

## The Latest News Headlines—Your Vote Counts

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If someday 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 news people?

If a new crop of user-news sites—and measures of user activity on mainstream news sites—are any indication, the news agenda will be more diverse, more transitory, and often draw on a very different and perhaps controversial list of sources, according to a new study.

The report, released by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), compared the news agenda of the mainstream media for one week with the news agenda found on 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 that Nintendo had surpassed Sony in net worth, according to the study.

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. It started with offering visitors a sense of what others found interesting: what news stories were most emailed and most viewed?

Soon, establishment news sites like CBSNews.com allowed users to make their own newscasts. Then, names like Digg, Reddit and Del.icio.us emerged as virtual town squares that became a way to measure the pulse of what the web community finds most newsworthy, most captivating, or just amusing. The trend continues, as even Myspace, the social networking site popular among 20-somethings, has launched a news page (<http://news.myspace.com> [1]).

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 then they bestow users with the task of deciding what makes it on the page.

What do individuals do with that power? What kind of events or issues do they 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 24 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-ranked news: Most Recommended, Most Viewed, and Most Emailed. These sites were then compared with the news agenda found in the 48 mainstream news outlets contained in PEJ's News Coverage Index.

A total of 644 stories from the three user-driven sites and Yahoo News's three most popular pages were coded for the study and then compared to 1,395 stories from the same time period in PEJ's News Coverage Index. The report first compared the content of the user-sites to that of the mainstream press. Next, it compared the three user-sites to each other. Finally, the study looked at the three user-oriented pages on Yahoo News, comparing them to Yahoo's editor-selected news page, to the other user-sites, and to each other.

Some key findings include:

- 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 we studied.
- The sources user news sites draw on are strikingly different from the mainstream media. Seven in ten stories on the user sites come either from blogs or Web sites such as YouTube and WebMd that do not focus mostly on news.
- The three user news sites differed from one another in subtle ways. Reddit was the most likely to focus on political events from Washington, such as coverage of Vice President Cheney; Digg was particularly focused on the release of Apple's new iPhone; Del.icio.us had the most fragmented mix of stories and the least overlap with the News Index.
- On Yahoo News—even when picking from a limited list of stories Yahoo editors had already pared down—users' top stories only rarely matched those of the news professionals.
- There were mostly similarities in what people are most likely to email each other versus what they recommend or view on Yahoo News. But there were some differences. Most Recommended stories focused more on “news you can use” such as advice from the World Health Organization to exercise one's legs during long flights; the Most Viewed stories were often breaking news, more sensational in nature, with a heavy dose of crime and celebrity; and the Most Emailed stories were more diverse, with a mix of the practical and the oddball.
- Despite claims that the Web would internationalize consumers' news diets, coverage across the three user-news sites focused more on domestic events and less on news from abroad than the mainstream media that week. Yahoo News, both on its main news page and three most popular pages, meanwhile, stood out for being decidedly more international that week.

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, traditional venues. But the agenda they set is nonetheless quite different. 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 delve further into this area of research.

### The Big Picture

Past research by PEJ has found that week-to-week mainstream media tend to focus on a handful of major events that they monitor continuously over the course of a week or a month. Whether it be floods in the Midwest, the death of Anna Nicole Smith or debate over the President's “surge” policy in Iraq, a sizable amount of airtime or space is often spent on just a handful of “big” stories of the week.

The week of June 24 was no different. There were no major breaking events demanding special media attention, but a handful of stories emphasizing political events in Washington and conflicts abroad dominated.

During that week, the immigration debate led the coverage, accounting for 10% of all news stories in the News Coverage Index. That was followed by coverage of a major fire near Lake Tahoe (6%), the failed bombings in the United Kingdom (6%), events on the ground in Iraq (6%), Supreme Court decisions (5%), the 2008 presidential election (4%), flooding in Texas (4%), the policy debate in the capitol over the war in Iraq (4%), U.S. domestic terrorism (3%), and the missing pregnant woman in Ohio (3%). In all, the top ten stories that week accounted for 51% of all the stories in the Index.

In the user-generated sites, these stories were barely visible. Overall, just 5% of the stories captured on these three sites overlapped with the ten most widely-covered stories in the Index (13% for Reddit, 4% for Digg, and 0% for Del.icio.us).

The immigration debate in Congress, the biggest single story of the week in the mainstream media, appeared just once as a top-ten story on Reddit, and not at all on Digg and Del.icio.us. Similarly, the war in Iraq accounted for 10% of all stories in the Index and seven percent in the Yahoo-user material. Across the three user-news sites, it amounted to about 1%.

What were the favorite stories on the user-driven sites? For the most part, there were no dominant ones. The only story with any real traction was the release of the Apple iPhone, and that was just on one site (it accounted for 16% of the stories on Digg that week). Otherwise, users put forth a mix of diverse and unconnected news events from day to day. On the morning of June 26 on Digg, for example, a story about intelligent design topped the list followed by a story about a woman suing record labels for malicious prosecution. But by 5pm that day, both had vanished from the top ten.

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[1] [1] Myspace launched its news page on April 19, 2007. The Project considered including MySpace News in the study but the site is still in Beta form and at the time the study, there was very little user activity. On average, the top stories received just one vote and some on the home page of the site had no votes whatsoever.