



# Editorial gatekeeping in citizen journalism

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## Abstract

Editorial staff play an essential role as gatekeepers within professional journalism. Citizen journalism has the potential to depart from routine journalistic practices and allow for more democratic posting of unmoderated content. Nonetheless, many citizen journalism web sites do have an editorial staff and no existing research has explored the contributions of editors to citizen journalism web sites. I theorize that the editorial staff on citizen journalism sites serve as *legitimizing organizational structures* within the larger organizational field and, as *citizen gatekeepers*, who enforce journalistic routines. Using a content analysis of a sample ( $n = 326$ ) drawn from the largest sampling frame of English-language citizen journalism web sites based in the United States to date ( $n = 1958$ ), I examine the characteristics of citizen journalism web sites with an editorial model as well as how the presence of an editorial staff is associated with the practice of journalistic routines common in professional journalism.

## Keywords

Citizen journalism, content analysis, editorial staff, gatekeeping, journalistic routines, media sociology, organizations

## Introduction

Over the past 30 years, scholars across a number of disciplines have produced an enormous literature on gatekeeping within professional journalism (PJ). Broadly speaking, these studies have shown how news routines and conventions within PJ produce predictable organizational behavior and often standardized content. Recent research has examined

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the extent to which the same news routines and patterns of content have been adopted within the still-settling field of citizen journalism (CJ) and shown some marked differences. These differences are among the traits that have led some scholars to herald the supposedly revolutionary qualities of CJ and others to argue that it is no substitute for a good old fashioned newspaper.

While comparative research on the use of news routines and conventions has noted differences between professional and citizen journalists, we still know very little about how they differ across various types of CJ. This study explores differences among CJ sites with and without editorial staff, asking two central questions. First, what are the characteristics of the CJ sites that adopt the organizational structure of an editorial staff? Establishing an editorial staff alone acts to reproduce convention within PJ and produces a hierarchy in content creation, rather than the potentially level playing field the Internet allows. How do the types of web sites that adopt such a structure differ from other CJ sites? Second, this study asks, "How is the content of CJ sites with editorial staff different from other CJ sites? Are sites with editorial staff more likely to adopt the conventions of PJ than those without?"

This study uses a dataset, first introduced by Lindner et al. (2015), offering advances in both the conceptualization and the sampling of CJ web sites. The sample of 326 web sites was drawn from the largest and most inclusive sampling frame of US-based, English-language CJ sites to date. Conceptually, the sampling method substantially expands what "counts" as CJ by including all self-identified CJ sites, not just sub-categories like political CJ sites or community citizen journalists. These data are far more representative of the population of CJ online than previous samples because the sites were randomly selected from a sampling frame that represents a near-population of US-based, English-language CJ sites. This method stands in contrast with the convenience samples used in most existing research and allows for greater confidence in generalizing our findings to the population of CJ sites.

## Literature review

### *Radicalism and professionalization in CJ*

While some overblown rhetoric about the radical and transformative powers of CJ is inevitable, over the past decade, CJ has played a vital and highly visible role within the larger news ecosystem. Some of the most vivid examples of CJ have come at moments of crisis, including the 2005 London bombings (Allan, 2007), the 2008 Mumbai bomb blasts, and the dramatic Hudson River landing of US Airways Flight 1549 (Murthy, 2013). In all of these cases, citizens posting photos and updates to blogs and social media not only scooped professional journalists but also effectively re-oriented the coverage to the individual experiences of citizens. Other studies have demonstrated the importance of CJ in providing an alternative to a professional press that tends to have a pro-capitalist, pro-military ideology (Meadows, 2012) and that often fails to give voice to marginalized groups, particularly low-income people and people of color (Rutigliano, 2008).

For all the attention it has received, CJ resists clear definition. Goode (2009) has observed that there are examples of CJ that are online and offline, radical and conventional, those

that produce original content, and those that simply link to the mainstream press and offer commentary. In a review of existing literature on CJ, Wall (2015) offers a typology of various strands of CJ, pointing to great variation in topical focus, political orientation, and chosen medium with some CJ taking site-based forms and others taking to social media. While many forms of CJ make important contributions, for the purposes of this research, I focus on the online, site-based form of CJ.

This type of CJ began to appear just as newspapers around the country started to fold in large numbers. A vast academic and popular literature has documented the decline in the number in newspapers as well as the cost-cutting tactics of the newspapers that do remain. These tactics include reporter lay-offs, increasing reliance on wire services and content-sharing, the consolidation of newsroom positions, and the creation of centralized centers producing content for multiple newspapers (for an overview of current trends, see Mitchell, 2015). All of these patterns have contributed to the loss of local news and, in some communities, CJ sites have attempted to replace the lost professional sources (Fico et al., 2013). Although some scholars have questioned whether CJ sites are adequate “newspaper replacements” (Fico et al., 2013), evidence suggests that young news consumers see CJ as just as credible as the pros (Netzley and Hemmer, 2012). Perhaps for this reason, even in communities with newspapers, “news organizations [are] encouraging reporters to ... [keep] up to date with all the citizen journalism sites of their beats” (Robinson and DeShano, 2011: 15).

As an organizational field, online CJ came into existence in approximately 2000 and grew, by one reckoning, to a peak of approximately 1400 sites in 2011 (Lindner et al., 2014). One boon to the growth of the population was the introduction of free, public blogging engines like Blogger and WordPress in 2004, significantly lowering the technical abilities necessary to establish a site. With the introduction of Twitter and the opening of Facebook to the public in 2006, some CJ began to migrate to social media, leaving behind the organizational form of the web site (Murthy, 2013). Still, at least 1200 US-based CJ sites remain active (Lindner et al., 2014), in part, because social media is not well-suited to posting long-form analysis, calendars of upcoming events, or permanent repositories of information.

During the brief history of online CJ sites, established non-profit organizations, most notably the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, have played an important role in shaping the population. Through the Knight Citizen News Network and the Knight News Challenge (Lewis, 2011), the Knight Foundation provided financial and organizational support to CJ sites that “distribute news in the public interest” to local geographic communities. Sites oriented to geographic communities are only one subset of CJ; others are oriented to particularly issues and engage a national or global audience. However, foundation support for community sites, in particular, may have incentivized emerging CJ sites to adopt a more professionalized “newspaper replacement” model. Still, some evidence exists to suggest that winners of the Knight News Challenge adopted forms of participation (e.g. “crowdsourcing”) uncommon in PJ (Lewis, 2011). Although the precise impact of foundations on the journalistic practices of CJ sites is still unclear, particularly within the hyperlocal subset of CJ, established foundations have brought resources, legitimacy, and some form of professionalization to the field. Given the significant contributions of CJ in offering an alternative to the professional press in recent years, it is

important that we consider the staffing patterns and journalistic practices that CJ sites have adopted.

### *Gatekeeping and routines*

Gatekeeping is the process by which media workers select among happenings, ideas, and competing perspectives to produce the “news” (Shoemaker and Reese, 1991). Among the most important factors in shaping day-to-day news coverage is the use of *routine* practices by journalists. These routine practices, like the division of newsgathering labor into “beats” (Fishman, 1988) and the creation of a “news net” (Tuchman, 1978), structure the daily work of journalists. With ever-pressing deadlines, limited resources, and an inconsistent supply of sensational news stories, news routines ensure predictable, legitimate, and appealing coverage. In other words, news routines help media workers deliver a consistent product.

Editors play a particularly important role in maintaining routine practices and enforcing conventions. Editors assign reporters to beats and stories, but reporters also compete in pitching stories to editors (Tuchman, 1978). Meanwhile, section editors promote their reporters’ stories at editorial conferences with managing editors (Clayman and Reiser, 1998). All stories flow through copy editors who enforce the organization’s style guide. There are hierarchical layers of gatekeeping designed to maintain routines that produce consistent, predictable content.

For the purposes of this study, I focus on four routine practices typical of PJ: reliance on official over unofficial sources, adherence to the “objectivity norm,” avoidance of the first-person, and the use of the “pack routine.” Newsroom ethnographies (Fishman, 1988) as well as content analyses (Fico et al., 2013) have consistently found that professional journalists more frequently cite official sources than unofficial sources. Official sources include government figures, figures from non-profit organizations, and business officials as opposed to “unofficial sources” like average citizens, “non-institutional representatives,” and bystanders. Journalists’ use of official sources over average citizens or activists is so great that Gans (2011) has described journalists as “stenographers for public officials” (p. 4). In a recent study of 480 articles from 50 US newspaper web sites, 75% of articles cited an official source, while only 37.3% cited an unofficial source, with the majority of the unofficial sources coming from non-institutional representatives (i.e. “experts”) (Carpenter, 2008). Moreover, almost half of the articles cited government sources alone. According to Shoemaker and Reese (1991), journalists rely so heavily on public officials because “the government provides a convenient and regular flow of authoritative information, which reporters find efficient compared with more labor-intensive research” (p. 189).

Citizen journalists appear to have very different patterns of sourcing. Carpenter’s (2008) study of the use of official and unofficial sources in online newspapers compared them with CJ sites. CJ sites used fewer sources overall, but were less likely to rely on official sources, using them in only 30.3% of articles. Fico et al. (2013), likewise, found that CJ sites use far fewer government sources. On the other hand, CJ sites used unofficial sources in twice as many articles as online newspapers. A popular view is that citizen journalists’ use of more unofficial sources reflects a type of radical resistance to

establishment views in favor of these views of various “publics” (Rutigliano, 2008). A more practical explanation is that citizen journalists lack the legitimacy to gain access to elite figures or to obtain journalist credentials to attend official press conferences (Robinson and DeShano, 2011).

Another nearly unwavering routine practiced by professional journalists is the “objectivity norm.” Regarded as almost sacred in American journalism, Schudson (2001) writes, “The objectivity norm guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts” (p. 150). According to Shoemaker and Reese (1991), the objectivity norm “helps [news] organizations in a number of ways to maximize their audience appeal” (p. 108). Avoiding not only opinion, but often even analysis, allows journalists to defend themselves against charges of bias or manipulation. Carpenter’s (2008) study of online newspapers found that only 11.2% of articles contained an opinion.

Citizen journalists, as a whole, do not seem to have the same allegiance to the objectivity norm. Indeed, one of the most widely lauded features of CJ is the freedom to express opinions and the often overt rejection of standard notions of journalistic impartiality (Carpenter et al., 2013; Fico et al., 2013; Rutigliano, 2008). CJ allows for “advocacy in violation of objectivity” (St. John, 2007: 258) and “gives community residents a voice with less concern about objectivity or balance” (Rutigliano, 2008: 60). Quantitative research on the subject has been rare, but compared with their mainstream counterparts, in Carpenter’s (2008) study, citizen journalists were far more likely to express opinions with 42.1% of CJ articles having “more opinion than fact.”

Most professional journalists must adhere to a set of prescribed rules constraining their writing style. One nearly universal journalistic style rule is avoiding the use of the first-person (“I,” “me,” “my,” etc.) particularly in News sections. A number of studies have noted that CJ sites often include frequent accounts of “personal experiences,” suggesting an abandonment of the “no first-person” norm (Deuze, 2003; Netzley and Hemmer, 2012). Rutigliano (2008) used the first-person as one indicator of adhering to journalistic convention in his qualitative study of five CJ sites, but no study to date has tracked it quantitatively.

A final practice Shoemaker and Reese (1991) describe is the “pack routine,” or the reliance on fellow journalists for ideas. In some cases, such as when covering a political campaign, journalists literally move as a pack. Even when they are not, journalists continue to look to other journalists and publications for new angles for stories and confirmation of their accounts. Online, the pack routine is visible in the form of links. Among blogging journalists, Singer (2005) found that 13.8% of links directed users to a web site that was part of the journalist’s parent media organization, but a full 63.3% were links to other news media outlets. The practice of linking to other media outlets suggests that for many professional journalists, it is other pros—not government web sites, non-profit web sites, or CJ blogs—that they look to as they construct their sense of the world.

Citizen journalists also look to professional journalists, but seem far more likely than professionals to link to other CJ sites and blogs. Carpenter’s (2010) found that 1 in 5 articles on CJ sites linked to mainstream news site, while only 1 in 10 articles on CJ sites linked to blogs. These findings suggest that CJ sites follow the “pack routine” with mainstream journalism, but, to a lesser extent, run with a pack of other citizen journalists as well.

## The functions of citizen editors

Despite the growing interest in how the work of citizen journalists differs from the routine practices of PJ, no existing research on CJ has considered the role of an essential player in journalistic gatekeeping: the editor. This research makes an important contribution to the existing literature on CJ by theorizing and empirically examining the dual functions of citizen editorial staff as *legitimizing organizational structures* and as *citizen gatekeepers*. I theorize that the organizational structure of the editorial staff offers CJ sites two benefits. First, by reproducing an established organizational structure within PJ, it acts to legitimate the work of citizens as “real” or serious journalism. Second, like their mainstream counterparts, citizen editors serve as gatekeepers within a hierarchy that enforce a set of routine journalistic practices.

The first function of an editorial staff is as a *legitimizing organizational structure*. In emerging organizational fields, there is always a struggle for legitimacy. Whether it be labor unions or wineries or smartphone app start-ups, a bold few organizations act as a vanguard testing the viability of the field. As the organizations prove viable and begin to thrive, new organizations enter the field and the organizational field continues to grow. Along the way, with a growing number of organizations, competition for resources and consumers increases (Carroll and Hannan, 1989).

As the field of CJ has grown, like many new organizational fields, it has struggled for legitimacy within the larger field of journalism even as individual CJ sites compete for resources and audiences. In such new or “settling” fields where the risk of organizational mortality is high, organizations often seek to mitigate risk by adopting established practices (Deephouse and Carter, 2005). In the case of the organizational structure of the editorial staff, it offers CJ sites legitimacy through an analogy with PJ. Rather than the seeming chaos of unmoderated contributions (like a message board), having the structure of an “editorial staff” suggests a layer of gatekeepers empowered to select among stories and submissions as well as to impose style standards and refine prose. Even if a CJ site’s “editorial process” is in practice the electronic equivalent of a rubber stamp, the structure of the editorial staff suggests editorial judgment to the outside world.

The organizational structure of the editorial staff also offers legitimacy by suggesting professionalization within CJ. Achieving the position of section editor or editor-in-chief within PJ reflects some level of career achievement and hard-earned trust from leadership at the news organization. By contrast, a precocious citizen journalist can start a blog and dub himself “Editor-in-Chief” on day 1 (although that seems to be rare, with only 7.8% of the sites with editors in our sample having just one writer). In both professional and CJ, the title of “editor” is reflective of the amount of power the individual exercises over content. But by making a linguistic analogy to an occupational role within PJ, a CJ site implies the professionalization of its own media workers.

Although adopting the structure of an editorial staff may offer a fledgling CJ site a greater degree of legitimacy, it also defeats what some scholars have seen as the radical potential of CJ. In Deuze’s (2003) typology of online journalisms, he contrasts mainstream news sites, which concentrate on editorial content and have high degrees of moderation, with the more radical “share and discussion” sites, which lack editorial control. These share and discussion sites “facilitate the need for people to connect with other

people worldwide, unhindered, in real time ... [producing] a 'just' communications infrastructure" (Deuze, 2003: 211). To adopt the structure of an editorial staff is a movement in the direction of mainstream news sites—toward professionalism, but away from the democratic potential of the Internet.

Adopting an editorial staff is legitimating, hierarchical, and deeply traditional. As a first research question (RQ1), I ask, "What are the characteristics of the CJ sites that adopt the organizational structure of an editorial staff?" Taking an exploratory approach, this study tests how several site-level characteristics affect the odds of having an editorial staff. In particular, I examine for-profit status, the presence of a former or current professional journalist, the site's longevity, the focus of its content (political and/or community-oriented), and community size (if it has an identifiable geographical community). It seems likely that contributors with a background in PJ would be more likely to join CJ sites with the familiar structure of an editorial staff or to reproduce that structure at the site's founding. Likewise, older sites and for-profit enterprises may operate in more traditional ways, leading to a higher share of sites with editorial staff. With other variables, like having a political topic or community size, the direction of any observed effect is more difficult to predict.

Do CJ sites with editorial staff simply use that structure to gain legitimacy or do those sites actually produce different content than the CJ sites without editors? If the first potential function of an editorial staff is as a *legitimizing organizational structure*, the second potential function of citizen editors is their labor as *citizen gatekeepers*. It stands to reason that citizen editors, like professional editors, act as gatekeepers engaging in some set of routine practices and maintaining some stylistic standards. Unlike sites with no moderation or with contributors who do not identify as editors, it seems likely that sites with editorial staff would have some set of requirements for what is "publishable" even if their writer base is so small that all submissions effectively meet those basic standards.

To be sure, the task of a citizen editor is different from professional editor. They typically have fewer human and financial resources as well as less time to work on the site. However, they also rarely have the same deadline pressures that professionals have in producing a printed newspaper each day. Past research also suggests that citizen journalists typically do not make their primary income from the site and, therefore, do not have to worry about a financial bottom-line the way professional editors do (Carpenter et al., 2013).

Not only are the resources and pressures that citizen editors face different, the nature of the job itself is different. Glaser (2004) argues that citizen editors act less as gatekeepers and more like "content shepherds, whipping the chaos of reader-generated content into a manageable morass." To use Bruns' (2003: 4) terms, citizen editors act as "gate-watchers," combining the traditional work of a journalist with duties of a "specialist librarian" who "surveys what information becomes available in a variety of media and serves as a guide to the most relevant sources ..." Citizen editors don't typically assign journalists stories or have a staffer call City Hall for a quote. Rather, they are more likely to sift through citizen contributions and search for documents online. Still, even if a citizen editor never once suggests a different choice of words in a contributor's submission, the mere act of selecting what is publishable content is a form of gatekeeping and follows some set of routines.

The second research question (RQ2) in this study examines patterns of gatekeeping at CJ sites with and without editorial staff. In particular, I ask, "Are sites with editorial staff more likely adopt the conventions of PJ than those without?" In adopting an editorial staff, CJ sites are already reproducing characteristics of PJ. In turn, to what extent, do editors act as *citizen gatekeepers*, reproducing routines of PJ? To answer this question, this research will compare CJ sites with and without editorial staff in terms of their use of the four routines described above: use of official/unofficial sources, the objectivity norm, use of the first-person, and the "pack routine."

## Data and methods

The unit of analysis in this article is the CJ web site. The data for this study were drawn from a quantitative content analysis of English-language, CJ web sites in the United States. A total of 350 CJ sites were randomly sampled (using the "sample" command with the "count" option in Stata 13) from a sampling frame of 1247 currently active web sites and 711 inactive web sites. For a more detailed discussion of the data collection procedures, see Lindner et al. (2015).

To develop a sampling frame, a team of three researchers conducted a variety of web searches for "citizen journalism," "citizen media," "citizen reporting," and so on. Through these searches, we identified directories of CJ sites and used a snowballing sampling method to pull in self-identified CJ web sites. We then followed links on those sites to expand our sample. To be included in our final sampling frame, the sites: (1) had to explicitly describe itself anywhere on the site as being engaged in CJ or be identified as CJ by another source, (2) had to be based in the United States and available in English, and (3) could not be connected to any professional news organization.

From the 1247 active CJ web sites, we randomly sampled 350 sites for a content analysis with over 50 variables. A team of three researchers hand-coded these sites over a 6-week period in June and July of 2013. Because of the dichotomous nature of most of the measures, it was relatively simple to achieve intercoder reliability. One hundred cases (30.6% of the sample) were double-coded as a reliability check. Intercoder reliability estimates for all items on the codesheet were consistently at or above 95% agreement. As a more rigorous test of reliability, I used Krippendorff's alpha, one of the most conservative measures of reliability, which compares observed versus expected intercoder disagreement and varies from 0 to 1 with higher numbers indicating greater agreement. According to Krippendorff (2013),  $\alpha \geq .8$  is generally regarded as an acceptable level of reliability. A total of 11 of the 12 measures used in this study had alphas above .8. Krippendorff's alpha for the hyperlink to other CJ sites measure was .77. After all coding, full information was obtained for 326 cases (for the dropped cases, it was not possible to determine some of the site-level variables). For each site, we coded site-level information (e.g. founding information and non-profit status) and content information (e.g. political topic and focused on a geographic community) drawing from "About" pages, mission statements, contributor profiles, and the 10 most recent posts/articles posted on different calendar dates.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for citizen journalism sample.

	Mean	Standard deviation
Site characteristics		
Founding year	2006.17	3.34
City size (thousands)	702.93	1247.53
For-profit	.38	.48
Professional journalist contributor	.46	.49
Editorial staff	.43	.49
Political topic	.36	.48
Community focus	.61	.48
Site content		
Uses first-person	.71	.45
Used official source(s)	.83	.37
Used unofficial source(s)	.28	.45
More opinion than fact	.30	.45
Link to other CJ	.14	.34

CJ: citizen journalism.

n = 207 for city size, n = 326 for all other variables.

### Measures and analysis

Descriptive statistics for all variables are reported in Table 1. For RQ1, which explores the characteristics of sites with editorial staff, the dependent measure was whether or not the site had an editorial staff (yes = 1, no = 0).<sup>1</sup> To be coded positively, a CJ site had to use “editor,” “editors,” or “editorial staff” explicitly. While this definition runs the risk of excluding sites that operated with a structure and processes that resemble an editorial staff, there was no way to observe and code such sites efficiently. The editorial staff variable becomes the primary *independent* variable of interest when examining RQ2.

The independent variables for RQ1 are founding year (ranging from 2000 to 2013), whether the site had a former or current professional journalist as a contributor (yes = 1, no = 0), whether the site was for-profit or non-profit (for-profit = 1, non-profit = 0), whether the site’s primary focus was politics (political topic = 1, other = 0), and whether the site was focused on geographical community (community site = 1, other = 0). Sites were also coded for the city they were based in if that information was available. Some CJ sites, for example, focus on national or international politics and never mention their geographic location. We were able to obtain city information for 207 of the 326 sites. Then, using the US Census web site, we determined city size data (measured in tens of thousands) for those 207 sites. In some cases, the site’s self-identified city was part of a larger metropolitan area. In all cases, we coded city size according to the site’s self-identification.

For RQ2, exploring how editorial staff affect routine journalistic practices, there are five content measures. The first two measures of journalistic practice are use of official and unofficial sources. Using Carpenter’s (2008) typology, we coded as “official sources” any quote by a government official, official non-profit or for-profit spokesperson, or

anonymous official (present=1, not present=0). We coded as “unofficial sources” any quote by “average people, non-institutional representatives,” whether anonymous or not (Carpenter 2008: 5380). The second dependent variable is a measure of the “objectivity norm” drawn from Carpenter (2010). Coders assessed, “Is the site mostly fact (‘centered on providing the public with information based on facts’) or mostly opinion (‘predominantly opinion or speculation ... tend to focus on one person commenting on a particular issue, event, or person’)?” Following Carpenter (2010), “mostly opinion” (50%+1 or more of content was opinion) was coded 1, “mostly fact” was coded as 0. CJ sites seemed to specialize in either opinion or fact-based reporting, and it was easy for the coders to make judgments about the preponderance.

The third measure was any use of the first-person (e.g. “I,” “me,” “myself”; present=1, not present=0). The final measure of routine journalistic practice was the presence of a link to any other self-identified CJ site (present=1, not present=0). As independent measures for RQ2, I use all the independent measures (other than city size) from the analysis of RQ1 as well as editorial staff.

To explore the two key research questions, this study presents a series of cross-tabulations between the dependent variables and key independent variables. Due to the dichotomous nature of all dependent variables, I conducted logistic regression analyses which estimate the odds of an outcome appearing on a site based on the independent factors.

## Results

### RQ1. *Characteristics of CJ sites with editorial staff*

As seen in Table 1, 43% of CJ sites had an editorial staff. A substantial proportion of self-identified CJ sites have former or current professional journalists (46%) and/or adopt a for-profit model (36%). The first research question (RQ1) asked, “What are the characteristics of the CJ sites that adopt the organizational structure of an editorial staff?” Immediately evident in Table 2 are some important differences between various types of CJ sites. For-profits and sites with professionals are significantly more likely to have editorial staff. Among for-profit CJ sites, 56.3% had an editorial staff as compared to only 39.2% of non-profit sites. Perhaps because former or current professional journalists seek to reproduce familiar structures or because they are drawn to CJ sites with legitimate structures, sites with professional journalists were also significantly more likely to have editorial staff (64.7%) than sites without professionals (25.1%;  $p < .001$ ). Turning to logistic regression analyses presented in Table 3, we see that independent effects of both being a for-profit site ( $p < .01$ ) and having a professional journalist ( $p < .001$ ) hold up when controlling for other factors. In Model 2, which incorporates the full sample, for-profit sites have almost twice the odds of the non-profit sites of having an editorial staff. Likewise, sites with professional journalists have 4.669 times the odds of having the organizational structure of an editorial staff as sites without professionals ( $p < .001$ ). With a Wald statistic of 32.322, the presence of a professional journalist was by far the strongest predictor of editorial staff. Taken together, these findings suggest that CJ sites with other features of PJ (a for-profit model and professional contributors) also tend to adopt the organizational structure of the editorial staff.

**Table 2.** Cross-tabulations of editorial staff by various site characteristics (n = 326).

Variable	Percentage with editorial staff (%)	Pearson chi-square
For-profit		
For-profit	56.3	18.21*
Non-profit	39.2	
Former or current professional journalist on staff		
Professional	64.7	48.38*
No professional	25.1	
Political topic		
Political	27.4	14.42*
Non-political	49.0	
Focused on geographical community		
Geographical	48.7	11.49*
Non-geographical	29.7	
Identifiable city		
Named city	52.5	29.01*
No named city	21.8	

\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 3.** Logistic regression estimating the odds of having an editorial staff.

	Model 1	Model 2
Founding year	1.003 (0.003)	1.045 (1.132)
For-profit	2.139* (4.789)	1.953* (6.069)
Pro-journalist contributor	6.79*** (29.168)	4.669*** (32.322)
Political topic	0.891 (0.065)	0.705 (1.221)
Geographical community focus	1.036 (0.004)	2.266** (1.221)
City size (in 10,000)	0.998 (2.565)	—
n	207	326
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.221	0.214

Values represent odds ratios, and Wald statistic in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; and \* $p < .05$ .

The next cluster of characteristics this study examined is whether the site focused on a political topic and/or a geographical community as well as city size. In the sample as a whole, as seen in Table 1, 36% focus on a political topic and 61% focus on a geographical community. Eight percent of community sites are non-political as compared to 38.3% of non-community sites (for cross-tabulations of independent variables, see Appendix 1). Community sites also tend to be in smaller cities with mean size of 606,790 residents for community sites and a mean size of 1,343,920 for non-community sites.

At the bivariate level (Table 2), both political topic and community site appear to have significant effects on the presence of an editorial staff. Of sites with political topics, only

**Table 4.** Size of cities with and without editorial staff (n = 207).

	City size			
	Mean	Median	Min	Max
With editorial staff	630,594	188,440	1736	3,831,868
Without editorial staff	794,283	214,893	1817	8,391,881

27.4% had editorial staff as opposed to nearly half of other sites. Sites with a geographical community focus had nearly opposite results, with almost half of them having an editorial staff (compared to only 29.7% among non-geographically oriented sites). However, the results diverge when controlling for other factors. Both models in Table 3 indicate no effect of having a political topic on the odds of having an editorial staff all else being equal. By contrast, Model 2 reveals that community sites have 2.266 the odds of having an editorial staff as sites not focused on a geographical community ( $p < .01$ ). However, when controlling for city size in Model 1, geographical community has no significant effect on the odds of having an editorial staff. This finding indicates that community sites are more likely to have editorial staff simply because they tend to be in smaller communities where sites with editorial staff are more common.

One thorny issue for this study was missing data on the home community variable. All sites focused on geographic community identified their home city, but home city information was available for only 63.5% of the total sample of sites. For that reason, this study examines results with and without city size. As seen in Table 2, sites with identifiable cities are significantly more likely to have editorial staff (52.5%) than those without them (21.8%). In examining only those sites where city size data were available (Table 4), we see that sites without editorial staff tend to be in bigger cities (median of 214,900 residents) than those with editors (median of 188,400) on average. CJ sites with identifiable cities (disproportionately geographical community sites) are more likely to have editorial staff, but big cities are less likely to have sites with editors. In the logistic regression analysis (Table 3, Model 1), city size has no significant effect on the odds of having an editorial staff; however, it did approach the .1 level of significance. With a larger sample and more statistical power, city size might prove to be a significant predictor. Even so, the magnitude of any effect appears to be a small one.

As a whole, these results suggest that having a professional journalist contributor, a for-profit model, and being a community site in a smaller city are strong predictors of having an editorial staff. Other variables, like longevity in the field (as measured by founding year) and political topic, had no significant effect net of other factors. All measures together explain about 22% of the odds of having an editorial staff in both of the two logistic regression models.

## RQ2. *Effects of editorial staff on routine journalistic practices*

Following the broad pattern for PJ, Table 1 shows that CJ sites were more likely to cite official sources (83% of sites cited one) than unofficial sources (28%). A minority of CJ

**Table 5.** Proportion of sites performing routine journalistic practices by editorial staff (n = 326).

	Editorial staff (%)	No editorial staff (%)	Chi-square
Official sources	81.8	84.6	.43
Unofficial sources	18.2	33.3	9.03**
First-person	48.5	86.2	53.09***
More opinion than fact	16.7	39.4	19.02***
Link to other CJ	9.1	17.5	4.52*

CJ: citizen journalism.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; and \* $p < .05$ .

sites (30%) had “more opinion than fact,” although most used the first-person (71%). Finally, perhaps surprisingly, only 14% of CJ sites linked to any other CJ site.

Recall RQ2 asked, “Are sites with editorial staff more likely adopt the conventions of PJ than those without?” Table 5 reports cross-tabulations between the editorial staff variable and the five measures of routine journalistic practices. There was no significant difference between sites with and without editorial staff on their usage of official sources ( $p > .05$ ). However, on all other measures, sites with editorial staff were more likely than those without to engage in routine journalistic practices. Sites with editorial staff avoided unofficial sources (only 18.2% of sites cited one), very rarely linked to other CJ sites (9.1%), and only 16.7% had more opinion than fact. By contrast, 33% of sites without editors cited an unofficial source and 39.4% had more opinion than fact. While linking to other citizen journalists was rare even on sites without an editorial staff (17.5%), they were significantly more likely to have a link to other CJ sites than sites with editors ( $p < .05$ ). The largest gap between sites with and without editors was in their use of the first-person. Less than half (48.5%) of sites with an editorial staff used the first-person compared to 86.2% of sites without editors ( $p < .001$ ).

Since for-profit sites, sites focused on a geographical community, and sites with a professional journalist contributor were more likely to have editorial staff, I controlled for these factors to be sure that they were not the driving force between any effects of editorial staff on content. Table 6 presents the results of logistic regression analyses exploring the effect of editorial staff on the measures of routine journalistic practice, controlling for other site characteristics. As at the bivariate level, there was no significant effect of editorial staff on the use of official sources. However, net of other factors, sites with editorial staff had 0.469 the odds of using unofficial sources compared to sites without editors ( $p < .05$ ).

Sites with editorial staff were also far more likely to follow journalistic routines concerning objectivity. As Table 6 reveals, sites with editorial staff had 0.196 the odds of using the first-person ( $p < .001$ ) and 0.506 the odds of having more opinion than fact ( $p < .05$ ) as compared to sites without editors. Sites with a geographical community focus also had much lower odds of using the first-person than non-community sites, although editorial staff had a bigger effect (with a Wald statistic of 27.393 compared with 7.262). In the case of the “objectivity norm” measure, editorial staff, community focus, and political topic all had significant effects independent of each other. Community sites

**Table 6.** Logistic regression of routine journalistic practices by site characteristics (n = 326).

	Official sources	Unofficial sources	First-person	Opinion	Link to other CJ
Editorial staff	0.978 (0.004)	0.469* (5.732)	0.196*** (27.393)	0.506* (3.895)	0.973 (0.004)
Founding year	0.898* (4.258)	1.015 (0.121)	0.913* (3.863)	0.933 (2.385)	0.943 (1.204)
For-profit	1.007 (0.009)	1.053 (0.714)	1.011 (0.045)	1.025 (0.184)	0.659 (1.054)
Pro-journalist contributor	1.232 (0.367)	0.898 (0.129)	0.863 (0.226)	0.553 (3.093)	0.367* (5.131)
Political topic	2.127 (3.316)	0.922 (0.065)	1.386 (0.828)	2.795** (10.294)	0.815 (0.25)
Geographical community focus	1.102 (0.073)	0.709 (1.286)	0.401** (7.262)	0.233*** (20.378)	0.143*** (18.75)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.037	.041	.214	.251	.122

CJ: citizen journalism.

Values represent odds ratios, and Wald statistic in parentheses.

\*\*\*p < .001; \*\*p < .01; and \*p < .05.

were far less likely (0.233 the odds) to have more opinion than fact ( $p < .001$ ), and political sites were far more likely to have more opinion than fact (2.795 the odds,  $p < .01$ ). These findings suggest that community sites and CJ sites with editorial staff are more likely to follow routine journalistic practices, while political sites tend to break from the objectivity norm.

The significant bivariate relationship between editorial staff and linking to other CJ sites, a measure of the “pack routine,” disappeared when controlling for other factors (see Table 6). Community sites had 0.143 the odds of non-community sites of linking to another CJ site ( $p < .001$ ). This finding seems to suggest that community sites are less likely to follow the larger “pack” of citizen journalists. It is possible that the local focus of these sites makes their contributors less concerned with what citizen journalists are doing in other places. Alternatively, community sites may see other CJ sites as a different genre of online content.

Sites with professional journalist contributors had 0.367 the odds of linking to another CJ site ( $p < .05$ ). Professional journalists may be more oriented toward the “pack” of mainstream journalism rather than the “pack” of CJ. Or, the type of site that seeks out professional journalist contributors may view the rest of the field of CJ as illegitimate in some way. What is clear is that lower rates of linking to other CJ on sites with editorial staff is not about the work of editors, but about other characteristics of the site. Taken together, it appears that CJ sites with editorial staff tend to perform journalistic routines in a manner more like PJ, while CJ sites without editorial staff act more like those in previous studies of CJ sites.

## Discussion

I theorized that, within CJ, the editorial staff act as a *legitimizing organizational structure*. The results clearly demonstrate that CJ sites with other characteristics of PJ, such as professional contributors and a for-profit model, were more likely to have an editorial staff. The findings also demonstrate that community sites (especially in small cities), which may have more conventional leanings, are more likely to have an editorial staff.

For these CJ sites with traditional leanings, having an editorial staff is a powerful symbol of legitimate journalistic work. The result also shows that the presence of an editorial staff significantly increases the odds of reproducing professional gatekeeping practices. In other words, through the structure of the editorial staff, *citizen gatekeepers* practice a set of journalistic routines more similar to PJ than other CJ.

As Reese (2011) has noted, journalism today is “more diffused and its boundaries under siege” (p. 11). At the same time, many scholars fancy CJ quite radical and powerful. However, the narrative that PJ is declining and CJ is gaining power fails to recognize that the organizational structures, symbols, and practices of PJ still carry great weight in the field of CJ. For those who find value in journalistic convention, these findings may prove heartening. Reese (2011) asks, with so many new forms of journalism including CJ, “will a ... professional ethos still be held in common across all these places?” (p. 12). At least among more traditional CJ sites, the answer appears to be yes. For those who wish that CJ might take a more radical form, breaking from traditional journalistic routines, the hope should lie with non-profit sites without professional contributors oriented to questions beyond their local community.

There are important limitations to this study. These findings show that patterns of journalistic practice co-occur with the presence of an editorial staff and theorize about the nature of *citizen gatekeepers*, but do not observe that labor directly. Future “newsroom” ethnographies of CJ endeavors ought to focus particularly on the work of editors. Furthermore, in understanding why CJ sites adopt routine practices, future research ought to consider the influence of foundations. It may well be that CJ sites adhere to journalistic convention in order to appear more legitimate in the quest for grant money.

Despite these shortcomings, this study makes two significant contributions to our sociological understanding of news media in an era where both the power and the labor behind journalistic production are more diffused. First, using the largest and most inclusive sampling frame to date, the sample analyzed here is far more representative than previous studies. Second, this study theorizes and empirically explores the work of editors within CJ. The findings of this study suggest that the presence of an editorial staff is an important dividing line within the field of CJ and that the editorial staff serves the dual functions of offering organizational legitimacy and replicating routines of professionals.

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### **Note**

1. In addition to the dichotomous editorial staff measure, we coded the number of editors at each site. For 8.5% of sites, there was some mention of editors, but it was not clear how many there were. A total of 60% percent had one editor, 22.8% had two to three editors, and 11.4% had

four or more. I conducted several analyses to test whether variation in the number of editors was associated with either site characteristics or content. There was no evidence of any effect due to the number of editors, although, with only 140 CJ sites with editorial staff, these analyses lacked statistical power.

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## Author biography

Andrew M Lindner is assistant professor at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, NY, and Trends Editor of *Contexts*. He teaches courses on mass media, political sociology, and research methods. His primary research interests are in the role of the state, the market, and civil society in structuring journalism.

## Appendix I. Cross-tabulations of independent variables.

	For-profit		Pro-journalist		Political		Community		n
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
For-profit									
Yes			49.6%	28.7%	33.0%	39.5%	38.8%	36.2%	202
No			50.4%	71.3%	67.0%	60.5%	61.2%	63.8%	124
Pro-journalist									
Yes	56.9%	35.1%			28.6%	51.5%	44.8%	40.5%	150
No	43.1%	64.9%			71.4%	48.5%	55.2%	59.5%	176
Political									
Yes	31.9%	38.3%	24.1%	45.7%			19.6%	61.7%	118
No	68.1%	61.7%	75.9%	54.3%			80.4%	38.3%	208
Community									
Yes	62.3%	58.7%	61.7%	57.4%	32.5%	76.1%			198
No	37.7%	40.3%	38.3%	42.6%	67.5%	23.9%			128
Founding year (mean)	2006.48	2006.06	2006.63	2005.87	2004.88	2006.87	2006.77	2005.22	
City size (mean)	77.557	66.231	81.482	62.161	67.173	71.255	60.679	134.392	

All percentages are column percentages.