

Dorothy Elder
ENG-496: Senior Seminar
Dr. Nancy Cardona
Final Thesis

The Social-Media-Based Citizen Journalist: An Examination of Conventions and Ethics

As the reliance on the internet as a means by which we spread information, ideas, and opinions continues to increase, a new type of informant has emerged: the social-media-based citizen journalist. These new, emerging self-proclaimed producers of news are often characterized by the advantageous use of social media platforms to disseminate information, content and their opinions by both borrowing from traditional journalism tactics and pioneering their own. Existing literature has already established how the creation and popularization of the internet has greatly assisted in the emergence of these citizen journalists and has provided a convincing case for how these characters can help give voice to minority and unpopular views, groups, and attitudes previously ignored by the mainstream media. In addition, the literature has spent a great deal of effort grappling with how professional journalists should work, or not work, with more-amateur citizen journalists. Some argue citizen journalists are a great accessory to the mainstream media by providing new-found access and helping popularize stories, while others are wary of the often ideology-driven actor in a world increasingly riddled with misinformation.

However, there is a literature gap regarding the ethics of the citizen journalist. There needs to be a better understanding of the ethical standards of these individuals as they produce “news,” and how closely these standards align with the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics. In order to fill this gap, my study looks at two cases of citizen-run information outlets, and compares their content to the SPJ Code of Ethics. For this study, I will examine Channel

Five, run by Andrew Callaghan, which is an interview-oriented social media show that travels nationally to cover often-unconventional topics, and 209 Times, which was identified in the “Chaos Machine” series of NPR’s invisibilia, which is an independent community driven grassroots news source covering the Stockton, CA, area. By selecting these two cases, I can compare citizen journalist efforts at both the national and local level by examining their content and their adherence to the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics, which is widely regarded and closely followed by professional journalists across the world. While adherence to ethics is a critical component of my research question, I also want to understand the conventions of these citizen-journalists, and how social media aids in their following, news-gathering, and distribution. The alignment with the SPJ Code of Ethics determined from these two case-studies will assist in developing clearer, more-logical, and ethically-rooted answers to how professional journalists should or shouldn’t network with citizen journalists. This paper will provide a review of existing literature on citizen journalism, a postmodern analysis of the citizen journalist’s conventions, audiences, and economic viability, and finally, an ethical analysis of the two mentioned citizen journalism cases.

Literature Review

In order to begin discussing the place of the citizen journalist, it’s critical to understand how the self-proclaimed journalist became a legitimate competitor of the professional journalist. To understand this, a brief overview of the history of the field is necessary. Up until recently, since the nineteenth century, newspapers were the primary means by which most people found out about current events (Adam, 2020). However, with the introduction of broadcast news on television and later, the introduction of the internet, newspaper readership started to decline in the 1980s and 1990s (Adam, 2020; Brown, 2010; Houston, 2010). Household newspaper

readership fell significantly, decreasing from a high of 130 percent (due to households reading multiple newspapers) to 54 percent by 2001 (Adam, 2020). Further, newspapers were largely impacted by the 2008 financial recession, mainly due to the majority of ownership being by companies that were severely impacted by the crisis (Derienzo, 2018; Adam, 2020; Houston, 2010). Simultaneously, the Internet was exploding with content, making it so that when the newspaper industry had mostly recovered, it had a severe loss in audience and readership loyalty (Derienzo, 2018; Houston, 2010). Today, most people throughout the world are accessing news information online, on a twenty-four hour news cycle (Adam, 2020). The shift from the newspaper to the internet has meant that new types of news outlets have emerged, and networks of information have changed (Bock, 2016; Adam, 2020). With this, the growth of blogging platforms, social media, and increased access to cheaper, more portable cameras and phones with the capability to record have allowed citizen journalism to emerge and thrive (Roberts, 2019). As Mary Bock, professional journalist and professor of journalism at UT Austin puts it, “Our national conversation about policing, privacy and electoral campaigns has been influenced by citizen contributions outside what used to be the normal news gatekeeping process” (2016).

Thus, the professional journalism industry has been forced to reckon with what it used to regard as the amateur, hear-sayer, citizen journalist. Many scholars agree on the basic definition of citizen journalists as citizen news collectors that position themselves on the border of the professional journalism field and engage in journalistic practices (Pearce and Rodgers, 2020; Wall, 2019; Monroy-Hernández & Palacios, 2014). There’s also wide agreement that citizen journalism is increasingly spread on social media and therefore, tends to appeal to young people (Wold, 2022; Pearce & Rodgers, 2020; Kuntze, 2019; Bock, 2016).

However, the agreement tends to end there; the extent that citizen journalists actually engage in journalistic practices and their traits are widely debated. Some scholars are optimistic about their traits and practices, saying that the new wave of citizen journalists should be characterized as grassroots organizers and communicators, arguing that citizen journalists work to re-control the mainstream narrative of events, ensuring that their take on the narrative is activist-generated and activist supportive (Pearce & Rodgers, 2020). Others, such as Em Kuntze, a contributor to the World Association of News Publishers, strays from characterizing them, but at least agrees that if the professional news industry ignores the citizen journalist, they are potentially ignoring valuable information (2019). The same goes for media scholar Leah Lievrouw, who instead of characterizing the citizen journalist itself, characterizes the trend of what she labels “participatory journalism” in a cultural context, stating that it often uses the practices and ethics of conventional news to report on stories neglected by mainstream media, and by doing so often highlights previously-marginalized and sometimes unpopular groups and ideas (2012).

Some, however, use Lievrouw’s idea of participatory journalism for why citizen journalism shouldn’t be classified as journalism at all, given that it produces content mainly driven by ideology rather than traditional news-worthy standards (Wold, 2022). This idea would be a bit more valid if it weren’t for scholars like Matthew Pressman, who in his book, *On Press: The Liberal Values That Shaped the News*, highlights that mainstream news wasn’t objective until there was an economic rationale to be (in order to appeal to a large amount of readers), and following the divisive “Trump era” political shift, more professional news organizations have abandoned their strict commitment to objectivity, anyway (2018).

This gets at the first benefit of citizen journalism that some scholars recognize: due to its more ideology-driven approach, it appeals to a more post-modern, objective-truth-questioning reader (Pressman, 2018; Lievrouw, 2012). Voices within this debate recognize that there is a general frustration among these readers regarding topics important to them being ignored by the mainstream media, relative to race, social issues and groups, political beliefs, and other minority or unpopular ideas, and citizen journalists possess the unique ability to focus their content on these topics (Wold, 2022; Pearce & Rodgers, 2020; Kuntze, 2019; Lievrouw, 2012). Some argue that by making news production a collaborative process, citizen journalism can actually boost civic engagement in public discourse and give more power to ordinary people (Wold, 2022). Others agree that there's benefit to the potential of a collaborative process, but instead focus on the potential of mainstream media producing the facts around an issue, and citizen media ensuring popularity and continuity of the public's attention on the issue by more-regularly covering it (Pearce & Rodgers, 2020; Monroy-Hernández & Palacios, 2014).

Another benefit is often brought up in the context of protest-coverage, which is that citizen journalists possess unique speed and access to spread important, on-the-scene footage and information that can help other protestors organize or mainstream media with their narration of events (Pearce & Rodgers, 2020). It can also help in areas of political instability with limited access that prevents coverage by the mainstream media. In their study of Blog del Narco, a citizen-run blog in Mexico covering cartels, scholars Andrés Monroy-Hernández and Luis Daniel Palacios discuss the strengths of the blog's existence, highlighting that many professional journalists have ceased to cover cartel issues due to threats or actual acts of violence by the cartels for publishing information about them (2014).

While Monroy-Hernández and Palacios applaud the blog for its much-needed coverage, they also get at some of the downfalls of citizen journalism that many other scholars agree with. Their primary concern is that the blog favored speed and speculation over accuracy, in-line with other hesitations about the practice of citizen journalism (Monroy-Hernández & Palacios, 2014; Roberts, 2019; Pearce & Rodgers, 2020). Monroy-Hernández and Palacios also point out that the blog that they studied often posted sensitive information that traditional media would stray from due to ethical standards (2014). In their study of protest reporting by citizen journalists, Susan Pearce and Jaylen Rodgers had similar concerns about ethics; they found that mainstream reporters occasionally had to counter or dismiss reports from citizen journalists due to lack of verification (2020). A 2019 analysis on adherence to ethics by citizen journalists on social media by media scholar Jessica Roberts concluded with similar concerns; it found that social media sites offer very little incentive for citizen journalists to maintain ethical news-gathering processes and share information in an ethical, accurate way, and the content they produce often reflects this.

Emergence, Platforms, and the Economic Viability of Citizen Journalists

The first task of this paper must examine the mechanisms that currently exist in the digital realm that enable these new forms of journalism to emerge. To start, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's "A Propaganda Model" is an useful text to consider in this debate because it is focussed on why traditional news is so likely to enhance and perpetuate the messages of the dominant culture, and therefore, we can use it to see the gaps that the the digital age has provided that create opportunities for new forms of journalism to emerge (1984). Herman and Chomsky break down the process by which the dominant culture infiltrates the media through five "filters." The first filter is crucial to our discussion of emergent forms of journalism, which they

called “Size, Ownership, and Profit Orientation of the Mass Media.” Within this filter, the authors discuss how the industrialization of the press made it so that in order to make producing media “worth it,” news organizations had to appeal to large audiences, quashing non-dominant media. This makes sense: the literal production of news, that is, the printing and distribution of print-journalism became costly.

This phenomenon allowed few news organizations to survive and the survivors emerged as media giants, who began to resemble corporations. Advertising and gaining large audiences became the primary task of these media giants; these tasks gained importance with pressure from the market, debt increase, and loss of autonomy due to stakeholders and powerful corporate advertisers (Chomsky & Herman, 1984). This notion also meant a departure from the task to appeal to niche audiences. A professor of journalism at Seton Hall University writes:

Although some people think objectivity is the press’ natural mode, for most of American history newspapers were proudly partisan. Not until the 1920s did objectivity catch on as a professional ideal. A wave of newspaper mergers and closings (which would continue for the rest of the century) meant each city had fewer papers, and the surviving papers had to appeal to a broader swath of the public. Overt partisanship in the news pages would alienate large parts of the target audience (Pressman, 2018).

However, with the emergence of social media and other digital platforms, those traditional costs saw a significant decrease and the economic rationale for appearing objective and pitching stories that were sure to appeal to the majority of Americans’ interests started to rapidly decline (Pressman, 2018). Now, journalists just need themselves, an iPhone or similar smartphone, and a social media account to produce their content.

This is sort-of how 209 Times started; in 2016, Motecuzoma Sanchez started the outlet via an online blog that used Facebook to boost its content to residents of Stockton, CA (where the outlet is based and the area that it covers), completely by himself. It was only after he'd gained a significant following from the community that he eventually moved over to a website and expanded to Instagram, and hired a few people to help him produce and filter content (209Times, 2022).

Similarly, but taking a different approach to content, Andrew Callaghan, the creator behind Channel Five, was only 22-years-old when he first set out in a beaten up RV with a distinct mission: to make a space for himself and the stories he wanted to tell in the journalism industry. A graduate of Loyola University's journalism program, he was put-off by the traditional, old-fashioned way of practicing journalism, he said in a Vice documentary (Nadler, 2020). Ironically, in the same documentary he told stories of his pitches being rejected by Vice and other similar news platforms. Frustrated, he began making his own "news," in a Borat-style ill-fitting suit and old-school microphone, traveling around the country to document events such as a Flat-earthers convention, the Midwest Furfest (a convention for furies), a Bigfoot hunt, and many other events that are seen as being places for Americans on the cultural fringe. Gaining popularity, Callaghan soon started documenting events focussed on the current political polarization of the country, gaining momentum as he went into the streets and talked to people at a Proud Boys rally, the Black Lives Matter protest in Portland, a Border Security Expo, and a Donald Trump Jr. Book Club. The critical element of all of his episodes is that Callaghan focusses on elements and opinions not covered by the mainstream media. Journalist Alex Katrowitz writes about Callaghan, "What comes out is an illuminating look into the soul of the country. It's not pretty. But if we want to fix our society's problems, it's worth our attention."

The ease of creating content doesn't directly translate to making money, but it does mean that the start-up costs are nearly completely diminished (especially compared to the cost of printing, say, your first newspaper, which would include fees pertaining to employment, licensing, printing, and distribution.) Once digital creators create their platform, they have several options for monetizing their content, and they aren't necessarily contingent on exclusive loyalty to the platform (in the way that the New York Times is, because they have to count on paid subscriptions) but rather views (Perelli, 2021).

One method that creators like Callaghan rely on are programs like the Youtube Partner Program. According to Youtube's policy, to start earning money directly from YouTube, creators must have at least 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 watch hours in the past year. Once creators reach that threshold, they can apply for YouTube's Partner Program, which allows creators to start monetizing their channels through ads, subscriptions, and channel memberships. Most creators make the majority of their revenue from advertisements, similar to the traditional system mentioned by Herman and Chomsky (Perelli, 2021). However, the relationship between advertisers and creators differs completely from the traditional nature: Youtube is the "broker," meaning that Youtube places advertisements on videos, based on "context like the video's metadata," according to their stated policy. This means that creators are significantly less beholden to the interests of the corporation behind the advertisement and often have no relationship at all. Further, if creators *do* want a relationship with their advertisers (to make a more guaranteeable income), they can qualify for Youtube's partner-sold ad program, which means the creators work directly with advertisers to serve ads on content they own. This can help significantly if their content is deemed "not advertiser friendly," and grants additional flexibility in the content's ability to make money.

Other social media platforms offer similar ways to make money. For example, when Instagram launched its “Reels” program, it needed to create incentives for creators to move their content onto the platform. To create this incentive, Instagram began offering popular creators up to \$10,000 dollars a month to post “reels” (Perez, 2021). Similarly, when Snapchat launched its “Spotlight” program, it offered prizes for challenges on the platform that ranged in monetary awards from \$1,000 to \$25,000 (Perez, 2021). This illustrates an important shift in media that is pivotal to the discussion of how new forms of social-media based journalism are able to emerge: Social media companies are becoming the new media giants, and they have every reason to attract partisan, alternative, and opinionated forms of content. To these media giants, there’s a new economic rationale for housing content that isn’t seen as objective: they can begin to guarantee a large audience for their company, as an eclectic range of views, opinions, and interests are represented on their site. For audience members, this is attractive because they can likely find accounts that are aligned with their identity. For social-media based journalists, this is attractive because there’s an existing, massive audience that is likely to contain people aligned with their content that will be able to find and follow their news.

Once creators have a significant following on these social media sites, they can expand to sites like Patreon, which allow creators to charge their followers for monthly subscriptions and unlock exclusive content. Callaghan followed this method, starting on Youtube and later posting unseen footage to his Patreon, which viewers can subscribe to starting at \$5/month. As of April 2021, his Patreon had 1,500 subscribers (Weiss, 2021), which is limited in comparison to his 403,000 Instagram followers and 1.4 million Youtube subscribers, but still generates a reliable monthly income independent from the influence referred to in “A Propaganda Model.” Collectively, this new nature of profit signifies that social-media based journalists no longer need

to worry about appealing to a mass-audience, and therefore, journalists like Callaghan can focus content on non-dominant culture and gain a more niche audience.

Audience and Citizen Journalism

Thus far, this paper has established how these new forms of journalism are able to emerge, which has been largely attributed to the economic rationale of news-making and the characteristics of new, emerging media giants such as Youtube, Instagram, Snapchat, and Tik Tok. Next, we must grapple with *why* audience members are attracted to this type of social-media based journalism, and answers are provided in an analysis of attitudes of postmodernism.

Most generally, postmodernism has brought with it an adherence to non-dominant culture, making it possible for creators like Callaghan to count on gaining and appealing to new people daily. Chomsky and Herman's third filter, entitled "Sourcing" leaned on the argument that news organizations often have to rely on information provided by "authorized knowers of society" such as experts, public officials, and highly-regarded business owners, for the purposes of coming off as accurate. However, the postmodern rebellion against these people, who are often seen by young Americans as dishonest and corrupt, has opened up new sourcing opportunities for emergent forms of journalism. Now, young people may see an unedited opinion by, for example, a flat-earther as a more reliable look into conspiracy theories than an expert's opinion because it feels like a more real, honest, and first-hand portrayal of conspiracy theorists. To his audience, it may feel like Callaghan is granting them an element of autonomy by trusting them to discern fact from fiction. It provides power to the viewer that they cannot find in mainstream media, and therefore appeals to the postmodern way of thought that is characterized by skepticism.

This idea is further supported by the Harvard University Press-published book, *On Press: The Liberal Values That Shaped the News*, in which the author notes the betrayal of the value of objectivity and the “authorized knowers of society” referred to by Herman and Chomsky that took place during the Trump presidency. “His rise has caused some journalists to question objectivity’s usefulness as a professional ideal more insistently than at any time since the 1970s. They say that the brazenness with which President Trump and his surrogates either lie or mislead people, and the challenge they present to the very notion of objective truth, call for a different approach to reporting. In their view, a commitment not to take sides leads journalists to merely parrot obfuscations and allows Trump to set the news agenda, thus “normalizing” a situation that is anything but” (Pressman, 2018). This abandonment of objectivity by the masses demonstrates the skepticism that postmodernism relies on, and may provide answers to why social-media based journalism is becoming so attractive to younger audience members who have yet to experience a form of objectivity that, all things considered, really feels objective.

209 Times is often characterized by provocative, clearly ideological claims about politicians, bills, and city council candidates shoved between normal-looking news of crime, missing persons, car accidents and road delays, and events in Stockton. In addition to the news and the occasional blatant opinion, it can be seen acting as a sort of “community watchdog,” posting about suspicious men that people should keep their children away from, places that have been unsafe lately, and even reposting missing dog and cat posters. In this way, 209 Times is abandoning objectivity and replacing it with the guise of being a trusted community member, differentiating itself from the mainstream media by reposting from other community members, being upfront about ideology, and putting a larger emphasis on covering the crime and chaos of Stockton. It takes the stance of being “one of the community members,” priding itself on its

grassroot-style (209 Times, 2022). Through this, we can see how this type of outlet might be attractive to the post-modern audience member who sees objectivity less as being impartial and more as being “raw” and “unfiltered.”

The first major theory of postmodernism was found in Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, in which Lyotard defined postmodernism as an “incredulity towards meta-narratives.” In other words, postmodernism is a reaction to the modernist thinking that created totalizing conceptions of truth, such as facism promising a better world if there was more space for superior ethnic groups or socialism promising a better world if the structures of class were dissolved and more power was granted to the working class. These modern theories had time to make their case, Lyotard posits, and following the end of the second world war, where many atrocities were revealed as a result of these meta-narratives, citizens became more skeptical of absolute truths. Lyotard’s idea has certainly gained momentum in America as more and more cases have revealed government dishonesty and abuse, along with corporate-level lies being exposed and seeping into the minds of American citizens. Therefore, in consideration of the mainstream media’s entanglement with corporations and the government, young people might be less-inclined to want to listen and believe their narratives of events.

Further, the multi-dimensional and sometimes ugly array of opinions portrayed on platforms like Callaghan’s might bring comfort and confirmation to young people that Callaghan’s news channel is independent of the government and corporations. Callaghan’s videos come across as unfiltered, honest, and often contradicting, in contrast to the neatly-packaged portrayal of events that can be found in a New York Time’s story. The latter is much less similar to the everyday experience of interactions with others, which might lead to a weaker appeal to young people. Callaghan’s news directly caters to the skepticism that Lyotard

based his theory of postmodernism off of, and gets to the idea that the mainstream is often missing elements of American life that exist. “Callaghan mostly interviews people on the outskirts of U.S. life, though the fringe tends to be mainstream in this country today. As people speak with him — unfiltered, uninterrupted, and at length — a sense of emptiness pervades... Traditional institutions that once provided purpose and kinship are falling, and the fringe is filling the void” (Kantrowitz, 2020).

Media scholar Leah Lievrouw furthers the conversation with her thoughts on how postmodernism has gone on to influence content found on the internet through her conception of new media (2012). Lievrouw suggests that the digital age has allowed new forms of media to stand amongst the mass market machine that Herman and Chomsky based their ideas off of. These new forms of media can sometimes be categorized as “alternative” or “activist” forms of media, which she defines as media that employs or modifies communication artifacts, practices, and social arrangements of new information and communication technologies to challenge or alter the dominant ways of society, culture, and politics.

Callaghan can be seen doing this: he takes the traditional form of man-on-the-street reporting, characterized by a single reporter and a microphone, followed by a camera crew, and transforms the practice by choosing to cover topics that are commonly ignored by the mainstream media. Lievrouw argues that within these forms of new media, there are five genres: culture jamming, alternative computing, participatory journalism, mediated mobilization, and common knowledge. Social-media-based forms of journalism practice many of these, signifying that they are part of this new wave of postmodern media. Lievrouw defines culture jamming as “the act of borrowing, commenting on, and subverting elements of popular culture.” Callaghan participates in culture jamming by commenting on current events and debates through his

depiction of certain events, interviews, and his own packaging of it. He does this both by literally borrowing from and subverting traditional styles of news (he now travels and reports out of a news-style van) and by basing the content of his videos out of “hot topics” in popular culture, like debates around race, gender, and identity.

In addition, Channel Five and 209 Times, but also every other form of social-media-based journalism, most clearly participates in the third genre, participatory journalism. Lievrouw defines this genre as, “Using the practices and ethics of conventional news to report on stories neglected by mainstream media.” Lievrouw argues that participatory journalists, “critique the traditions and prerogatives of establishment journalism and the press (so-called ‘mainstream media’), particularly the mainstream’s marginalization or exclusion of local, minority, unpopular, or fringe communities, issues, and views.” With this, we can begin to understand the lure of these alternative news platforms, given the postmodernist open-interpretation view of the world: many audience members, at this point, crave to see it all. They are becoming increasingly unattracted to the objective, dry portrayal of events by the mainstream news, and have begun turning their heads towards these emergent forms of journalism in an attempt to decipher events and people themselves.

Ethical Analysis

So far, this paper has laid out the means by which citizen journalists are able to emerge, profit, and maintain and appeal to an audience. As this paper has established that these social media accounts are gaining and maintaining attention from a mass audience, it is key to analyze the level of ethics followed by both Channel Five and 209 Times. Only after conclusions are made in this realm is it reasonable to start discussing the future of social-media-based citizen journalists, particularly when examining the impact that their presence might have on their

audience and dominant culture and the extent to which professional journalists should collaborate with citizen journalists.

In order to do so, I will use the code of ethics provided by the Society of Professional Journalists. First developed from the code established by the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1926, the Society of Professional Journalists later adapted that code and created the existing one in 1973 (“SPJ Code of Ethics,” 2014). Since then, the code has been edited and amended four times, with the most recent being in 2014. According to its stated mission, the code “is a statement of abiding principles supported by additional explanations and position papers that address changing journalistic practices. It is not a set of rules, rather a guide that encourages all who engage in journalism to take responsibility for the information they provide, regardless of medium” (“SPJ Code of Ethics,” 2014). The code has four guiding principles, from which I will base my ethical analysis. Those principles are (1) Seek Truth and Report it, (2) Minimize Harm, (3) Act Independently, (4) Be Accountable and Transparent.

Each of these principles have guiding statements that help establish actions that journalists should or should not in order to adhere to the principles. In order to most effectively compare and contrast Channel Five and 209 Times, we will calculate “ethical scores” for each citizen news outlet. These numbers will be determined by distributing up to two points for every guiding statement, within a principle, that can be observed on their networks. Zero points are given if the outlet is seen never following the guiding statement, one point is given if the outlet is seen following the guiding statement sometimes, and two points are given if the news outlet is seen following the guiding statement frequently. Totals will then be calculated within each principle, along with an overall total. For example, the first principle, Seek Truth and Report it,

has 18 accompanying guiding statements, so each news outlet would, without omission of statements (to be discussed later), be capable of gaining 36 points ($18 \times 2 = 36$).

This analysis considers forty of the most recent Instagram posts from each account. The majority of the analysis took place on or before April 8, 2022, and therefore the content taken into consideration was posted no later than that date. For the Channel Five posts, the date range of content considered in this analysis was from January 15 to March 31. For the 209 Times posts, the range is from April 2 to April 8. This analysis considered the photo(s) and/or the video(s) in the post, the caption of the post, and any comments from the account that replied to viewers within the post.

There are some obvious limits to this type of analysis. Primarily, some of the guiding statements aren't observable by the audience, and they apply more to interactions that happen "behind the scenes" of the content that the audience can see. If that's the case, the guiding statement will be omitted for both outlets. This pertains to situations where it can be determined in one news outlet but not the other, as well, so that results are not skewed. In other words, only statements that can be determined in both outlets will be counted toward their final ethical score. For the purpose of this analysis, I will consider both outlet's Instagram accounts and not take into consideration their actions on other platforms in order to simplify my approach. Finally, I recognize that some of the determinations for whether or not a news outlet should get a point will be inevitably subjective; it is not my intention to make a wholly-accurate determination of ethics at this point in my research. Rather, the scoring will provide a useful basis for discussion and a tangible number for comparison. For the complete ethical analysis table, see the appendix.

Discussion

I will begin my discussion at the bottom of the table, as that is where the most commonalities occur between the two outlets. For both 209 Times and Channel Five, the lowest score was in “Be Accountable and Transparent,” with both outlets scoring a zero percent. Both showed no explanations for ethical decisions, no indication that they were responding to questions regarding clarity or accuracy, and showed no acknowledgement of previous mistakes or corrections. This finding makes sense; citizen journalists do not have the same organizational structure that professional journalists and their employers do. Further, since they are unofficially giving the news, and not recognized by entities like their government (to an official extent) or entities like the Society of Professional Journalists, they have less reason to prioritize accountability. Obviously, this can be a concern when discussing the possible future networking of professional journalists and citizen journalists because if the latter group isn’t prioritizing accountability in their own practice, they could be seen as too-risky of a venture for the professional.

In contrast, the next category, “Act Independently,” was where the biggest difference between scores happened between the two cases. Channel Five scored its highest in this category, after being observed as limiting advertising to self-advertising, avoiding special treatment to advertisers or other entangled entities, and avoiding conflicts of interest. However, the ideologically-driven 209 Times took a large hit in this category, mainly due to its continued politically-slanted posts either boosting or bashing local Stockton politicians. I think that a large reason for these scores can be partially attributed to the difference in scope between the two outlets. For a local, community-focussed citizen news source like 209 Times, it may be much harder to remain independent when you are constantly making connections and covering a fixed

topic. On the other hand, Channel Five more-often follows trends, different rallies, and odd events, with no exact rhyme or reason to its coverage other than the topic being out of the mainstream. In this way, it covers what it pleases and doesn't adhere to a specific ideology that would increase its likelihood to become slanted.

Similarly, Channel Five scored higher than 209 Times in the "minimize harm," but with less of a gap, with Channel Five scoring 5 out of the 12 points and 209 Times scoring 3. Again, 209 Times's lack of points in this category mostly reflects its adherence to its right ideology, and the often provocative, inflammatory posts it makes against politicians and candidates that contrast that ideology. In addition, its heavy focus on crime, with regular posts showing suspects, describing crime in detail, and releasing sometimes violent footage, ultimately negatively impacted the account in this category. Predominantly, the SPJ specifically warns journalists against using the names of suspects before they are proven guilty, which there is no adherence to on the 209 Times Instagram page. It did, however, gain a point for its tendency to give updates on stories, like in a case where it posts a crime and suspect, and later the verdict of the crime. Channel Five, on the other hand, lost points in this regard, as it very seldom follows up on stories or people in the stories. Often producing viral content, this account lost points for its tendency to post private citizens. Some videos of private citizens on the account have thousands of views, and while the account is usually interviewing them, which somewhat-implies that the individual is consenting to it, sometimes the content can be considered embarrassing, unprofessional, and generally unfavorable for the private citizen. In contrast to 209 Times, Channel Five strays completely from covering crimes or violence (at least, directly, but there are sometimes mentions of it), which is why it scored so highly in not naming suspects.

Interestingly, the only category in which 209 Times scored higher than Channel Five was in the “Seek Truth and Report it” category, where 209 Times beat out Channel Five by a single point, with 9 and 10 out of 30 points, respectively. Channel Five scored high in the categories that asked journalists to “give voice to the voiceless,” cover diverse content, and support a variety of views, given that its entire platform is dedicated to covering non-mainstream content, people, and opinions. However, it lost major points in the realm of accuracy, attribution, source-sharing, labeling content, and balance. It seems that Channel Five has used the format and feel of its platform—silly, strange, and sometimes satirical—to excuse its adherence to any of the typical “professional news” practices. It’s blatantly uninterested in fact-checking, often posting people rambling about Q-Anon, flat earth theories, etc. with no content contrasting it for accuracy purposes. The channel itself isn’t posting the theory, though, but rather posting a video of the individual sharing the theory, and there are very few comments from the audience indicating that these views are taken seriously by the audience. In this way, perhaps the channel deserves to score higher in this realm, but it seemed best to stick with the most literal interpretation of the guiding statements. 209 Times scored its points by scoring many 1s, meaning that it was better, in general, at adhering to the standards of professional journalism but was neither consistent or proper at it. The outlet features a mix of inflammatory, opinionated content and content from police and government officials that is attributed and therefore assumed to be highly accurate, which is why in most cases it scored a one. It was the most consistent at attributions, as it commonly is tagging other accounts, including links, or citing the police department in its post. Unlike Channel Five, it didn’t score very high in the diversity categories, mostly due to its ideological slant and its tendency to stick to crime, police reports, and politics-related content.

Concluding Remarks

In the beginning of this paper, I set out to find answers pertaining to the growing emergence of social-media-based journalism, which is sometimes characterized by elements of humor, absurdity, and a love for the culturally-fringe, like in the case of Channel Five, and sometimes characterized by grassroots, ideological community coverage, like in the case of 209 Times. Through the analysis of platforms, audience, and the economic viability of citizen journalists, I concluded that this emergence can be attributed to a changing economic rationale for producing news, brought about by the digital plane that content creators can now capitalize in, combined with new “media giants,” that have new-found reasoning for housing an eclectic array of opinions, identities, and content on their platforms. With this, the postmodernist departure from meta-narratives, a distrust of objectivity, and a skepticism toward the sources that traditionally occupy the mainstream news, such as experts, politicians, and corporate spokespeople have allowed alternative, citizen-run news to flourish.

The ethical analysis revealed that our two cases, which differed on the basis of scope (national vs. local) and content (culturally-fringe vs. ideologically-driven), both scored fairly low on their adherence to the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, with Channel Five following 32.1% and 209 Times following 25% of the observable guiding statements. Both platforms scored the lowest in areas of transparency and accountability. An interesting contradiction exists here; if modern audiences look to citizen journalists for a less objective, more fluid, and less authoritative source, then alarms should ring at the actual lack of transparency and accountability in these sources. Put simply, it seems that the citizen journalists—at least in this analysis—have mastered the illusion of transparency, producing content that separates themselves from the neatly-packaged stories at traditional news outlets. What

emerges is a feeling that the citizen-produced content is more-localized, honest, and “for the people.” In reality, one of its largest faults is transparency.

It is hard to say which principles of ethics, if any, professional news organizations value over others, and how the scores of Channel Five and 209 Times would impact their view on the citizen-run platforms. We can observe, however, that Channel Five has previously received more positive attention from the mainstream media. It should be noted that both outlets have received mainstream media attention, with 209 Times being the center of the multi-episode series on NPR’s *Invisibilia* called “Chaos Machine.” However, the coverage was largely negative and it was clear that NPR did not view the source as legitimate, and was more using the outlet as an opportunity to dig into and explore citizen-run media and its potential ramifications. On the other hand, Channel Five and its creator Andrew Callaghan have received overwhelmingly positive coverage with headlines like, “The genius of Channel 5’s ‘Q Conference’” by the *Michigan Daily*, “Documenting America’s Underbelly,” by *Vice*, and “He Had an R.V., a Camera and a Plan to Document America. Was That Enough?” by the *New York Times*, to name a few.

So, what differentiates the two? Why is Channel Five hailed by the mainstream and 209 Times used as an example of the flaws of citizen journalism by the mainstream? Namely, adherence to ideology. As mentioned in the discussion of the ethical analysis, 209 Times, more than anything else, lost points for its ideological slant, with its frequent politically-charged, right-slanted posts that often poked fun at and created bad press for democratic politicians, candidates, and policies. Perhaps, in the age of hyper-politicalization, where the nation is highly polarized, a clearly-slanted citizen journalism page is a risk many mainstream news organizations are not willing to take. Further, mainstream news organizations may be more willing to look past a page like Channel Five’s, which lacks professional journalism practices

such as attribution, source-sharing, labeling content, and balance but provides content considered lucrative, culturally-fringe, and audience retentive. In this regard, it's also true that Channel Five offers more original content than 209 Times, which is predominantly posting crime and opinions.

Overall, the future of collaborations between professional news and citizen-based journalism will likely depend on the citizen platform's content, slant, with some consideration of adherence to journalism ethics. It seems that, outside of protests, political conflict, and foreign coverage, the mainstream is less interested in a citizen's content and more interested in the citizen's innovation. If, like Callaghan, the citizen is able to invent a new space for themselves on the Internet, change the type of coverage people want to look at, and manage to enter themselves in the rare and elite position of producing regularly-viral content, then they may very well have a future with the mainstream media.

References

- Adam, B. (2020). Decline of Newspapers: An Overview. *Points of View: Decline of Newspapers*, 1–N.PAG.
- Brown, J. (2009, April 20). *Investigative Reporting Hard Hit by Media Cutbacks*. PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/investigative-reporting-hard-hit-by-media-cutbacks>
- Bock, M. (2016, October 19). *The Role of the “Citizen Journalist” in Today’s World is Changing*. UT News, <https://news.utexas.edu/2016/10/19/role-of-the-citizen-journalist-is-changing/>
- Chomsky, N. & Herman E. (2012). *A Propaganda Model*. Media and Cultural Studies Keyworks, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Derienzo, M. (2018). A recession, then a collapse. *NeimanLab*, 2018. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2017/12/a-recession-then-a-collapse/>
- Houston, B. (2010). The future of investigative journalism. *Daedalus*, 139 (2): 45–56. <https://doi.org/10.1162/daed.2010.139.2.45>
- Kantrowitz, A. (2020, Aug. 13). The Brilliance of All Gas No Brakes. *Big Technology*. <https://onezero.medium.com/the-brilliance-of-all-gas-no-brakes-f53fba496800>
- Kuntze, E. (2019, May 14). What are the responsibilities of citizen journalism? *World Association of News Publishers*. <https://wan-ifra.org/2019/05/what-are-the-responsibilities-of-citizen-journalism/>
- Leotard, J. F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Lievrouw, L. A. (2012). *Alternative and Activist New Media: A Genre Framework*. Media and Cultural Studies Keyworks, Wiley-Blackwell.

- Monroy-Hernández, A., & Palacios, L. D. (2014). Blog del Narco and the Future of Citizen Journalism. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 15(2), 81–92.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43773630>
- Nadler, L. (2020). 'All Gas No Brakes' Is Capturing America's Weird Underbelly on an RV Road Trip. VICE.
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/epgjaj/all-gas-no-brakes-is-capturing-americas-weird-underbelly-on-an-rv-road-trip>
- Pearce, S.C. & Rodgers, J. (2020). Social media as public journalism? Protest reporting in the digital era. *Sociology Compass*, 14:e12823. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12823>
- Perelli, A. (2021, Oct. 21) How much money YouTubers make, according to dozens of creators. *Business Insider*;
<https://www.businessinsider.com/how-much-money-youtube-creators-influencers-earn-real-examples-2021-6>
- Perez, S. (2021, Nov. 11). Instagram is offering huge bonuses for posting on Reels, its TikTok clone. *Tech Crunch*. <https://techcrunch.com/2021/11/11/instagram-bonuses-reels-tiktok/>
- Pressman, M. (2018). *On Press: The Liberal Values That Shaped the News*. Harvard University Press.
- Roberts, J. (2019). The erosion of ethics: from citizen journalism to social media, *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society*, Vol. 17 No. 4, pp. 409-421.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JICES-01-2019-0014>
- Shearer, E. (2021, Jan. 12). More than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices.

Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>

Wall, M. (2019). *Citizen journalism: Practices, propaganda, pedagogy*. Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351055703>

Weiss, G. (2021, April 6). Following Split With Doing Things Media, The Creators Behind ‘All Gas No Brakes’ Launch Indie Journalism Venture.” *TubeFilter*.

<https://www.tubefilter.com/2021/04/06/all-gas-no-brakes-split-doing-things-media-new-venture-channel-5/>

Wold, T. (2022). Alternative news on social media in Norway. *Communication & Society*, 35(1), 137–150. <https://doi-org.fortlewis.idm.oclc.org/10.15581/003.35.1.137-150>

209 Times [@209Times]. (n.d.) Posts [Instagram profile]. Retrieved April 10, 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/209times/?hl=en>

Appendix

Table 1: *A comparison of adherence to the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics by Two Citizen Journalist Outlets*

Guiding Statement	209 Times @209times (Instagram)	Channel Five @Channel5 (Instagram)
Take responsibility for the accuracy of their work. Verify information before releasing it. Use original sources whenever possible.	1 -clearing inflammatory opinions are sometimes posted with little regard to accuracy -other posts include verified police reports/ judicial documents	1 -people regularly posted saying conspiracy theories with no verification -original sources almost always used
Remember that neither speed nor format excuses inaccuracy.	0 -uses the story feature to repost stories that 209Times is tagged in; no fact-checking appears to be happening	0 -format seems to excuse all inaccuracy
Provide context. Take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.	1 -Does provide at least a paragraph of context, usually with dates, locations, and names -misrepresentation can be seen	0 -no context provided in most every video on Instagram–caption is almost always a 2-5 word “quote” from video
Gather, update and correct information throughout the life of a news story.	1 -Stories are occasionally updated	0 -No observable corrections or updates
Be cautious when making promises, but keep the promises they make.		
Identify sources clearly. The public is entitled to as much information as possible to judge the reliability and motivations of sources.	1 -Sources are sometimes revealed and other times not.	0 -Source names are seldom given and/or background on the source
Consider sources’ motives		

before promising anonymity. Reserve anonymity for sources who may face danger, retribution or other harm, and have information that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Explain why anonymity was granted.		
Diligently seek subjects of news coverage to allow them to respond to criticism or allegations of wrongdoing.	0 -Purposefully inflammatory news stories (mainly about public officials/ candidates) are often posted with no response opportunity from the individual	0 -All stories are “one source stories,” unless more than one person are in the same interview. Videos are never organized in a claim/respond structure
Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information unless traditional, open methods will not yield information vital to the public.		
Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable. Give voice to the voiceless.	1 -Does attempt to hold public officials accountable, although not evenly	2 -Definitely goes out of way to hear from people on “outskirts” of society
Support the open and civil exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.	0 -Clearly right-leaning ideology; seems unwilling to report on things that do not support this ideology	2 -Welcomes and encourages a variety of views
Recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government. Seek to ensure that the public’s business is conducted in the open, and that public records are open to all.	1 -Does seem to recognize obligation, but again, not evenly among all government officials	0 -Shows no priority toward government/ public affairs beyond eliciting opinions on them.
Provide access to source material when it is relevant and appropriate.	0 -No sign of this	0 -No sign of this.

Boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear.	1 -Content is varied but pretty typical of basic news coverage; crime, missing people, car accidents, and occasional oddities	2 -Again, content features a diverse and varied collection of people, events, and topics.
Avoid stereotyping. Journalists should examine the ways their values and experiences may shape their reporting.	0 -Targeted posts at public officials rely on stereotyping/over-generalizing	1 -Not a lot of interjection happens from the creator, no major stereotyping observed on platform, although sometimes the people shown to represent certain views so align with the societal conception of them
Label advocacy and commentary.	0 -No labeling of any kind	0 -No labeling of any kind
Never deliberately distort facts or context, including visual information. Clearly label illustrations and re-enactments.	1 -Some posts feature very straightforward facts and context while other posts rely on information from screenshots with no extra context	1 -While very little context is given to begin with, there's no sign of distortion.
Never plagiarize. Always attribute.	2 -Pretty consistent attributions– either tags another source, marks as original, or puts police department information	0 -No attributions
Seek Truth and Report it Total (Out of 30)	10 33.3%	9 30%
Balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness.	1 -Does post about uncomfortable topics, but does take actions like blurring out dead bodies, faces of individuals who are not suspects, etc.	1 -While new, unseen views and opinions are shared, some are a bit provocative and could trigger discomfort in audience members.
Show compassion for those	0	1

<p>who may be affected by news coverage. Use heightened sensitivity when dealing with juveniles, victims of sex crimes, and sources or subjects who are inexperienced or unable to give consent. Consider cultural differences in approach and treatment.</p>	<p>-Very vivid descriptions of crimes, along with follow-up coverage</p>	<p>-Tends to avoid topics that are particularly sensitive altogether and does not have any blatantly uncompassionate footage on page. Does occasionally interview juveniles.</p>
<p>Recognize that legal access to information differs from an ethical justification to publish or broadcast.</p>		
<p>Realize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than public figures and others who seek power, influence or attention. Weigh the consequences of publishing or broadcasting personal information.</p>	<p>1 -Tend to publish the greatest amount of personal information about public officials or candidates, although they do post names of suspects</p>	<p>0 -Usually posts people who would be considered “private” with little to no regard for exposing them to their followers.</p>
<p>Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity, even if others do.</p>	<p>0 -Yes, as mentioned before, a good majority of the account posts graphic pictures of car accidents, crime scenes, and occasionally videos of conflict/fights.</p>	<p>1 -Debatable; never covering unnecessary details to crime or violence, but occasionally posting inappropriate/ suggestive/ provocative material</p>
<p>Balance a suspect’s right to a fair trial with the public’s right to know. Consider the implications of identifying criminal suspects before they face legal charges.</p>	<p>0 -No regard for this; posts suspects names and ages on every crime post, occasionally accompanied by more information on them</p>	<p>2 -No suspects shown.</p>
<p>Consider the long-term implications of the extended reach and permanence of publication. Provide updated and more complete information as appropriate.</p>	<p>1 -Some updates given.</p>	<p>0 -No updates given/ sign of awareness of longevity</p>

Minimize Harm Total (Out of 12)	3 25%	5 41.6%
Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived. Disclose unavoidable conflicts.	0 -Clearly posting in favor of politicians on the right (ex: posted a picture of a republican candidate cleaning up graffiti on the streets)	1 -Does seem to cover things Callaghan has no attachment to whatsoever -Callaghan is given special access/ merchandise/ opportunities due to his event coverage, particularly within the hip hop community
Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and avoid political and other outside activities that may compromise integrity or impartiality, or may damage credibility.	0 -See above comment; politically leaning	0 -See above comment
Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; do not pay for access to news. Identify content provided by outside sources, whether paid or not.		
Deny favored treatment to advertisers, donors or any other special interests, and resist internal and external pressure to influence coverage.	1 -Seems to have own agenda in regards to covering the community but does post in favor of political candidates	2 -Occasionally does call-outs from followers to get suggestions on what events to go to, but does not seem to be continually influenced by any specific force
Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Prominently label sponsored content.	0 -Does not label advertisements. Almost the entire story could be labeled as advertisements.	1 -Only advertises merchandise belonging to own channel but does not clearly label it as an advertisement (but it is plainly different from regular format)
Act Independently Total (Out of 8)	1 12.5%	4 50%

Explain ethical choices and processes to audiences. Encourage a civil dialogue with the public about journalistic practices, coverage and news content.	0 -No explanations provided.	0 -No explanations provided.
Respond quickly to questions about accuracy, clarity and fairness.	0 -No direct way to contact or forum where this kind of thing is addressed. No interactions in comment sections.	0 -No direct way to contact or forum where this kind of thing is addressed. No interactions in comment sections.
Acknowledge mistakes and correct them promptly and prominently. Explain corrections and clarifications carefully and clearly.	0 -No acknowledgements or corrections posted on the page.	0 -No acknowledgements or corrections posted on the page.
Expose unethical conduct in journalism, including within their organizations.		
Abide by the same high standards they expect of others.		
Be Accountable and Transparent Total (Out of 6)	0 0%	0 0%
TOTAL OVERALL (Out of 56)	14	18
Total Percentage	25%	32.1%

Key**Seek Truth and Report it****Minimize Harm****Act Independently****Be Accountable and Transparent****Omitted because not observable**