A typology of participants in online news processes

Jéssica Roberts & Linda Steiner
Universidade Católica Portuguesa    University of Maryland
Our goal is to establish a **typology of participants in (online) news processes**, providing...

- clear definitions and characteristics to distinguish among activities and forms
- clarity to the forces that shape the information
- understanding of the roles and obligations of participants
Context
Many terms have been proposed for the [new] role of people who don’t have professional journalism experience but do have tools for recording and sharing news content online:

citizen journalism  participatory journalism

civic journalism  crowd-sourced news

public journalism  produsage

prosumption  user-generated content

peer-to-peer production  open-source journalism

street journalism  guerrilla journalism

networked journalism  hyper-local news
These tools are increasingly (but not perfectly)

- available
- accessible
- easily mastered
- cheap
- integrated in devices we already use
social networking sites
smartphones
embedded high-quality cameras
blogging platforms
streaming technology
open-source software
wireless networks
WYSIWYG platforms
photo-sharing sites
Some terms are used interchangeably, but refer to processes and philosophic positions that are significantly different.

Different terms describe projects that are essentially overlapping, if not the same.

→ Incoherence undermines attempts to theorize the forms and, more importantly, to set standards, assess performance, and make normative judgments about the content.
The Typology
Dimensions

- Degree of institutional oversight/control/gatekeeping
- Degree of openness of creative process
- Level of compensation or commercial motivation
- Strength of mechanisms of accountability
- Amount of professional experience or formal education required
Dimensions

- Level of commitment to ethics
- Diversity of perspectives reflected
- Complexity of contribution across range of activities/Thickness (v thinness) of information
- Transparency of authorship to audience
- Willingness to trust/work with professional news
Categories

- Student journalists
- Participants in public journalism projects
- Citizen journalists
  - Individuals
  - Group projects
  - Accidental eyewitnesses
- Participants in crowdsourcing projects
- Public affairs commentators
  - Monetized (entrepreneurs, influencers)
  - Not monetized (casual social media users)
We mean here:

- **Student journalists**—not yet professional journos, getting formal education, especially in “teaching hospital model”

- **Public journalism**—professional journalists’ efforts’ to benefit civic life/democracy by consulting with citizens about issues/problems/topics of greatest concern, get feedback over time, and then get their commentary

- **Hobbyists**—citizens who produce blogs, podcasts they consider of public/greater interest, because of passion or interest in the subject; this is for “fun” or “recreation”
Citizen journalists

“The people formerly known as the audience are those who were on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another— and who today are not in a situation like that at all” (Jay Rosen)

Sub-categories:

○ Individuals--who produce local news on own online space
○ CJ groups--large or small, but with formal structures and organization
○ One-off eyewitnesses--who share (sometimes sell) accounts, video, or sounds of dramatic breaking news
• **Crowdsourcing participants**—volunteers recruited by professional organization to gather and/or interpret large bodies of data/evidence

• **Public affairs commentators (not monetized)**—citizens who use Twitter, Instagram, Facebook to curate and share news of interest, including that from professional sources

• **Public affairs commentators (monetized)**—entrepreneurs who produce public/news-oriented blogs, podcasts with commercial or monetary goals, and social media influencers who use their status, reputation/image and powers of persuasion to sell products but also produce news content
Who’s ignored here?

- Professional journalists
- Programmers of computer algorithms
- Trolls

These outliers and exceptions could be placed somewhere on the spectrum of each dimension, but generally prove the rule or establish the standard on which the dimension is based.
Looking at the Dimensions
Degree of institutional oversight/control

Low: Public affairs commentators and citizen journalists act independently, with little to no oversight

- Social media influencers are subject to some regulation by FTC

High: Student journalists and participants in public journalism projects are guided by editors, supervisors, and their contributions are vetted before publication

- Crowdsourcing participants contribute to projects that are overseen, but their individual contributions may not be
- Members of group citizen journalism projects monitor each other
Level of commitment to ethics

High: Student journalists are presumably offered some instruction in journalistic ethics

Low: All others make no particular commitment to a code of ethics. This doesn’t mean they don’t have ethics codes--in fact, they may be guided by a strong sense of ethics--but it means we don’t necessarily know what kind of ethics they are guided by. Social media influencers are governed by FTC regulations, a minimal level of commitment to disclosure.
Amount of experience/education required

Low: Participants in Public Journalism projects need bring no particular skills or education to the project, social media users similarly need little experience or education

Crowd-sourcing, citizen journalism, and public affairs commentators may need a slightly higher level of digital media literacy to participate effectively

High: Social Media Influencers, in order to be effective, need a relatively high level of digital and social literacy

Student journalists do not need a great deal of training or education, but receive it while participating
Transparency of authorship to audience

Low: Crowdsourced participants may remain largely anonymous

High: Student journalists’ authorship is clearly communicated to audience

Others in the middle can vary considerably: identities may be confirmed by social media sites (as with Twitter’s blue checkmark), but for many citizen journalists, and public affairs commentators, there is a wide range of practices that run from assumed characters or even anonymous accounts to fully identified authors. Some depend on the medium in which the contribution is ultimately published/broadcast/distributed.
Conclusions
As we interact with news and information online, we face a dizzying amount of content created by a wide variety of sources.
A typology can help us avoid overly simplistic distinctions made solely on the basis of job titles.
This typology attempts to provide the nuanced perspective needed to navigate the contemporary media environment with its increasingly contested information. Scholars may—and we hope they will—use the dimensions to distinguish between and assess the practices and contributions of participants. The categories and their associated dimensions is that they can be applied to a particular piece of news and the participants who created it, either alone or in concert with others.
Information from non-professional participants represents intersection of many dimensions that do not consistently align.

Roles can be fluid, as individual participants may contribute in various ways over time.

While participants’ roles provide no guarantee about the quality, reliability or validity of the information provided, it may be helpful in understanding that information.
From a media literacy perspective, this typology provides some heuristics for news/information audiences to determine what kinds of questions to ask about the motivations, background, and access of the people creating information.

Professional journalists, participants of various kinds, and non-participating audiences for this information should all avoid knee-jerk assumptions and consider these factors.
As technology and information practices evolve, the typology can be applied to consider where new participants fall in each dimension
Questions, comments, feedback?
Thank you!

contact: jessicaroberts@ucp.pt
        lsteiner@umd.edu