sense, it is consistent with public journalism’s ultimate goal of enhancing democracy. Whether the gesture serves the specific goals of public journalism stated above, however, depends on the frame of participation provided (Nip, 2006). The history of public journalism has seen experimentation with multiple
techniques in six main areas of practice (Nip, 2008), which can be fruitfully applied to the seven modes of citizen connection.

*In professional incorporation*

Most of the modes of connection discussed in this chapter are provided only online. Despite the increasing popularity of the Internet, however, many people do not have the resources to access news online or prefer to receive it through traditional print and broadcast media. The digital divide will therefore allow the mode of professional incorporation to remain valuable. Advocating a journalism that moves beyond many traditional journalistic practices, public journalism has specific suggestions for incorporating citizen perspectives into news, including:

- Reaching beyond officials and quasi-officials to ordinary people using techniques such as civic mapping--an attempt to map the informal leaders of a community (Schaffer, 2001);
- Interviewing in a way that opens up conversation, and following the interviewee’s pace; and
- More frequently and more prominently citing “real people.”

These practices are as applicable today as before, except that new communication technologies and electronic databases can make some of them, such as civic mapping, much easier.

In the other modes of citizen connection that are facilitated by online exchanges (except citizen journalism), the extent to which the goals of public journalism are served depends mainly on three conditions: 1) that ordinary people, not just the elite, have the opportunity to participate; 2) that the content and topic selected is relevant to public life; and 3) that the frame of participation provided encourages a public perspective.

*In professional co-option*

A study conducted in 2004 found that political reporters and editors tended to follow elite blogs but not citizen blogs generally (Farrell & Drezner, 2008). Indeed a
study in 2004 reported that some editors described blogs as “extremely dull”,
“mediocre” or of “very marginal interest” (Thurman, 2008). But a more recent study
in 2006 found that journalists have become more appreciative of the value of citizen
journalism (Hermida & Thurman, 2008), as editors acknowledged that a newspaper’s
audience could be “very knowledgeable about certain areas”. Some editors, however,
still described blogs as “massively overrated” and as “a bit of fun” (Hermida &
Thurman, 2008). Realization of public journalism principles would require that
professional co-option reaches beyond elite citizen content.

Public journalism started with coverage focused on elections and
community-wide action projects. Then it turned to specific community issues such as
race, immigration, family, and youth (Friedland & Nichols, 2002). In co-opting
citizen-published content (col. 2 in Fig. 1), journalists can select from among views
and experiences related to elections, government, and community issues that are
clearly relevant to public life. Disseminating this type of content on the platform of
the news organization would serve to connect to the public concerns of the community,
which is one of the main goals of public journalism.

Consistent with public journalism principles, these professional news reports
should aim to facilitate public understanding and stimulate citizen deliberation
addressing the problems behind the stories. As citizen content tends to highlight
individual experiences, journalists probably need to change the angle of the story to
focus on the issue, and provide historical background or information related to larger
civic concerns. Journalists can include possible solutions to the problem, and, in that
way, reveal the values behind different courses of action and help spark constructive
civic dialogue.

In audience response

Similarly, journalists should select stories and topics about public issues for
soliciting responses from the audience. Public journalism advises addressing the
people as citizens, which means contextualizing them as learners, participants and
decision-makers of public affairs, with the capacity to contribute to public life as a
deliberative body (Rosen, 1997). One of the main goals of public journalism is to create spaces where news users could interact with each other, deliberate and solve problems. Creating a civilized environment and equal opportunity for participation is fundamental (Nip, 2006). User registration helps to ensure responsible behavior. Online moderation (like the mediation provided in the town hall meetings sponsored by public journalism projects) could enhance opportunities for deliberation.

**In guided professional reporting**

For tapping into the concerns of citizens—the basis of guided professional reporting—public journalism newsrooms have already devised various listening techniques. They include conducting polls, surveys, town hall meetings, focus groups, readers’ panels, organizing intimate living room or kitchen conversations, opening up news meetings, and sending reporters to “third places” (Harwood and McCrehan, 2000). Another technique is building citizen databases, as done by the Spokane (WA) *Spokesman Review* (Ken Sands, personal communications March 2005) and Minnesota Public Radio’s Public Insight Network (Andrew Haeg, personal communication January 9, 2005). In some of these approaches, news workers who were involved in long-form reporting projects engaged citizens for their input in a back-and-forth cycle. The same as when co-opting citizen content, journalists should avoid polarizing the issue, but report on areas of agreement in addition to differences. For long-term community issues, journalists should frame the story to include the progress (or lack of it) made in solving the problem.

**In guided citizen reporting**

Beyond journalists giving story ideas to amateurs to pursue, guided citizen reporting requires substantial resources from the news organization. Deeper-level journalistic guidance is justified if the education provided to the contributors is valued. The “Your Turn” column introduced in *The Spokesman Review* in 1994, for example, required that the column editor sit together with contributors to work on conceptualizing, writing and editing the pieces (Rebecca Nappi, personal
communication, March 23, 2005). The Savannah (GA) Morning News used the Neighborhood Newsroom program for this kind of education from 2001 to 2004 (Nip, 2008).

In citizen submission

When space is provided for news users to submit stories or commentaries, the frame provided is critical. A call for submission of photographs of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in China surely engages the audience as citizens; a similar call for pet photographs (as is often the case) does not. MSNBC’s “First Person” referred to the network’s first citizen journalism project on the Democratic and Republican conventions in 1996. References to news are also made on iReport and “You Witness News.” These references prompt potential contributors to think in a public perspective.

In citizen journalism

Apart from co-opting content from citizen media, news organizations could connect to them in systematic ways. Domingo et al. (2008) found that 37.5 percent of the newspapers studied provided space for citizen blogs. Short of that, news organizations could relate to selected citizen journalists as informal leaders, and invite them to make suggestions for news coverage or to take part in discussion forums on public issues. To amplify the impact of major stories, citizen journalism sites could be invited to highlight and comment on the issues being covered, just as public journalism newsrooms allied with other news outlets to highlight major coverage. Hyperlinks to the news organization could be built on selected citizen journalism sites. In return, news organizations could use their Web sites to recommend (through links) some of the citizen sites.

Promises and limitations on the future of public journalism

Two decades of experience in public journalism has produced many successful examples of citizen engagement, along with controversies about some of its practices.
Where public journalism has been less successful is resolving a certain applied and theoretical vagueness regarding some of its fundamental concepts. Many have pointed out that public journalism, also known as civic journalism, lacks a clear definition. Advocates have said that they aimed to help democracy by building the public, but they have also said they aimed to strengthen the community. Schudson (1999) said that the public and the community might not be complementary as was implied. Here, I shall try to clarify the relationship between the two, for the purpose of defining the scope of relevance for audience connection.

Some scholars of democratic theory doubt that there is one collective called “the public.” This discussion accepts the notion of multiple publics, each formed around different interests, professions or locales (Fraser, 1990; Gitlin, 1998; Negt & Kluge, 1993; Warner, 2002). A public differs from a community in one key way: A public is formed on the basis of a shared common good; this is not necessarily an attribute of a community. A community is bound by a sense of belonging among members who share something in common--such as a language, a certain value orientation, style of costumes, and type of activity--and some of whom have social interactions and social ties with each other (Anderson, 1983; Castells, 1997; Cohen, 1985; Effrat, 1974; Elias, 1974; Janowitz, 1952; Wellman, 1999). With this distinction, it becomes clear that stories that strengthen the sense of belonging to a geographic community, such as reports about a carnival in town or a prominent figure in the community, have little direct relevance to building the public or supporting democracy. With this understanding, we can see that the topics covered by public journalism projects—first community-wide problems, then specific issues such as race, immigration, family, and youth—were selected to help publics who were struggling with these issues at different levels.

The advent of new online technologies increases the convenience in practicing public journalism. Early attempts at “public listening” to ordinary citizens could involve journalists wandering around in streets and talking to people haphazardly or knocking on people’s doors one after another. The Internet and mobile broadcasting helps to overcome logistical and resource limitations such as these that often
constrained public journalism practices.

News organization Web sites are providing increasing opportunities for readers to contribute (Domingo et al, 2008, Hermida & Thurman, 2008). These opportunities span across the various modes of participation described above. Professional co-option (col. 2 in Fig. 1) has been going on for a number of years. Blogs shot to fame when traditional journalism outlets discovered, and reported on blogs critical of U.S. Senate majority leader Trent Lott and CNN news executive Eason Jordan. Lott eventually left his leadership position and Jordan resigned from CNN.

A 2007 study of 16 online newspapers in nine countries found significant opportunities for citizen response (col. 3 in Fig. 1), with 68.8 percent providing commentary spaces to journalist stories or blogs, and 56.3 percent providing journalist-driven forum spaces. However, guided professional reporting (col. 4 in Fig. 1) and guided citizen reporting (col. 5 in Fig. 1) were relatively rare: even the most superficial level of seeking story suggestions from readers (37.5%) or suggesting topics for readers to cover (6.3%) was uncommon. Opportunities for citizen submission (col. 6 in Fig. 1) were often provided, with 62.5 percent allowing contributions of photos, video and audio, and 31.3 percent allowing citizen stories (Domingo et al., 2008).

Public journalism started as projects; then it struggled to be integrated into day-to-day news work. The provision of features of audience connection on professional news websites institutionalizes user engagement as part of news making. Some of these features, as the above discussion shows, seek to engage users as citizens in public issues. They signal the integration of public journalism in day-to-day news routines. In this respect, it is a small step of success for public journalism. Looking to the future of public journalism, the question is how to get news organizations to build in more of the features of audience engagement, and to use them towards strengthening the community/public and democracy.

On the other hand, a combination of factors has created an unfavorable environment for the future of public journalism. Public journalism emerged in the
United States in the late 1980s partly in response to declining newspaper circulation, and partly as a reaction to the undesirable state of public affairs reporting, especially of the 1988 presidential election. It was a movement that involved the industry and the profession, as well as academia and philanthropic foundations. As of this writing, however, foundations that once provided financial support for many public journalism projects have identified other initiatives outside of journalism for engaging citizens. Academic interest in the subject also has receded. Back then newspaper owners were convinced that people who felt connected to their geographical communities were more likely to read newspapers (Batten, 1989). Technological and social changes have revealed that multiple communities exist both in geographical localities and online spaces, and that other factors also affect news consumption. Theoretical developments have clarified that community-building and democracy-enhancement has no necessary connection. The continued decline of citizen consumption of news through traditional news outlets has resulted in closures of news operations, as well as huge cutbacks in staffing and resources. In this environment, it is easy for the profession to turn its focus away from the democratic ideals of journalism. Instead audience engagement could be valued for community-building with a view of commercial success. In this consideration, the features of audience engagement would be used for engaging people as private individuals, not citizens.

Research has found that even with audience participation, journalists tend to retain control on the published content (Domingo et al, 2008, Hermida & Thurman, 2008, Örnebring, 2008). The seven modes of citizen connection presented above helps to classify the various participatory and interactive features provided on news websites. With the exception of citizen journalism, professional journalists retain control in all the other modes, to varying degrees, on the issues as well as the frames in which news users are engaged. In some of the modes, they also decide which particular news users can participate. It is this control that gives professional journalists the possibility to use the features for the goals of public journalism. Twenty years of experimentation in public journalism has provided rich experience which journalists can draw upon, yet the conditions of the news industry nowadays
are unpromising for such efforts to be made.

Summary

Theory

• Features of online news can be analyzed with a typology of five models of audience participation (traditional journalism, interactive journalism, public journalism, participatory journalism, citizen journalism) and a continuum of seven modes of citizen connection (professional incorporation, professional co-option, citizen response, guided professional reporting, guided citizen reporting, citizen submission, and citizen journalism).
• Professional incorporation is the mode used in traditional journalism.
• Citizen response is the mode provided in interactive journalism.
• Guided citizen reporting and citizen submission are modes provided in participatory journalism.

Practices

• Public journalism practices in giving a voice to the people are particularly applicable to the modes professional incorporation and citizen journalism.
• Public journalism practices in presentation are particularly applicable to the mode professional co-option.
• Public journalism practices in addressing the news user as citizen are particularly applicable in the modes citizen response, guided citizen reporting and citizen submission.
• Public journalism practices in listening are particularly applicable to guided professional reporting.

Reflection Questions

• Do news reports that increase a sense of belonging to the community help democracy indirectly?
• Apart from news reports about problems and issues, are there news reports
of other content nature relevant to public well-being?

References


Effrat, Marcia Pelly (1974). Approaches to community: Conflicts and


Press.


Schudson, Michael (1999). What public journalism knows about journalism but doesn’t know about “public”. In Theodore L. Glasser (Ed.) *The idea of public journalism* (pp. 118-133). NY: Guilford Press.


