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Wikinews - a safe haven for learning journalism, free of the usual suspects of spin and commercial agendas

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This paper reviews the assignment processes in two 2011 undergraduate subjects in journalism, where Wikinews was used for publishing and assessment. Wikinews was effective for improving student engagement, motivation, quality and reflection, which greatly assisted assessment and moderation. Students were observed engaging in and reflecting on the real-world problems and issues of the profession, with several reporting their higher levels of motivation and understanding. This culminated not only in the publishing of international news stories, but also saw improvements in writing care and quality, drawing from the open source peer review and the publishing processes of Wikinews.

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Abstract

Online distributed and networked voluntary journalism, across all media, is attracting attention as an alternative news service - offering situated, active, learning opportunities for emerging journalists. The internationally oriented journalism site Wikinews is positioned to offer high-quality learning in newswriting; while emphasising ethics, reliability and therefore accuracy. Wikinews also offers opportunities for supported production and learning in the converged media context for original investigative journalism across the print, audio and visual formats.

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The [Fourth E]state of the media

The industry of culture would in the coming decades replace that of ideology, becoming 'primary' in the way that economics used to be, and spawn a whole new nomenclatura of cultural commissars, a new breed of apparatchiks engaged in great ministries of definition, exclusion, revision and persecution, and a dialectic based on the new dualism of defence and offence. And if culture was the world's new secularism, then its new religion was fame, and the industry - or, better, the church - of celebrity would give meaningful work to a new ecclesia, a proselytising mission designed to conquer this new frontier, building its glitzy celluloid vehicles and its cathode-ray rockets, developing new fuels out of gossip, flying the Chosen Ones to the stars (Rushdie 2001).

International news media, particularly newspapers, seem lost as distributed and networked citizen newswriting improves and expands. Excluding media with intense and large readerships, as found in India, mainstream and 'global' news services are losing integrity as they increase their commercial activities in order to maintain economic sustainability. In this process, journalists are replaced with executive staff in accountancy, management and advertising – prompting questions of declining freedom, accuracy, reliability and independence in news. One

consequence is that mainstream news services are increasingly unable to serve their social charter and core function as the Fourth Estate.

The behaviour continually exposed at News International publications in London is testimony enough. By mid March 2012, more than 40 people had been arrested in connection with illegal telephone interceptions, corruption, misconduct in a public office, perverting the course of justice, conspiracy, bribing police officers and aiding and abetting in a public office. 'It was criminal behaviour on an industrial scale,' said Simon Hughes in *The Guardian* in response to settling his phone-hacking claim (*The Guardian*, 2012). News Corporation's British subsidiary, News International, covered up, lied, and paid bribes to conceal unethical and criminal behaviour at the *News of the World* and *The Sun*. The practice of investigating corruption, with 'private investigators' hacking computer networks of supposedly corrupt parties, first developed at *News of the World*. This, however, grew into a culture where journalists routinely pursued and investigated soft and more commercially rewarding news of celebrities and their private peccadilloes across more than eight hundred cases. Later, it was revealed, that even police officers were being paid to provide salacious information. First arrested and later jailed in 2007, *News of the World* royal editor Clive Goodman and private investigator Glenn Mulcaire were illegally intercepting voicemail messages of the aides to three Princes: William, Harry and Charles.

In 2011 it was revealed that a private detective working for the *News Of The World* hacked the mobile phone of murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler. Later that year, 31-year-old Bethany Usher was arrested by detectives, in their investigation of other cases of phone hacking by the media. She was the seventeenth arrest and is a former *News of the World* reporter. She was briefly held on suspicion of conspiracy to intercept voicemail messages, contrary to the Criminal Law Act 1977. Usher was not charged but practices that indicate a culture of lawbreaking, to which she may have become habitually accustomed, continue to be revealed. She was named UK Young Journalist of the Year in 2003 and by the close of 2011 she was a senior lecturer in journalism at Teesside University. Rebekah Brooks is central to many questions about the relationship between the police and the press and in May 2012 she was charged over allegations that she, and six associates, impeded a criminal investigation into phone hacking. Earlier in March this year she was rearrested by detectives from Operation Weeting on suspicion of perverting the course of justice. She was editor of the *News Of The World* and *The Sun* prior to being appointed chief executive of News International in 2009. This phone-hacking scandal initiated the Leveson Inquiry into media ethics. Witnesses before the inquiry testified that the culture of corrupt practice in *News of the World* also existed at *The Sun* newspaper. By February 29, 2012, the inquiry heard that while Brooks was editor at *The Sun*, her own work telephone was hacked twice a week by her former *News of the World* colleagues.

These cases highlight a common factor in mainstream journalism: the increasing use of unreliable, even tarnished, source material. Best practice journalism is accepted as having two or three sources in a story, which are verified and independent of each other (triangulation). Despite this understanding, there is evidence around the world of increasing reliance on press release material, news agency feeds from affiliated overseas newspapers, blogging and other sources (OECD 2010). Also increasingly evident are paid contributions, but reliable research data on this is scarce. The Australian Press Council's *State of the News Print Media in Australia 2008* demonstrated how blogging on newspaper sites, by external contributors as well as by employed journalists, has increased rapidly (Australian Press Council 2007, 2008).

Independent and collaborative journalism

Rebillard and Touboul identified networked 'citizen' news sites as the 'productive autonomy of individuals' that brings 'egalitarian decentralisation'. They argue that this is due to the open content networks on which such journalism thrives. Evidence for this is found in the many press articles dealing with the Web 2.0 phenomenon. Users of participatory websites like YouTube and Vimeo are also providing open source content as visible evidence. Social media now brings to journalism new capabilities in sourcing and uploading material, and in 'crowdsourcing', a particularly powerful new research method for investigative journalism (Crowdsourcing 2011). However the revolutionary promises of 'Journalism 2.0', with optimistic horizontal egalitarianism in social networks, has not put journalists and Internet users on the same level (Rebillard and Touboul 2010). While theorists and advocates of 'Journalism 2.0' enthuse about user-generated content, there remains the complex question of just how the territory might be shared with mainstream news agencies. Instead, there remains a culture-resistant firewall between the networked sites and the mainstream, with an 'old school' journalism perception of citizen journalism as amateur and lacking the refinements of 'the profession'.

Complicating this problem is that some citizen journalism sites have the same economic and cultural dysfunction as typical of the mainstream. Large corporations are buying up websites based around the sharing of social media content. For instance, Google acquired Blogger.com in 2003 and the video sharing website YouTube in 2006. Although these websites remain free access, privacy concerns, advertising and stricter copyright controls prevail. YouTube now runs advertising before selected content is screened. In many instances, popular content is taken offline if it offends larger publisher's copyright. Early in 2012, a simple YouTube search under two terms: Blackwater and Syria, yielded around eight citizen sourced videos on the subject. After brief exposure, the clips remained only as thumbnails, the actual video content removed for 'failing to meet the correct protocols'. Mainstream news media speculates on many issues, but rarely does it investigate espionage in the traditions of investigative journalism, as it once did and still does in India (Nazakat 2011). The alternative networked news services, however, run stories on destabilisation in countries like Syria, regularly uploading video on YouTube as visible evidence.

Goode (2009) advocates for a wider understanding of this kind of citizen journalism, saying it is not the sole domain of the online context and is not confined only to non-mainstream news outlets like *Russia Today*, as the Blackwater and Syria Internet search reveals. He makes the case that investigative journalism often occurs outside the usual contexts (online and mainstream) and so is not simply in the 'horizontal or peer-to-peer public sphere of citizen journalism networks'. Goode calls for research that investigates new forms of 'gatekeeping and agenda-setting power within social news and citizen journalism networks'. He calls for research that 'highlights the importance of both formal and informal status differentials and of the software code', in structuring alternative and more democratic modes of news production.

In an analysis of newspaper websites, Rebillard and Touboul (2010) show, that there is a mainstream reluctance to welcome non-established forms of publication. Singer (2005) showed that even though the mainstream adopts new formats such as blogging, professional news media websites tend to favour similar professional sources for citation. Rebillard and Touboul argue mainstream media outlets retain their power over the new methods of social media dissemination. They also conclude that citizen journalists continue to use mainstream news items

for sourcing and citation, therefore continuing to seek legitimacy and, by so doing, reinforce the power of mainstream news corporations. However, as mainstream news corporations continue to fail in accuracy and as social news media grow, with increasing veracity, this trend of citation is shifting in favor of the newly emerging agencies.

In this context, Rebillard and Touboul miss a significant point: that increasingly large numbers of researchers use Wikipedia for news, and to a lesser degree, Twitter. These channels refer to mainstream and voluntary coverage alike. By aggregating the output of a vast number of outlets, volunteers help boost sites like Wikipedia and Wikinews, or channels like Twitter, thus achieving a certain levelling of power - as Goode advocates. Wikipedia commands very large audiences, and with Wikinews gaining a share of that audience by association within the Wikimedia Foundation, balance begins to shift. For the moment, both Wikipedia and Wikinews maintain an acknowledgement of mainstream media through citation policies. While it is unlikely they would change policy and accept more reportage from primary sources, if they did, a flatter more citizen-oriented system would emerge. Currently, Wikipedia allows Wikinews stories to be given prominence in the See Also and External links sections, and Wikinews policy allows careful use of primary sources. Wikipedia and Wikinews, or the volunteers managing them, have a potential opportunity to transfer power as mainstream media outlets continue to be unreliable and continue to collapse.

It has never been so easy for so many people to widely disseminate their opinion (Högerl, 2010). Five hundred and seventy thousand new Twitter accounts per day were created over March 2012 and one billion messages, on an average, are posted per week, making Twitter central to news. Increased participation is one positive effect of this phenomenon and such trends are disruptive to the entrenched power of the mainstream industry. Newspapers and broadcasters have already tried harnessing these forces and the effects are widely discussed (Deuze 2005). Less covered is the impact of citizen journalism on mainstream news agencies. This is an important part of the news ecosystem and citizen contributions to the mainstream news flow should have appropriate award remuneration (Högerl, 2010). Little known to the mainstream is that the *Wikinews'* volunteer formal review process is tight and accountable, with checking and peer review of standards – standards to which the mainstream news generally no longer adheres. Similar to *The Economist*, *Wikinews* contributors are permitted to write anonymously, in joint contributions, which are heavily reviewed to a standard far higher than a self-published blog (Thorsen, 2008) (Bruns, 2005). Veracity checks by *Wikinews* reviewers ensure at least two independently verified sources for every news point made in a story. *Wikinews* has no commercial imperative over the work. Qualified reviewers are experienced volunteers and work on copy as it arrives. *Wikinews* is unique in that review is applied according to strict policies and processes. As with any publication, freedom of expression is limited by the prior restraints arising essentially from law, ethics and news policy.

Pedagogy

Joachim Kimmerle, Johannes Moskaliuk, and Ulrike Cress examine the role of wiki-style software and technology for collaborative learning and teaching, defining it as a form of self-regulated learning that is independent of formal learning settings (Kimmerle et al, 2009). The *Wikinews* website is thorough in design and provides for discussions on ethics around a story while providing links to a range of international codes. This is available to all, including students, learning and preparing to publish news in a wide range of languages. There is great emphasis on

neutrality, fact checking, accuracy and balance, with strict attention to sourcing. The pedagogical value here is that student-volunteer-networked journalists are able to, within their rights, consider what it means to be a journalist publishing in a context of restrained 'free speech' (internationally) via on-line citizen journalism. Writing for *Wikinews*, journalism students learn there are rights and responsibilities that go with the journalistic imperative to understand their role within democracy. This includes an understanding and a holding of values that define how journalism contributes to this information flow for democratic functionality as The Fourth Estate. Ideally, a functioning citizen journalist has a range of literacies enabling them to read the media beyond the interests of the elite (Blackall, Lockyer, Harper 2011), and engage with, access, and use a range of journalistic perspectives. For student journalists, this should help to build credentials required by employers. Poor journalism obfuscates crucial information for citizens and voters, so threatening democracy. Instead, trusted and effective journalism not only informs and shapes the citizenry, but more critically, it upholds values in justice, fairness and truth (Reece and Blackall, 2007).

Current theories about learning generally assert that education is more effective if situated within a community of practice (Lave and Wegner, 1991), where professional, authentic mentoring and critique are available and observable in the production of quality product (Blackall, Lockyer and Harper 2011). This process is generally considered superior to the traditional classroom simulations, where knowledge is likely to be transferred passively and assessed for evidence of retention. *Wikinews*, an online, networked citizen journalism program based on a working newsroom paradigm, is ideal for these purposes. With an established community of practitioners to guide volunteer journalists through an open review process of production and publication, *Wikinews* arguably presents what many would consider an ideal learning environment. *Wikinews* also provides technologies and opportunities for fact-checking and investigative research through crowdsourcing. If learning is situated, it is therefore not the sole domain of educational institutions, nor is it limited to the relatively isolated teacher and student dynamic. As learning is likely to be improved in a situated context, in appropriate communities of practice, then what arises is the possibility for different, even improved, values and practices to those common and supported in institutions of education. Learners in this context are engaged with the broader social world in an applied sense. Without this engagement, learning is less effective (Hanks 1991). Implicit, is the assertion that superior learning is situational, networked and open. Such learning serves also to critique mainstream news agencies and educational institutions, as lacking these qualities. Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1971) is a most relevant and cutting of critiques, complete with his proposal for 'learning webs' in the sixth chapter, some 25 years prior to the Internet. Once education is institutionalised and disengaged from the profession it purports to teach, its hidden narrative or curriculum is likely to encourage conformity and to attenuate learning.

As universities throughout the world spend financial resources on software solutions, and their teachers work at developing simulations of practice, it seems obvious that journalism education, in particular, could look to *Wikinews* as a no cost education solution. This would be highly complimentary to the *Wikinews* community, with a boost in volunteers, both in writing news as well as editors and reviewers. Learning the process of *Wikinews* journalism must include theoretical and practical components, as embedded in the experiential learning. Students can develop understandings of the principles of truth, fairness and accountability, much touted by mainstream news services as central 'brand' (Hearns-Branaman, 2011). Students need to be

given situations where they can begin to recognise the values required in the practical decision-making aspects of professional journalism, thus strengthening awareness of their legal obligations and public duty in the process of writing accurate and unbiased news. Wiki-volunteers as peer reviewers, where necessary, also provide dialogue and reflection on writing styles in grammar, newsworthiness and ethical issues. The process fulfills many curriculum imperatives, while also covering techniques in producing stories for online convergent journalism in still photography, video and audio recording. For more advanced levels, copy-editing and investigative journalism are also possible. Essential journalism values in citizenship and free speech are embedded in the networked software. Improved student learning can be noted and measured, diagnostically, in story development in 'History' on the *Wikinews* story page.

Journalism education throughout the world involves a more or less autonomous and agreed upon field of study, unique to the vocation. The occupational ideology of journalism agrees on shared values like ethically working to deadlines, aspiring to balance and for each news point, having at least two reliable and independent sources (Deuze 2007). Such values are designed into the software that drives *Wikinews*. Values learning in journalism is not achieved as effectively through formal education. *Wikinews* reporters learn rather from emulation and correction through feedback provided by mentors. Conveners of journalism programs agree that simulation processes are vital for student journalists, where work is exposed to professional scrutiny. *Wikinews* incorporates this essential and natural gate-keeping process so that checking and consideration of ethics and due process, or due diligence, is applied to all copy before publication.

The *Wikinews* experience at Wollongong

Throughout 2011, this process was applied to two subjects at the undergraduate level at the University of Wollongong: 'Investigative Reporting' (JOUR301) and 'Legal and Professional Issues for Journalists' (JOUR113). In this context, *Wikinews* served motivation, learning, diagnosis and assessment and was effective in improving engagement, motivation, quality and reflection. Students were observed engaging in and reflecting on the real-world problems and issues of the profession, with some reporting their higher levels of motivation and understanding derived from their assignments. These responses were noted in a University of Wollongong survey on the Spring Session subject, 'Legal and Professional Issues for Journalists' (JOUR113). The improvements in writing care and quality, after peer review and publishing on *Wikinews*, meant that assignments were more likely to meet formal learning objectives and assessment criteria. While attempting to publish on *Wikinews*, students examined a series of mainstream case studies, which generally illustrated poor journalistic sourcing and poor research. This approach also highlighted areas where significant news was lacking in detail, helping students to find fresh news angles for publishing on *Wikinews*.

In formulating the assignments and tutorial activities for two University of Wollongong undergraduate subjects, the focus of this paper, it was assumed that citizen journalism would facilitate learning. Simply by way of its software and editorial policy, *Wikinews* insists on best practice: writing that is not plagiarised, that is neutral, with each point of reference having at least two sources, named and independently verified. These requirements in university education are usually the sole responsibility of the tutor. Simply by nature of networked software requirements, online writing processes can alleviate some of the University tutor's load. Wiki reviewers check facts, examine critical imperatives like newsworthiness, test source

reliability, consider law and ethics, and then either publish or reject. This process also reduces the risk of defamation and other legal liabilities.

The core base of *Wikinews* contributors to review articles is very small and this was a problem for both subjects, when the unusually large number of contributors simultaneously registered and began posting stories. The standard of writing expected of contributors is analogous to *Wikipedia's* Good Article standards and this is set in terms of verifiability, neutrality and ethical and legal considerations. Students are required to write an article within 72 hours, so it doesn't become stale. Those who succeed see their articles on the front page of a globally available news site. A story is listed on websites Google News, Facebook and Twitter and students found this satisfying. Contributors can refer friends and family, and even prospective employers, to their stories.

Throughout the sessions, students regularly received leads to potential stories that were generally absent from mainstream news. In response to one lead, a student in Investigative Reporting wrote a related story that initiated debate with Wiki reviewers. The story used the term 'mercenaries', when referring to Blackwater operations, which were assisting the rebels in Libya, while the reviewer insisted on the term 'contractor'. The story, 'Britain touts private security contractors for Libya', was debated in tutorials over the correct usage of terms.

The call to deploy private security contractors came as the Afghan government announced plans to phase out such operators over the following twelve months. The image of such firms has been severely tarnished by repeated revelations of abuse by the U.S. firm Blackwater Worldwide, subsequently renamed Xe Services. Blackwater executives and employees have faced civil lawsuits, criminal charges and Congressional investigations related to accusations of bribery and murder in Iraq and Afghanistan (Cropje 2011).

Another student, in a related story ('NATO intensifies attack on Libya'), wrote: 'The United Nations approved the NATO bombing campaign to protect Libyan citizens in the civil war'. Seven months later *The New York Times* published, 'In Strikes on Libya by NATO, an Unspoken Civilian Toll', including the comment that NATO is in denial, in that the war 'came with an unrecognised toll: scores of civilian casualties the alliance has long refused to acknowledge or investigate'.

...examination by *The New York Times* of airstrike sites across Libya — including interviews with survivors, doctors and witnesses, and the collection of munitions remnants, medical reports, death certificates and photographs — found credible accounts of dozens of civilians killed by NATO in many distinct attacks. The victims, including at least 29 women or children, often had been asleep in homes when the ordnance hit (Chivers and Schmitt 2011).

The human rights theme in student works was initiated by the tutor, in a provocative approach of supplying information contrary to the so-called 'Western line'.

The use of Journalism 2.0 *Wikinews's* hyperlinks in backgrounding can provide additional information on sources and facts. This is enhanced initially by the compulsory research required by the software, and the habitual processes of *Wikinews* that make *Wikinews* a more reliable agency, technically and theoretically, than most news outlets. This pedagogical approach, encourages students to notice the mechanisms by which the mainstream news services allow error, bias and inaccuracy into reportage.

Conclusion

With many Internet sites devoted to opinion writing, there are surprisingly few stand-alone sites like *Wikinews*, with neutral language and peer-reviewed processes. In agreement with Deuze (2006), the idea of citizens participating in mainstream news production does not fit 'set notions of professional distance in journalism: notions which tend to exclude rather than to include'. However, maintaining the status quo risks 'large sections of the citizenry disenfranchised from participation in processes of journalistic and political deliberation'. Therefore, a transparent and provocative pedagogical approach, as discussed in this paper, is one way to assist students formulate critical and constructive appreciation around the issues facing both the mainstream news services and the voluntary networks alike. To achieve this, building values in skepticism and accuracy and then publishing assignments, must be central to an effective pedagogy. *Wikinews* can provide this, but its biggest challenge is the constant deadlines.

Contributors burn out and so do reviewers. *Wikinews* reviewers are likely to be overworked when a group of 60 students simultaneously submit stories. To provide relief from this pressure, a university subject at the undergraduate third year level in editing news may be possible, where students aim to qualify as Wiki-reviewers. This would offset the pressure on reviewers, as students enrolled in the editing news subject begin to qualify as editors. This could incorporate a *Wikinews* accreditation process for student reporters and editors, rendering *Wikinews* accreditation a status that can be certified with verifiable business ID-cards. This would encourage students to continue as *Wikinews* contributors and reviewers and by way of the accreditation it would increase their employability. Additionally, accreditation renewal (or revocation) process based on an ethics judiciary mechanism could also be applied.

Notes: Links to Wikinews

University of Wollongong Journalism student writers on Wikinews can be found by searching at the main page: 'Category:UoW' or go to:

https://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Wikinews:UoW_2011_student_contributions

https://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Category:UoW_student_%28Spring_2011%29

https://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Category:UoW_2011_student_work

See also http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Britain_touts_private_security_contractors_for_Libya

The link to 'NATO intensifies attack on Libya':

http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/NATO_intensifies_attack_on_Libya

For assessment purposes, or simply perusal, once on a story click 'History' (right hand side) to review the editor and writer interaction, then click on the writer's user-name to see their profile.

For example, the revision history of 'Britain touts private security contractors for Libya'

http://en.wikinews.org/w/index.php?title=Britain_touts_private_security_contractors_for_Libya&action=history

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