The News You Choose

How User-Driven Content Differs from Mainstream Media

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If somehow we have a world without journalists, or at least without editors, what would the news agenda look like? How would citizens make up a front page differently than professional newspeople?

If a new crop of user-news sites – and measures of user activity on mainstream news sites – are any indication, the user sites will be more diverse, more transitory, and often in a very different and perhaps controversial list of sources, according to a new report. The result, released by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), compares the news agenda of the mainstream media with that of a host of user-news sites for the same period. In a week when the mainstream press was focused on Iraq and the debate over immigration, the three leading user-news sites – Reddit, Digg and Del.icio.us – were more focused on stories like the release of Apple’s new iPhone and the release of new Google software, both of which had supersetted in width. The report also found subtle differences in three other forms of user-driven content within one site: Yahoo News’ Most Recommended, Most Viewed, and Most Emailed.

The question of whether citizens define the news differently than professionals is becoming increasingly relevant. The trend of user-defined mainstream news defined with sites offering visitors a sense of what others found interesting: what news stories were most emailed and most viewed? Soon, endearingly named news sites like CBSNews.com allowed users to make their own newscasts. Then, like Digg, Reddit and Del.icio.us arrived as vertical town square, a way to see what the pulse of the web community found most newsworthy, captivating, or just amusing. The trend was the introduction of MySpace, the social networking site popular among 20-somethings, to the world of news.

In short, the user-news agenda, at least in this one-week snapshot, was more diverse, yet also more fragmented and transitory than that of the mainstream news media. This does not mean necessarily that users disapprove or reject the mainstream news agenda. These user sites may be supplemental for audiences. They may gravitate to them in addition to, rather than instead of, the mainstream press.

Seven in ten stories (70%) on the user sites come either from blogs or Web pages, meanwhile, stood out for being decidedly more international that week. Most stories on the user-news sites appeared only once, never to be repeated again in the week studied. And there was often little in the way of follow-up. Most stories on the user-news sites appeared only once, never to be repeated again in the week studied.

For instance, indeed these user-driven sites have entered the news business, or perhaps more accurately, they have entered the news dissemination business. Reporting is not a part of their charge. Instead, they turn to others for content and leaving users the responsibility of deciding what makes it on the page.

What do individuals do with that power? What kind of events or issues do users choose to highlight? And how does it differ from the news the mainstream press offers?

To find out, PEJ took a snapshot of coverage from the week of June 26 to June 29, 2007, on three sites that offer user-driven news agendas: Digg, Del.icio.us and Reddit. In addition, the Project studied Yahoo News, an outlet that offers an editor-based news page and three different lists of user-generated content: Favorite, Recommended, Most Viewed, and Most Emailed. These sites were then compared with the news agenda found in the 46 mainstream news outlets contained in PEJ’s News Coverage Index.

A total of 644 stories from the three user-driven sites and Yahoo News’ three most popular pages were coded for the study and then compared with 1,358 stories from the same time period in the PEJ News Coverage Index. The report first compares the content of the user-sites with that of the mainstream press. Next, it looks at the differences among the three user-sites with each other. Finally, the study looked at the three user-oriented pages on Yahoo News, comparing them with Yahoo’s editor-selected news page, with the other user-sites, and with each other.

Key findings include:

1. The news agenda of the three user-sites that week was markedly different from that of the mainstream press. Many of the stories users selected did not appear anywhere among the top stories in the mainstream media coverage studied. And there was often little in the way of follow-up. Most stories on the user-news sites appeared only once, never to be repeated again in the week studied.

2. The mainstream user-news sites are all ethically different from those employed by the mainstream media. Seven in ten stories (70%) on the user sites come either from blogs or Web pages. Most stories on the mainstream press appeared only once, never to be repeated again in the week studied.

3. The stories on the three user-news sites are all ethically different from those employed by the mainstream media. Seven in ten stories (70%) on the user sites come either from blogs or Web pages. Most stories on the mainstream press appeared only once, never to be repeated again in the week studied. During the study week, Reddit was the most likely to focus on political events from Washington, such as coverage of Vice President Dick Cheney; Digg was particularly focused on the release of Apple’s new iPhone; and Del.icio.us had the most fragmented mix of stories and the least overlap with the News Index.

4. Yahoo News – even when picking from a limited list of stories Yahoo editors had already approved – was more fragmented and transitory than that of the mainstream news media. This does not mean necessarily that users disapprove or reject the mainstream news agenda. These user sites may be supplemental for audiences. They may gravitate to them in addition to, rather than instead of, the mainstream press.

5. Despite claims that the Web would internationalize consumers’ news diets, coverage across the three user-news sites focused more on domestic events and news on events from abroad than the mainstream media. News, both on the main news page and the most popular pages, meanwhile, stood out for being decidedly more international that week.

In short, the user-news agendas, at least in this one-week snapshot, was more diverse, yet also more fragmented and transitory than that of the mainstream news media. This does not mean necessarily that users disapprove or reject the mainstream news agenda. These user sites may be supplemental for audiences. They may gravitate to them in addition to, rather than instead of, traditional venues. But the story is not necessarily quite that simple.

This initial report is based on a limited sample – a one-week snapshot – to get a first sense of differences and similarities in user-driven and mainstream media. PEJ intends in a future study to look at the news of the week at various stages of its evolution.