

Running head: USER-GENERATED CONTENT

User-Generated Content of an Online Newspaper:
A Contested Form of Civic Engagement¹

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Abstract

Framed within New Literacy Studies, this study uses a critical discourse analytic lens to examine the literacy practices of online newspaper, user-generated content as a contested form of civic engagement. The analysis focuses on news articles, video webcasts, blog posts, and related comments of the online version of a print newspaper situated in a Midwestern city. The study seeks to understand how the social practices of users, journalists, and public officials represented in the discourse of the online newspaper constitute forms of civic engagement, as well as how these various stakeholders take up online community literacy practices in relation to other forms of civic engagement. The study concludes with a consideration of what changes to the social order or practices would be necessary for user-generated content to be regarded as a legitimate form of civic engagement, as is hoped for by theorists and journalists invested in civic and participatory journalism.

Keywords: online newspapers, user-generated content, civic engagement, New Literacy Studies, critical discourse analysis, journalism

The advent and proliferation of interactive features of online newspapers that enable users to generate their own content has served as a source of optimism for theorists invested in civic and participatory journalism, who argue for a more informed citizenry and robust democracy through active participation with the news reporting process (e.g., Bennett, 2006; Gibson, 2006; Gilmor, 2006). Although civic and participatory journalism differ in their approach² (Bowman & Willis, 2003), they share the general claim that emergent publishing tools and forms of interactivity with media and news provide the means for increased social participation and civic engagement. Similarly, Pryor (2002) argues that online journalism is historically in its third wave, which promises to be marked by shared control and innovation through partnerships between owners and users.

Despite this promise, the impact of citizens' use of these interactive features, e.g., article comments, blogs, photo galleries, on their social practices and civic engagement is an argument yet to be made. To date, the available research on interactive features associated with online newspapers has focused on identifying the features and determining the frequency of their use. In their review of research on online journalism, Kopper, Kolthoff, and Czepek (2000) conclude that most of this research is conducted by media institutions and their research divisions, and the results are sold at a high price to institutions with commercial interests. Kopper et al. also make the claim that traditional approaches within distinct fields of research are thwarted by the changing nature of online journalism; this may account for the small amount of research being conducted by universities.

² Participatory journalism calls for citizens to play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Civic Journalism is an effort by professional journalists to increase participation and interactivity in the news reporting process.

Longitudinal content analyses have revealed a steady increase in the number of interactive features associated with online newspapers, e.g., blogs and article comments, (Bivings Group, 2008; Greer and Mensing, 2006). However, content analyses conducted within a single year (Rosenberry, 2005; Shultz, 1999; Tankard & Ban, 1998; Ye & Li, 2006; Zeng & Li, 2006) have revealed that online newspapers were not tapping the full potential of the interpersonal interactivity per the tenets of civic and participatory journalism (Bowman & Willis, 2003).

More recent research of online newspapers has extended beyond counting, classifying (Deuze, 2003; Nip, 2006; Sparks, 2003), and determining patterns of use (Chung, 2008) to begin to examine the social practices of online journalists in terms of how they position themselves as guides, filters, and gatekeepers (Gilmor, 2006; Kolodzy, 2006). In a content analysis of 16 online newspapers in Europe and the U.S., Domingo, et al. (2008) revealed that while there is an increasing diversity of strategies for audience participation, there is a general reluctance for journalists to open up most of the news production process to the active involvement of citizens. Domingo, et al. conclude that despite the use of interactive features in the online newspapers, journalists are retaining their traditional gatekeeping role in adopting user-generated content; journalists “reserved the last word in management of the production process; citizens generally were limited to a role as contributors, if they were given a role at all” (p. 335). However, Thurman (2008) found in case studies of nine major British news websites that “the adaptation of established news websites to the increasing demand from readers for space to express their views is driven as much by local organizational and technical conditions as it is by an attachment to traditional editorial practices” (p. 139).

Consistent with Domingo, et al.'s (2008) call for research on the impact of user-generated content on news products, journalistic work and the public sphere, in my review of the research I did not find any studies that focused on the user-generated content as a unit of analysis. This study seeks to understand the ways with which various stakeholders take up user-generated content associated with online newspapers as a form of civic engagement and the extent to which there is reason to share in the optimism of theorists and journalists invested in civic and participatory journalism who are encouraged by the civic affordances of interactive features (e.g., Bucy & Affe, 2006).

The concept of civic engagement used in the study is grounded within Dalton's (2008) 'engaged citizen' model of citizenship that he defines in contrast with the 'citizen duty' model. Dalton defined these models using a factor analysis of citizenship variables of the 2005 'Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy' (CID) survey of the Center for Democracy and Civil Society at Georgetown University. Dalton uses the survey data to establish norms of citizenship for the two models. However, the two sets of norms are not contradictory, "since all items are positively correlated in simple bivariate relationships, and all are cited as important by the sample" (p. 83).

'Citizen duty', which combines norms of participating in the processes of government and the maintenance of social order, e.g., serving on a jury, reporting a crime, obeying the law, serving in the military, is significantly related to electoral participation. However, citizen duty is not related to other forms of direct citizen action, e.g., contacting political figures or working with a citizen group. By contrast, the 'engaged citizen' model taps participatory norms that are broader than electoral politics

and include norms of being active in civil society groups and general political activity, e.g., forming own opinions, supporting those worse off, active in voluntary groups.

The engaged citizen is more likely to participate in boycotts, buying products for political or ethical reasons, demonstrations and other forms of contentious action. These effects are even more striking for internet activism, which is unrelated to citizen duty but strongly related to norms of engaged citizenship. (Dalton, 2008, p. 88).

Dalton cites a stream of research that argues that civic life is diminishing in America (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Macedo, et al., 2005; Putnam, 2000 as cited in Dalton, 2008). However, Dalton states that rather than citizenship decreasing, the norms that define citizenship may be changing; the definition of the active citizen in these studies is circumscribed by the ‘citizen duty’ model and does not consider other forms of social action that are discouraged within this model, but are taken up by the ‘engaged citizen’ model.

Drawing from the ‘engaged citizen’ model and conceptualized within New Literacy Studies, I use a critical discourse analytic lens in this study to answer the following research questions: How do various stakeholders, e.g., community members, public officials, journalists, take up user-generated content associated with an online newspaper as a form of civic engagement? In relation to other forms of civic engagement, what characteristics of user-generated content support or thwart this taking up of various stakeholders?

Theoretical Framework

New Literacy Studies (NLS) represents a broader understanding of literacy as a situated social practice embedded within cultural contexts. NLS scholars make a distinction between *autonomous* and *ideological* models of literacy (Street, 2003). In the autonomous model, literacy itself is viewed as having effects on other social and cognitive practices, irrespective of the social conditions and cultural interpretations. The autonomous model frames interactive features of an online newspaper as having inherent affordances for civic engagement, regardless of the social contexts within which the content is embedded. Under the autonomous model, the mere presence of user-generated content is an indication of civic engagement. In accordance with this model, “digital participants are ascribed a heightened level of engagement with society, enhancing cultural citizenship” (van Dijck, 2009). However, as Croteau (2006) has observed, we know very little about how user-generated content of online newspapers is taken up by various stakeholders.

In the ideological model of literacy, the nature of reading and writing (and related semiotic systems) is defined by the social and cultural practices and events in which it is embedded, and literacy cannot be known outside of social/cultural practices and events. From this perspective, we cannot understand how user-generated content and interactive features are part of literacy practices outside a particular ideological, cultural, and social situation, i.e., the context of a particular newspaper, a particular group of journalists and citizen writers, and a particular rhetorical task.

Studying user-generated content of a particular online newspaper from an NLS perspective presents some challenges to the framework because of the limit of not

knowing each user's context within which they are generating content. Because of this limitation, this study will define context by the geographic community for which the online newspaper under investigation is named. The unit of analysis for this study includes the discourse present in online newspaper articles, user-generated comments on articles, user-generated blog posts and related comments, as well as digital video of interviews and public meetings published on the online newspaper. These digital artifacts are analyzed using a critical discourse analytic lens.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Drawing on a computer discourse analytic approaches to research (Herring, 2004), I use critical discourse analysis (CDA) to understand the social practices of users generating content within online newspapers as *discourse*. Consistent with New Literacy Studies, “describing discourse as a social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). That is to say that the discursive event shapes, and is shaped by, situations, institutions and social structures. Therefore, discursive practices have ideological effects in that they produce and reproduce unequal power relations between people and institutions.

Power in this regard is conceptualized as what Sheridan, et al. (2000) classify as ‘power as process’ rather than ‘power as product’. When power is considered a product it can be given and taken away like a commodity, or a measurable thing. This study conceptualizes ‘power as process’, “which takes the view that power varies among and between contexts rather than being a static product. Power can be viewed as a set of relations among people and among social institutions that may shift from one situation to

another (Bloome, et al., 2005, p. 162). I use this CDA lens to understand how the discourse of user-generated content shapes, and is shaped by, these power dynamics within local institutions and social structures.

CDA focuses on the relationships between discursive change and socio-cultural change (Fairclough, 1992), e.g., the hypothesis that the advent of user-generated content associated with online newspapers impacts civic engagement.

Discursive change is analysed in terms of the creative mixing of discourse and genres in texts, which leads over time to the restructuring of relationships between different discursive practices within and across institutions, and the shifting of boundaries within and between ‘orders of discourse’ (structured sets of discursive practices associated with particular social domains). (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997)

For example, discursive practices and power dynamics shift between (a.) a print letter to the newspaper editor and (b.) a comment posted on an online newspaper article, (c.) an editorial written for a newspaper and (d.) a post to a personal blog on the newspaper’s website, or (e.) speaking at a public forum or meeting and (f.) addressing public officials via online newspaper user-generated content.

The application of CDA is an attempt to understand how shifts between social practices of civic engagement (items a. through f. above) establish an order of discourse that is defined by social and cultural structures and processes and power dynamics. Within these genres of civic engagement, some ways of making meaning may be considered dominant or mainstream, while others may be considered marginal or oppositional. For example, an editorial written by a community member and reviewed

and accepted for publication by a newspaper editor may be considered as an accepted form of civic engagement by some stakeholders and institutions, while a blog post on an online newspaper may be considered as a marginal form by the same stakeholders and institutions. The dominance of the social practice of the letter to the editor may be considered hegemonic, as it constitutes the “legitimizing common sense which sustains relations of domination,” (Fairclough, 2001) with which newspaper staff members make editorial judgments and citizens who write letters are complicit—even though the order of discourse is always contested in hegemonic struggle in actual social interactions.

The analytic framework for CDA that I use in this study combines relational and dialectical elements, both a “negative critique in the sense of diagnosis of the problem, [and a] positive critique in the sense of identification of hitherto unrealized possibilities in the way things are for tackling problems” (Fairclough, 2001). The schematic for this analytic framework is represented procedurally in 5 stages:

1. Focus upon a social problem which has a semiotic aspect.
2. Identify obstacles to it being tackled, though analysis of:
 - a. the network of practices within which it is located,
 - b. the relationship of semiosis to other elements within the particular practice(s) concerned, and
 - c. the discourse (the semiosis) itself.
3. Consider whether the social order (network of practices) in a sense ‘needs’ the problem.
4. Identify possible ways past the obstacles.
5. Reflect critically on the analysis (1-4). (Fairclough, 2001).

Stage 1 represents CDA as a form of critical social science that seeks to identify and illuminate social problems within particular forms of social life in order to contribute resources with which people can overcome these problems. CDA is controversial in this regard, in that researchers using CDA choose to focus on certain features of social life as problems, e.g., how stakeholders take up user-generated content as a form of civic engagement. Stage 2 involves a diagnosis of the problem by identifying the obstacles that are erected by the way social life is structured and organized and, thereby, make the problem difficult to resolve. “The diagnosis considers the way social practices are networked together, the way semiosis relates to other elements of social practices, and features of discourse itself” (Fairclough, 2001). Stage 3 of the analysis considers whether the social order *needs* the problem; in other words, does the social order inherently generate a range of major problems that are requisite for sustaining particular power relations and dynamics? Stage 4 moves the analysis to a positive critique by identifying unrealized or not fully realized possibilities for making a change to the social order. Stage 5 turns the analysis reflexively back on itself to consider the extent to which the critique can contribute to social emancipation.

Data Collection

I chose to focus my study on the online version of the print newspaper for the community in which I lived. My rationale for this selection is that I had a four-year history as a print and online reader of the newspaper, and while I did not post content on the online newspaper I was a regular reader of the articles and user-generated content. User-generated content associated with online newspapers became an area of interest to me after a conversation with a parent of one of my high school students explained that

while she would never speak at a school board meeting about her school district concerns, she felt comfortable posting comments to our local online newspaper. A year later as a PhD student, this interest led me to propose and conduct this study.

The print and online newspaper is situated in a Midwestern city of a population of 46,279 with less than 6% minorities. 80.7% of the population has a high school diploma and 14.7% of the population has a Bachelor's degree or higher. The median household income is \$34,791, the median per capita income is \$17,819, and 13% of the population is below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The city also houses a branch campus of one of the largest land grant, research universities in the county.

Between July and December 2008, I recorded the date, headline, geographic location, author, and number of comments of every news article published in the local news section of this online newspaper. Starting in the first month, I developed an emergent list of codes to categorize the news articles by topic. During the first and second month, I refined this list collapsing categories into each other that proved to be similar over time. I decided on a list of 14 codes that held up over the six-month data collection window: Auto Accident, Accident, Death, Human Interest, Local Economy, Local Government, Local Interest, National Government, Non-Violent Crime, Official Report, Schools, Sex Crime, State Government, and Violent Crime. While tracking all of the local news articles (see Appendix A), I thematically sampled news articles that both had a topic that spanned multiple news articles, comments and blog posts, but also contained what I determined to be a significant number of comments ($n > 10$). When thematically sampling, I saved copies of the news articles, blog posts, and related comments as PDF files. I sampled four emergent themes during the data collection window: land dispute

over a bike path (19 news articles, 720 comments), nude photos of students distributed by students' cell phones, i.e., *sexting* (13 news articles, 534 comments), school funding and leadership of the local district (53 news articles, 2 letters to the editor, 2 newspaper editorials, 1 live video interview, 2975 comments), and comments and blogs as a contested form of civic engagement (2 news articles, 1 live video interview, 1 school board meeting webcast, 11 blog posts, 116 comments). The latter two themes overlapped and proved to be the most pertinent to my research questions for this study.

A limitation of this data collection process was raised by Kautsky and Widholm (2008). Consistent with my own experience collecting data, they correctly observe that the current research practices of capturing online news articles at a point in time poses problems for the researcher as the same news article may change during its life online before being archived or becoming unavailable. My practice for collecting data was to save a copy of the article and related comments the day before it was archived, and to save blog posts and related comments several days (even weeks) after the last comment was posted, in order to capture the maximum number of comments. However, as Kautsky and Widholm (2008) ask, what about the previous versions that are commonly dismissed “on the basis of being ‘too much data’?” (p. 82). The fluid nature of online news articles is particularly significant to my study as users may be posting comments on an earlier version of the article that is subject to change for users posting subsequent comments. The variance between versions of an article may complicate my discourse analysis of these artifacts at a point in time after the shifts and revisions have been made. Kautsky and Widholm offer a methodology for dealing with this problem, Regular Interval

Content Capture (RICC); however due to time and technical constraints, I must acknowledge the convenience of my sampling at a single moment in time.

Data Selection for Analysis

I selected the artifacts for the analysis that were sampled under the emergent theme ‘comments and blogs as a contested form of civic engagement’ (which overlapped with some artifacts sampled under the theme ‘school funding and leadership of the local district’), in the interest of answering my research questions for this study: (a) How do various stakeholders, e.g., community members, public officials, journalists, take up user-generated content associated with an online newspaper as a form of civic engagement? (b) In relation to other forms of civic engagement (e.g., letters to the editor, guest editorial, speech given at a public forum or meeting), what characteristics of user-generated content support or thwart this taking up of various stakeholders?

The selection of these artifacts was intentional in that they represent a semiotic aspect of a social problem in this community. Over the course of the six-month data collection window, the local school district lost two operating levies (August, 2008, 9.5 mils, failed; and November, 2008, 7.7 mils, failed) consistent with a history of the local community not supporting an increase in operating funds against a backdrop of local and national economic decline (see Appendix B). Across the artifacts sampled within the theme ‘school funding and leadership of the local district’, the local school district leadership was represented in news articles, editorials, and comments as unresponsive to the will and needs of the community as evidenced by the two levy failures. In an effort to improve communication with the community, the local school district leadership hired a replacement communications director. Members of the local school district leadership

discounted user-generated content associated with the online newspaper as a legitimate form of communication with school district officials, while users of the online newspaper and the editorial staff of the newspaper argued for the user-generated content to be considered a form of community conversation.

Table 1
Artifacts for analysis

No.	Theme(s)	Date	Description: Title	Author(s)	No. of Comments
1	SF&L	July 17, 2008	Letter to the Editor: [The city] cannot let its schools continue along the current path	Resident	22
2	SF&L	July 25, 2008	Guest Editorial: Financial myths about [the city's] schools can be corrected with facts	School Board Member	27
3	C&B	Aug. 11, 2008	Blog Post: An effort to correct inaccurate [comments]	Managing Editor	4
4	C&B	Sep. 3, 2008	News Article: Law director wants dialogue with bloggers	Newspaper Staff	11
5	C&B	Sep. 4, 2008	Blog Post: A blog, even wrong, is good feedback to government	Brad Harris*	10
6	C&B	Sep. 5, 2008	Blog Post: Blogging from the bushes is better than not at all	Brad Harris*	5
7	C&B	Sep. 7, 2008	News Column: Online forums and blogs offer timely and informative feedback	Managing Editor	13
8	C&B, SF&L	Oct. 22, 2008	Video Webcast: Superintendent addresses school levy concerns	Managing Editor, Superintendent	53
9	SF&L	Oct. 27, 2008	Blog Post: How to improve [the] City Schools	Brad Harris*	1
10	SF&L	Nov. 13, 2008	Video Webcast: School board meeting	School Leadership, Sherry M.	N/A

*pseudonym

Therefore, I selected artifacts (see Table 1) sampled under the themes 'comments and blogs as a contested form of civic engagement' (C&B in Table 1) and 'school funding and leadership of the local district' (SF&L in Table 1) that were representative of the semiosis of the social problem of various stakeholders contesting user-generated as a form of civic engagement.

Analysis

To frame the analysis, I identify the network of social practices of civic engagement within which the user-generated content of the online newspaper is located. The subsequent part of the analysis moves through Fairclough's (2001) second and third stages of CDA. In the second stage, I demonstrate how the order of discourse, or the semiotic aspect of these social practices, presents obstacles for user-generated content to be considered a dominant form of civic engagement. To explain these obstacles, I provide an analysis of the discourses, genres, and styles of the different forms of civic engagement as they are presented in the texts of the selected artifacts. In the third stage, I discuss how the social order depends on the social problem of user-generated content in order to demarcate the discursive boundaries that define dominant and marginalized forms of civic engagement.

Social Practices and Order of Discourse

In the selected artifacts, several social practices of civic engagement are extant that can be described within the norms established by Dalton's (2008) 'citizen duty' and 'engaged citizen' models. Using survey data, Dalton explains that duty-based norms of citizenship "encourage individuals to participate as a civic duty, which may stimulate election turnout and participation in other institutionalized forms of action" (p. 85). On the other hand, the norms of the 'engaged citizen' model have an expressive, participatory emphasis which "suggests a shift in the modes of political participation – away from elections and party activity, seen as institutionalized expressions of citizen duty, and toward individualized and direct forms of action" (p. 86).

During the six-month data collection (July – December, 2008), two elections were held in which the local school district levy proposal was defeated both times. During the August special election, 8,246 registered voters cast ballots defeating the proposed 9.5-mil school levy by a margin of 26.42%. During the November presidential election, 21,180 registered voters cast ballots defeating the proposed, emergency 7.7-mil school levy by a margin of 11.48% (County Board of Elections). These two elections are consistent with a history of registered voters not supporting a new school levy in addition to their approval of a bond issue, permanent improvement renewals and income tax renewals (see Appendix B). For registered voters, participating in elections is a social practice that is consistent with the norms of the ‘citizen duty’ model. The local school district proposed an additional school levy against a list of school programs that will be potentially cut without the new levy, and registered voters expressed their disapproval by casting ballots.

Social practices that fit within the norms of the ‘engaged citizen’ model are present in dominant and marginal forms. Both the dominant and marginal forms present in the artifacts are established and regulated by institutions; however, the processes and procedures of the dominant forms are generally accepted by the stakeholders involved, while the processes and procedures of the marginal forms are contested by the involved stakeholders. Dominant social practices of civic engagement include: writing a print letter or e-mail to the editor of the newspaper; writing an editorial for the newspaper; and speaking at official, public forums or meetings. Corresponding marginal social practices of civic engagement include: posting a comment on an online newspaper article, posting

a personal blog on the newspaper website, and addressing public officials via user-generated content associated with the online newspaper.

These social practices of civic engagement are networked together in relationship to each other in a particular way that constitutes a social order; the order of discourse is the semiotic aspect of this social order. The order of discourse is not a closed or deterministic system, but rather a system that is continually put at risk in every interaction that is shaped by and simultaneously constitutes the system (Fairclough, 2001). The artifacts analyzed in this study represent interactions among stakeholders that attempt simultaneously to reify and contest the order of discourse that establishes and maintains the dominance of certain social practices and marginalize others, as forms of civic engagement. The different types of social practices of civic engagement can be defined as corresponding with a particular genre, or

relatively stable set of conventions that is associated with, and partly enacts, a socially ratified type of activity, such as informal chat, buying goods in a shop, a job interview, a television documentary, a poem, or a specific article. A genre implies not only a particular type of text, but also particular processes of producing, distributing and consuming texts.

(Fairclough, 1992, p. 126)

The discourse of particular genres can be characterized by its activity type and its style. The activity type includes the “structured sequence of actions of which it is composed” and the “set of subject positions which are socially constituted and recognized in connection with the activity type” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 127). The style of a particular genre varies along three main parameters: tenor (e.g., formal, informal), mode (e.g.,

spoken, written, spoken as if written, written as if spoken), and rhetorical mode (e.g., argumentative, descriptive, expository) (Halliday, 1978). In the next section, I use the selected artifacts to provide an identification of dominant and marginal genres of civic engagement and an analysis of the activity type and style of the genres in order to demonstrate the obstacles present that marginalize user-generated content.

Genres of Civic Engagement

Response to News Article. In the online newspaper of the study, citizens respond to news items using dominant and marginalized social practices. The dominant form of responding to a news item is to send a print letter or e-mail to the newspaper editor. The activity involves a reader of the newspaper writing to comment on a news article, social issue, or event. While the letters and e-mail messages are written to the newspaper editor, they often are written for a wider audience, addressing the community at large.

Fortunately, it still is up to our own school district working with the community to account for our own district needs and to establish a clear case for financial support. If we continue to fail our responsibility to provide quality education to our children, someday we might lose the right to vote "yes" or "no" altogether. (Artifact 1)

The resident author of the letter to the editor cited above is responding to another letter published in an earlier issue of the newspaper. This author addresses the wider audience of the community using pronouns such as ‘our’ and ‘we’; the author refers to the writer of the letter to which he is responding as “the letter writer” (Artifact 1).

Often these letters or e-mails are written to contest or correct the official account offered by the newspaper reporter in the article. The activity also involves a newspaper

editor reading the letter or e-mail and making a decision whether to publish the letter or e-mail in the newspaper for readers. The letter or e-mail is signed with the writer's legal name, and the writer's address is required. The letters and e-mails published in the online newspaper are written with a formal tenor in a written mode. The writers of the letters often use an argumentative or expository rhetorical mode to communicate their message and point-of-view. The newspaper editors have the opportunity and responsibility to check the facts presented in the letters before publishing them in the interest of providing accurate information to the community. The editors' gatekeeping process gives them control over which letters get published and which letters do not.

A marginalized form of responding to a news item is using user-generated content to post a comment to an online newspaper article. The activity involves a user, who has registered an account with an e-mail address, posing a comment in response to a news article or in response to other comments. The user self-identifies using a user name that most often is not his or her legal name. The style of the posts is more informal and often includes personal anecdotes which serve to provide a biographical identity for the user despite the anonymity of their user name. The posts are written in a written-as-spoken mode with multiple posts involving multiple users taking on the characteristics of a dialogue mediated by written language. The rhetorical mode varies vastly across argumentative, expository, and narrative forms.

The editors of the newspaper make attempts to determine the validity of the users' comments, sometimes responding to the comments of users and deleting users' comments that are inappropriate and/or violate the terms of the online newspaper. In a post on his blog, the managing editor explains,

Addressing reader issues raised in comments or forums is not new for us. [The editor] routinely posts clarifying information on subjects raised by readers. Unfortunately, those posts get lost in the many other comments and disappear from the site over time. (Artifact 3)

The managing editor also marks the discursive boundaries between the users' comments and the contents of news articles:

We're willing to make this effort just in case some readers take comments posted by people they don't know as immediate facts. I have faith that most readers see comments for what they are, not journalistic reporting. I've never heard anybody claim to learn new facts from [the comments]. Instead, they see it as a way to exchange views on important topics in our community. I also urge readers to stick to sharing their opinions and not trying to play news reporter. (Artifact 3)

The managing editor emphasizes that the users' comments are not the same as journalistic reporting; the comments are meant to exchange views, not facts, while journalistic reporting is meant to report facts, separate from opinion. In contrast to this discursive distinction, a user posted a comment to the managing editor's blog post:

If you want to see how [the city's] costs compare to other districts in the state, go to the [State] Department of Education web site at [address]. Visit the Department of Education web site and see what you can figure out. (Artifact 3)

Another user in response wrote:

Thanks for the info. I am fairly new to [the city] so don't know all the background. Your points are well taken and is what I felt too. It is easy to say money is misspent, administrators are overpaid; it is not always as easy to show the facts that support this. (Artifact 3)

Within the same discursive event of the managing editor posting an editorial on his blog and users commenting on his post, boundaries are both defined and contested between which social practices are designated for disseminating facts and which are designated for facilitating the sharing of opinions.

The managing editor views the oversight and moderation of users comments as the newspaper's role in facilitating community conversations. In his blog post, the managing editor writes,

To me, if such comments are being made online, they are likely being made in personal discussions across the community, whether it's in the break room or family dining room. If we can help clear the air a bit, then the [comment] function serves as a way for more people to participate in a valid community conversation. (Artifact 3)

The newspaper editors assume a traditional gatekeeping role in determining what counts as facts in the writing of authors who compose print letters and e-mail to the authors and users who post comments to an online newspaper article. The dominant social practice of writing letters to the editor afford the newspaper editors' with more control over the process, while the sheer amount of user-generated content on the online newspaper complicates the newspaper editors' role of maintaining 'validity' in the marginalized social practice of posing to comments.

Editorial. Similar to the genre of responding to a news item, the social practices of editorials are represented in dominant and non-dominant forms in the online newspaper. An official editorial written by an author who is not a member of the newspaper staff, often labeled a guest editorial, involves similar activities as a print letter or an e-mail sent to an editor. Whether the guest editorial is solicited or not, an author submits his/her writing to the editor for consideration for publication in the opinion section of the newspaper. The author is typically expressing an opinion about an issue or an event using a formal style and argumentative and/or expository, written rhetorical mode.

Artifact 2 is a guest editorial written by a school board member, titled “Financial myths about [the city’s] schools can be corrected with facts.” The purpose of the editorial is to clarify information about school funding in the interest of passing a school levy; a ballot issue that the newspaper supported at the time in its own staff editorials. In the editorial, the board member refutes seven myths about the local school district’s funding:

One of the reasons for going with an August levy request was we felt a special election would give more opportunity to have an open dialogue about the [City] School District's finances. I'd like to take this opportunity to dispel the some of the myths. (Artifact 2)

While the school board member’s writing resembles copy used in the levy campaign, the genre of the newspaper editorial repurposes the discourse as if it is one school board member, speaking on behalf of the board, attempting to dispel myths and popularly held ideas about the local school district’s funding with facts and more sources of correct information:

These are just a few of the myths out there regarding district finances. All we ask is that you take the time to learn the facts before voting next month. You can find The [Name] Report on the [State's] Department of Education's Web site. Just search "[Name]." There's also a wealth of information on the treasurer's page of the district Web site, [address]. The site also lists the numbers and e-mail addresses for all five board members. Please feel free to contact one of us, Superintendent [Name] or Treasurer [Name] with your questions. (Artifact 2)

Campaign copy became one person's appeal to the public to seek out the facts before voting. Not everyone in the community is given the opportunity to write a guest editorial for the newspaper; the genre is reserved for community members the newspaper designates, maintaining the dominance of the form as a source of opinion, approved by the editors of the paper.

A marginalized form of the editorial is the personal blog published on the online newspaper. The online newspaper provides registered users with a space for publishing a blog, with the option of receiving comments by other users to the posts on the blog. Like the user-generated content of comments posted to articles, the blogs are published under user names that self-identify the author in a variety of ways, most often not using the author's legal name. However, the activity on the blogs is similar to the activity involved with editorials; the major difference is that the newspaper does not restrict who can and cannot set up a blog, so long as they comply with the terms of the user agreement of the online newspaper. Users posting to their blogs express opinions about social, economic, and political issues, as well as comment on and contest news items. This activity is often

enacted in dialogue with other users establishing intertextuality across users' blogs, comments to users' blogs, and comments posted to newspaper articles. The style is often less formal than a sanctioned editorial, but more formal than comments posted to news articles. The mode ranges from written to written-as-if-spoken using argumentative, expository, and narrative rhetorical approaches.

Brad Harris (pseudonym) is a user who writes a blog using his legal name as his user name. He maintains a regular commentary (80 blog posts during the six-month data collection) on a range of national, state, and local issues including the local school district's leadership and funding:

The largest player in community perception of [the City] Schools is the superintendent, as it should be. Under his leadership, with school board backing, city schools have morphed from a once-admirable community asset into something feared, a constant problem against which taxpayers must defend themselves. On August 6 I called for the superintendent to be replaced and for the schools to stop bullying the community. Neither has happened. Meanwhile I've delivered sermonettes here on "Ask not what your school district can do for you..." and "[City] Schools: No more sucker punches, no more B.S." and "[Superintendent], the invincible. Or not." and "Latest levy request is insolence" (Artifact 9)

Using his blog, Harris positions himself as a member of the community who is calling for changes in the schools and countering the editorials sanctioned by the newspaper that support the local school district and its ballot issues. However, the guest editorial maintains its dominance as an official part of the online newspaper in the opinion section,

and the blogs posts are marginalized as unsanctioned opinion of users who primarily self-identify with a user name that maintains their anonymity and undermines their credibility, as I will demonstrate in the next section.

Addressing Public Officials. A dominant definition of civic engagement is participation in conventional places designated for citizens to participate in city and school district government, e.g., city council meetings, school board meetings, public forums held by the newspaper. These places are highly regulatory as they often use Robert's Rules of Order to establish and enforce who may speak in turn, to whom, and for what duration of time. These meetings and forums also often require citizens to state their name and their address before speaking in order to establish proof that they are residents of the community and credibility for having speaking rights at the meeting.

Meetings that involve government are public and subject to Sunshine Laws, meaning that the minutes of meetings become public record for anyone to access. Forums are often moderated by public officials and people who hold positions of authority, solicit opinions from citizens, as well as answer questions in turn. The newspaper often writes about and edits a report of the forum to publish in a news article. Citizens who participated in these public forums and meetings typically use a formal style when addressing the officials and the audience, sometimes using a pre-written script or a spoken-as-if-written mode of argumentation and exposition. These social practices of addressing public officials and people of authority maintain their dominance through the practices and processes in place to regulate such civic engagement.

City and school district officials are invested in these highly regulatory social practices of civic engagement because the practices support the unequal power relations

between them and the citizens who attend the meetings to express their concerns. Citizens who are enacting such an embodied performance may be concerned with their identity and social and discursive practices in relation to the officials, the audience in attendance, and the public broadcasting or reporting of the event.

This concern of identity and performance by citizens attending public forums or meetings is exemplified by the participation of an adult female at a school board meeting, in which board members were deliberating about hiring a communications director against an unbalanced budget in an effort to improve communication with the community and pass an operating levy (Artifact 10). Immediately after stating her name and address, Sherry M. (pseudonym) said:

00:10: As you can see, I may not fit in here, but I belong here. I'm not happy to be here, but the importance of this conversation overrules my discomfort at being here. I have to agree with the board, you definitely do have a problem with communication. You certainly do. You don't listen.

(Artifact 10)

Sherry expressed her discomfort speaking in front of the school board, though despite her discomfort she delivered a harsh message about the board not following the fiscal advice of a state school board representative. Throughout Sherry's 8 minute, 30 second discursive performance (against a time limit of 5 minutes) at the podium facing the board of education, she shifted to directly address the audience and remark on her perceived lack of congruence of her physical appearance and diction with those in attendance at the school board meeting.

02:40: Look at me people, you know I don't fit in here. I'm working class.

I came in here and not one person spoke to me tonight, but that's ok. I'm from hard knock high, I can take it. I don't have any education. But that might keep me from being tactful, but it doesn't keep me from being truthful.

04:08: I apologize for what I lack in being tactful, but that in no way hinders my being truthful. I feel very strongly about this. I may be the only working class person here tonight. Like I said, I might not fit in, but I sure as heck belong.

07:18: I'm sorry that I don't have a better vocabulary. I'm doing the best I can to communicate with you. And I would warn you, that I'm not a very smart person, so what I've got figured out, everybody else has got figured out too. (Artifact 10)

While Sherry's message to the board of education was shared by the next two community members who expressed similar sentiments about the hiring of a communications director at a time when the school district was approaching fiscal deficit the next school year, her discursive performance was marked by these comments directly addressed to the board and the audience about her identity and presence in the school board meeting. In this socially stratified community, Sherry's discursive performance demonstrates that some public places designated for dominant, discursive genres of civic engagement are uncomfortable and problematic within complex dynamics of power.

However, what is most problematic is that the dominant discursive practice of speaking publicly at an official forum or meeting is socially constructed as a form of

civic engagement that is neutral and non-problematic. While Sherry's performance served as significant resistance to the unequal power dynamics of the discursive event, rather than calling into question the dominant social practices of speaking publicly at an official forum or meeting Sherry was assured that she belonged and did indeed speak well by the citizen who spoke after her, a board member, and the superintendent. These three respondents took up the event in terms of what was wrong with Sherry (helping Sherry feel better about herself and about speaking at the meeting) rather than what was wrong with the social and discursive practices that made Sherry feel discomfort.

In contrast to embodied performances within highly regulatory events at official forums and meetings is the social practice of using user-generated content to publicly address government and school district officials. Within the practices of posting comments to news articles and posting personal to personal blogs on the online newspaper, users often directly address public officials by commenting on or contesting local social, political, and economic issues. Users employ a range of formal and informal styles, varying across written and written-as-if-spoken, rhetorical modes of argumentation, exposition, and narration.

In response to the social practice of addressing public officials and issues via user-generated content associated with the online newspaper, the city law director, during a city council meeting on September 2, 2008, made a public appeal for citizens to contact his office rather than participate in the comments and blogs on the online newspaper:

I say that because that is the proper way to get involved in city government...[n]ot to hide behind an anonymous blog name. (Artifact 4).

The city law director's concerns about anonymity are shared by the local school district superintendent. In a webcast video interview via the online newspaper, in which users posted live comments and questions and the superintendent responded in front of a video camera, he stated:

I'm not a fan of the blogs, ah, I believe that, ah, people that write in that aren't willing to put their names on something, ah, ah, shouldn't be listened to. If you're not willing to stand up, as I'm doing right now, I'm trying to respond to this, ah, questions and difficulty, ah, then I'm not sure you should have that input. (Artifact 8)

In response to the city law director, Brad Harris took up this issue of anonymity in posts to his blog (Artifacts 5 & 6). Harris stated that despite the anonymity of the users, they are sharing their opinions based on what they actually believe and not intentionally deceiving readers. For Harris, the availability of the user-generated content of anonymous citizens is of great benefit to city and school district officials as a gauge of popular opinion:

It behooves those who claim to be serving the public to monitor, as best they can, what commentators/bloggers are saying. There has never been a more efficient system for feedback than responses being written to [the newspaper's] news reports or in blogs - and feedback is exactly what officialdom should cultivate, not attack. (Artifact 5)

In a second post (Artifact 6), Brad Harris offered advice to users, who he argues should validate their content within dominant discursive practices of civic engagement: (a) self

identify, (b) cite the sources of information presented as factual, (c) provide biographical details to establish credibility, (d) enable users to respond directly to you.

In response to Brad Harris' advice, users who posted comments to his blog post insisted that the emphasis should be on the message rather than the messenger. Some of the responding users claimed that the anonymity has the potential to shift the focus away from the social positioning of the user based on the user's credentials and social network in the city toward the claim or argument being made by the user.

However, the issue of how representative the user-generated content associated with the online newspaper is of the citizens of the city is an unknown for all stakeholders involved. Due to the anonymity of the user names, the various ways user self-identify, and the registration process that only requires an e-mail account, there is no way for the stakeholders to gauge who comprises the online readership and the users who are generating content on the online newspaper. There is no mechanism in place to determine citizenship, whether a user is or is not a geographic resident within the city. The anonymity of users posting to the online newspaper raises challenging issues to the taking up of user-generated content as a form of civic engagement.

15 users responded to Harris' blog posts (Artifacts 5 & 6); they agreed that despite the anonymity, city and school district officials could potentially benefit from the available feedback posted to the online newspaper. One user related an experience of being contacted directly via e-mail by a city council member who clarified an issue based on a comment the user posted to an article. Another user, who self-identified using his legal name and position as a school board member, acknowledged his practices of

reading the comments and blogs and responding to users and also related his preference for direct e-mail communication:

As a school board member, I often read the blogs and have sometimes offered corrections to some folks' misinformation. As a person who has decided to get involved, I will say that it is frustrating when bloggers have made up their minds, and want to debate factual items with you. There does come the point where you do feel that you are wasting your time. Everyone is entitled to their opinions, but sometimes facts are facts. In regards to this being the only way to make a point, school members' email address, street address, and phone numbers are on the school's website. People should feel free to contact us. If you send a message to all five members, you may only get one response as we tend to monitor each others' responses and often don't just send duplications. Whether someone agrees with us or not, as long as we respectfully disagree, we are all ready to discuss issues. (Artifact 5)

A third user discussed the differences across the social practices of writing a letter or an e-mail directly to a city or school district official and posting a comment to a news article or blog post.

You can send a formal letter but it would just get shuffled into the trash bin, but if you write in a blog, there is no way for it to disappear. Even if it gets deleted off of your blog there are still archives available and you can also save it to your computer to repost. (Artifact 5)

A letter or e-mail directly sent to a city or school district official may or may not solicit a response. While the same is true of a comment to a news article or a blog post, there is a public display of the direct address to the official.

In a news column written by the managing editor in response to the law director's city council meeting remarks (Artifact 4) and Brad Harris' blog posts (Artifacts 5 & 6), the managing editor emphasizes the intertextuality between the online community conversations and "what happens when parents chat at soccer practice or gather around the dinner table" (Artifact 7). The managing editor also makes a distinction between the online community conversations and attendance at public forums and meetings:

Like it or not, people don't have much time to run to [city council] meetings. They're more comfortable behind their computer than standing before an imposing council. Just one person attended Thursday's levy forum at [the local community college]. None attended our well-publicized 2006 [school district] levy forum. Until public officials realize what's happening is irreversible and embrace online forums, they risk great frustration. (Artifact 7)

For the managing editor who has experienced lack of attendance at public forums and meetings, the online community conversations may offer the best opportunity for city and school district officials to gauge public opinion and directly address concerns of citizens in the city.

Obstacles and the Social Order

Across the genres of civic engagement detailed above, i.e., responding to a news article, writing an editorial, and addressing public officials, obstacles are present that

thwart the taking up of user-generated content as a form of civic engagement by some stakeholders. These obstacles can be characterized as issues of anonymity, validity, and access.

The dominant social practices of writing a print letter or e-mail to a newspaper editor, writing an editorial for the newspaper, and speaking at a public forum or meeting involve the author or speaker self-identifying with his or her legal name and affiliating as a resident, a tax-payer, and/or a registered voter with a physical, residential address in the community. These dominant social practices are also subject to processes of validation, in which a person of authority, e.g., newspaper editor or elected official, determines the accuracy of facts presented by the author or speaker. Letters to the editor and editorials are subject to the fact-checking of the newspaper editors to determine what letters and editorials do and do not get published in the newspaper. Performances at public forums or meetings often involve regulatory practices of determining speaking rights, in which the speaker presents his or her case and the officials being addressed respond in a public performance that often is broadcasted and reported on as public record; these social practices serve as processes of validation.

The marginalized social practices involving user-generated content are contested along the discursive boundaries demarcated by the obstacles of anonymity and validity as presented by the social order, which is both sustained and questioned in the interactions of the various stakeholders. The social practices of posting a comment to an online newspaper article, posting to a personal blog on the newspaper's website, and addressing a public official via user-generated content are contested as forms of civic engagement due to the potential for the anonymity of the user, or the lack of verification that a user is

who they say they are and have a legitimate social position as a resident, a tax-payer, and/or a registered voter to claim a stake in the conversation. The social practices involving user-generated content also lack the processes by which validity is determined in the dominant social practices listed above. Editors of the newspapers attempt to validate and correct facts presented by users in the comments and on the blogs, but this process is complicated by the sheer number of posts and the limited time and resources of the editorial staff. The managing editor attempted to demarcate a boundary along lines of validity between the content published by the newspaper and the content generated by users: the newspaper content as validated fact and the user-generated content as opinion.

Although the user-generated content's potential for anonymity is problematic in comparison with the dominant forms of civic engagement, anonymity when posting user-generated content may be one of the most salient features of the social practice. Citizens concerned with the social consequences of writing a print letter or e-mail to the newspaper editor, writing an editorial for the newspaper or addressing an official at a public forum or meeting may feel protected by the anonymity of user-generated content. However, this protection is taken up as a lack of accountability and verification of citizenship by those who benefit from the dominant forms of civic engagement.

Additionally, not all citizens have equal social access to the practices involved with these dominant and marginalized forms of civic engagement. Citizens may have inequitable experiences with and unequal social access to the practices involved in the dominant forms, e.g., the social practices involved in writing a form letter or editorial and speaking at a public meeting. Citizens may also have inequitable experiences with and unequal social and material access to the practices and hardware required to generate user

content on the newspaper's website. These differences between who has social and material access to dominant and marginal forms of civic engagement can be described using Banks (2006) five kinds of access in his critique of the digital divide:

1. material access (having the economic means to access the hardware, software, network, etc.),
2. functional access (access to the knowledge and skills to use the tools provided by material access),
3. experiential access (in which the tools and knowledge of their use become a relevant part of people's lives and the life of the community),
4. critical access (to assess the benefits and problems of any technology well enough to critique, resist, and avoid them or to take them up and use them when necessary), and
5. transformational access (both with regard to the technology and with regard to the society more broadly).

While Banks links these five kinds of access to the historical struggle of social justice of African Americans to argue for a broader conception of technology, these definitions of access are helpful for considering who has access (hereafter inclusive of the five kinds listed above) to the social practices requisite for both dominant and marginal forms of civic engagement.

In turning to Fairclough's (2001) third stage of CDA, the social order in a sense *needs* these obstacles of anonymity, validity, and access to maintain unequal relations of power. Within the social order the dominance of forms of civic engagement is maintained privileging officials and people of authority within social practices used to determine

accountability, verify factual information, and control access to process and procedures that regulate the participation of the engaged citizen. The next stage of the analysis involves considering what changes to the social order or practices are required for user-generated content to be considered a non-marginalized form of civic engagement.

Moving Past the Obstacles

The lack of attendance at the public meetings and forums cited in the artifacts and Sherry's performance at the school board meeting suggest that the dominant forms of civic engagement are anything but neutral and natural. As with letters to the editor and editorials, certain discursive performances are privileged over others, and citizens do not have equal access (Banks, 2006) to the social and literacy practices required. However, the marginalized forms of civic engagement involving user-generated content present their own issues of unequal access for citizens, as at the very least participation requires familiarity with an interface that gives them material access to the online newspaper.

In this regard, perhaps moving past the obstacles of anonymity, validity, and access is not possible. Is it possible to develop processes of self-identification that provides those invested in the dominant forms of civic engagement with citizenship verification and accountability, while at the same time provides citizens with protection from social consequences of public civic engagement? Is it possible to develop validation procedures that equally involve newspaper editors and users working together to verify facts and warrant claims? Is it possible to develop the means by which citizens can gain equal access, i.e., material, functional, experiential, critical, and transformational, to the social practices involved in participating in all forms of civic engagement? Can the vision of theorists and journalists invested in civic and participatory journalism for user-

generated content associated with online newspapers be taken up by stakeholders to support a more informed, civic-engaged citizenry and a more robust democracy? Is it possible to transform the uneven power relations between officials and newspaper editors in positions of authority and the citizens that they are elected to represent and hired to serve?

Perhaps a more immediate goal is to use the obstacles of anonymity, validity, and access as guides for opening up the practices of dominant and marginalized forms of civic engagement to include more citizens. The following list is an attempt at identifying proposed and promising practices that work toward this end.

- *Letter to the editor and editorials.* While newspaper editors may maintain their gatekeeping role for deciding which letters and editorials are and are not published—with the obstacles of anonymity and validity intact—they could make the social practices and acceptable forms of the written genres more accessible to citizens. The newspaper could make its decision-making processes and the criteria involved more transparent to the readers, as well as actively seek out opportunities to work with community groups and schools to provide guided practice writing letters and editorials.
- *Article comments and blog posts.* While users may wish to maintain their anonymity using a user name in order to avoid social (and potentially professional) consequences based on what they post to the online newspaper, users should consider self-identifying in ways that are useful for their readership. Most of the users who posted in the selected artifacts, self-identified in some way as a member of the community. Users may consider self-identifying in strategic

ways that may make their message more credible, e.g., affiliating as a resident of a particular part of the community, affiliating as a registered voter and tax payer of a particular ward. Blogger Brad Harris made the suggestion not only for users to self-identify with biographical information, but also to cite the sources of information they include and enable other users to respond directly (Artifact 6), a feature that can be turned on or off in this online newspaper. Biographical and contextual information may provide users with a frame of reference for considering a user's comments.

- *Speaking at a public forum or meeting.* The lack of attendance at public meetings and forums cited in the artifacts indicates that the social practices that comprise the meetings are potentially unwelcoming or unfamiliar to the citizens of the community; Sherry's performance is an example of this. If stakeholders are interested in increasing attendance and participation at these meetings, they need to make them more accessible (Banks, 2006) and welcoming. While city council and school board meetings may be constrained by the conventions of Robert's Rules of Order, public forums hosted by the newspaper and other community groups should consider new ways of structuring social participation to avoid the highly regulatory and public performance of a single individual addressing a panel of officials in front of an audience. Perhaps focus groups organized around community issues would be one way to restructure social participation so that the emphasis is not placed on an individual performance.
- *Addressing a public official via user-generated content.* The school board member responding to Brad Harris in Artifact 5 suggested that users contact

officials directly using the official's e-mail address. However, the process of contacting an official directly removes a layer of the anonymity involved with user-generated content. If users sent an e-mail directly to an official, their personal e-mail address would be visible to the officials. Whereas when users address officials via user-generated content, their personal e-mail address is protected and their identity is based on their user-name and the biographical information they provide in their posts. Perhaps an intermediate social practice would be for officials to set up user accounts with the newspaper for users to contact them directly via user-generated content associated with the online newspaper. While the managing editor has been unable to convince the local school district superintendent to set up a blog on the newspaper website, he has hosted a video webcast forum, in which users submitted questions and comments via user-generated content to a live video Q&A session with the superintendent. The managing editor read the users' comments and questions to the superintendent on video camera, and the superintendent responded in real time. This process put the superintendent in direct communication with users who were available to post comments and questions, a social practice that the superintendent was reluctant to engage in due to the anonymity of the users.

These suggested and promising practices are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather examples of ways various stakeholders can begin to consider how social practices of dominant and marginalized forms (in particular, user-generated content) of civic engagement can be transformed along the obstacles of anonymity, validity, and access.

Discussion

The last stage of Fairclough's (2001) analysis is to turn the analysis "reflexively back on itself, asking for instance how effective it is as critique, whether it does or can contribute to social emancipation.... (p. 127)

My investment in considering user-generated content as a form of civic engagement is grounded in my experiences as a classroom teacher in this community. Parents and guardians would often relate their discomfort directly addressing school district officials and the board for fear of the social consequences they and their school children may face as a result. Some parents and guardians related their positive experiences posting user-generated content to articles and blogs associated with the community's online newspaper. In my view, the social practices around posting user-generated content involved parents and guardians giving voice (in writing) to concerns that they may not otherwise have expressed. However, I overestimated how various stakeholders, e.g., school district officials, took up this content. I set out in this study to understand the obstacles that prevent user-generated content from being taken up as a dominant form of civic engagement—I very much wanted the vision of theorists and journalists invested in civic and participatory journalism to be realized.

That being said, I have come to understand that while obstacles of anonymity, validity, and access remain in ways that reinforce the uneven power dynamics between citizens and city and school district officials, this order of discourse has the potential to be challenged in every interaction within each of the forms of civic engagement identified, both dominant and marginalized. Performances like Sherry's remind us that

social emancipation and equality is often not the stuff of radical restructuring of orders of discourse, but rather the stuff of individual, discursive acts of resistance that challenge “the ways things are.” While this is one study of six months of user activity of one online newspaper, my hope is that this critique will incite dialogue and further investigations of user-generated content as a social practice embedded in particular cultural contexts.

Appendix A

News article and comment counts

Codes	July	August	September	October	November	December	6-Month Totals	Total Comments	Comments per article
Auto Accident	35	17	17	48	14	30	161	251	1.56
Accident	24	30	36	18	10	13	131	244	1.86
Local Government	74	74	57	80	80	58	423	1433	3.39
Death	26	12	7	17	4	12	78	469	6.01
Human Interest	55	51	19	20	28	15	188	190	1.01
Local Economy	27	23	37	25	36	30	178	753	4.23
Local Interest	179	218	172	209	203	179	1160	1949	1.68
National Government	16	18	26	49	23	9	141	1365	9.68
Non-Violent Crime	42	28	28	23	18	19	158	822	5.20
Official Report	57	82	83	79	74	73	448	87	0.19
Schools	50	98	92	120	99	76	535	3705	6.93
Sex Crime	14	4	4	18	12	9	61	726	11.90
State Government	13	18	13	22	14	17	97	238	2.45
Violent Crime	31	25	42	24	48	31	201	1246	6.20
Totals	643	698	633	752	663	571	3960	13478	3.40

Appendix B
History of local school district levies

Date	Ballot Issue	Fiscal Consequence
1997	1% income tax approved	
1998	Two property taxes repealed	
2001	2.9-mil permanent improvement levy renewed	
2002	1% income tax renewed	
2004	Bond issue approved	
2005	2.9-mil permanent improvement levy renewed	
Nov 2006	7.9-mil levy fails	\$5.1 million in cuts
May 2007	1% income tax renewed	
Nov 2007	4.5-mil levy fails	
Aug 2008	9.5-mil levy fails	
Nov 2008	7.7-mil levy fails	\$1.8 million in cuts

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