Media Re:public Project
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A Typology for Media Organizations

Information technology is fundamentally changing the media environment. Major changes have included the loss of advertising and subscription revenue for commercial media companies and the remarkable drop in media creation and distribution costs which has enabled individuals to report and comment on news, at times reaching audience sizes previously accessible only to large media companies. Alongside the mounting challenges for traditional media companies, there also has been considerable optimism over the potential for participatory media to engage and inform wide audiences in fundamentally new ways.

The Media Re:public Project at the Berkman Center seeks to evaluate the state of participatory media and assess how these new media models fit into the changing media environment. This research is driven by a few important questions, including the degree to which participatory media enriches the information environment, and the relationship between the trends in participatory media and the challenges that have been accumulating for traditional media for many years.

Defining Media Types

One of the milestones in this project is the creation of a typology of media models. This typology is intended to provide a framework for further analysis, to clarify our ideas, and to generate hypotheses for future testing and study. As with any model, these typologies are abstractions from and simplifications of reality. In this case, reality is the great variation and complexity of the current media environment. The purpose of these typologies is not to overlook or discount the important details necessary for the study and understanding of media enterprises and relationships but to focus attention on those aspects that we believe to be most central to the analysis of the changes in the media landscape.

Our preliminary work and discussions have led to the realization that a typology of participatory media alone would not suffice and that including the relationships with traditional media is essential. Our early discussions focused on business models. Before the explosion of blogs and other forms of content created by "the people formerly known as the audience," the mass media was

overwhelmingly the product of "professionals," used here to refer to people who are regularly paid for their work in a specific area. The few exceptions proved the rule: letters to the editor; the relatively recent invention of the op-ed page;[1] radio call-in shows; and community access cable TV.[2]

In the United States, a range of business models give mainstream media the ability to pay professional journalists, editors and others to produce news stories and other informational content. These business models include:
- Advertising only (broadcast TV and radio, free newspapers);
- Combination of advertising, subscription, and retail sales (most newspapers and magazines, cable TV);
- Subscription only (non-profit and/or specialized publications, premium cable, satellite TV);
- Combination of sponsorship, subscription, membership, grants, and public funding (public broadcasting, municipal newsletters).

Although these same media business models exist in other developed democracies, the overall news media environment in those countries is far less reliant on advertising. In most other countries of the world, state and/or public media play a far more prominent role in the information environment than in the United States.

Despite these national differences, the profession of journalism is considered to transcend the financial model of the media outlet in question. We expect that a journalist working for USA Today observes the same ethical guidelines and professional practices as a reporter for the News Hour on PBS or for that matter the state-owned France 3 TV channel. All are meant to be working on behalf of the people, in search of the truth, without regard for the interests of advertisers or politicians. There have always been discussions, often heated, about the strength of the firewall between editorial[3] and advertising departments, the inherent biases of media outlets based on the position of their owners or the demographics of their staff and the relative professional quality of the work of specific individuals or publications. Nevertheless, the basic paradigm was accepted. The source of the money was not supposed to affect decisions made by individual journalists or editors.

Perhaps for this reason, much of the debate about the growth of non-professional media content creation has focused on issues of professionalism: can authors without training, supervision and the support of an institution be trusted? What will stop them from pushing a political agenda, spreading misinformation, attacking their personal enemies?

The new authors have consistently denied these supposed dangers. On the one hand, they cite the many cases when the traditional media themselves have published false, inadequate, biased, or otherwise compromised information. In online media, they say, the ability of the audience to react, comment and correct creates a system with enough fact-checkers and editors to fix any errors.

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[1] …the first modern op-ed page is generally attributed to the New York Times, which initiated its page on September 21, 1970, under editorial page editor John B. Oakes. Oakes had argued for the page's creation for ten years; when it appeared it instantly became one of the paper's most popular features. At the time, Oakes wrote that his motive in creating the page was to provide a forum for non-Times employees to have their say.

[2] Created by the Cable Communications Act of 1984 (http://www.publicaccess.org/cableact.html)

[3] 'Editorial' is used throughout in the broader sense of the components of any publication or broadcast that is not paid advertising.

Leaving aside the tendency of both sides to make unequal comparisons (e.g. the NY Times' investigative team vs. 9/11 conspiracy bloggers; Talking Points Memo vs. Jason Blair) there is clearly some truth in both narratives.

When considering how to define the relationships between traditional and participatory media, we first looked at two facets of the business model: whether the entity was for-profit or not, and whether content was authored by people who were paid or not.
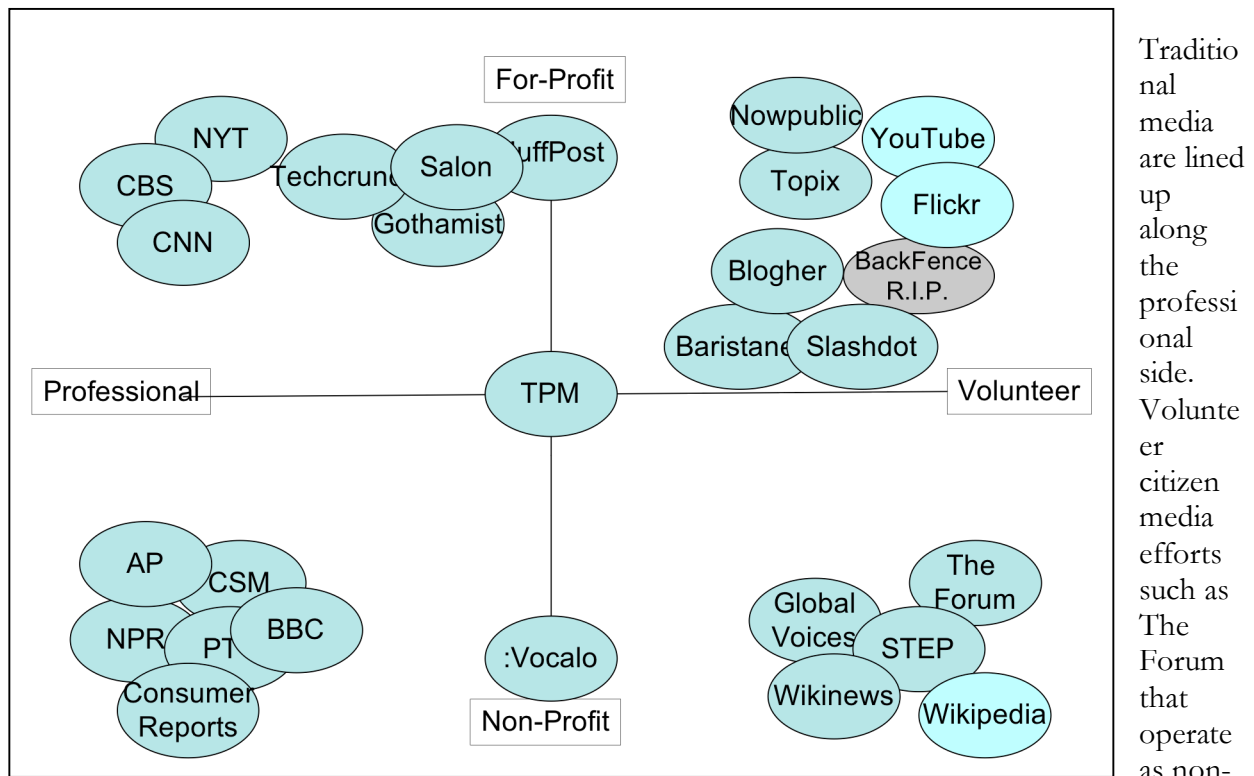
Traditional media are lined up along the professional side. Volunteer citizen media efforts such as The Forum that operate as non-


profits and where content is created by members of the community, are in the lower right quadrant. This is also the quadrant where Wikipedia, so often held out as an example of the possibilities of networked volunteer collaboration, is located.

The upper right quadrant holds the geese that lay the golden eggs – the content is created by volunteers (or other sources not paid by the publisher) and the publisher makes money based on selling advertising against that free content. The obvious success stories in this area are sites such as YouTube and Flickr.

There are many past and current attempts to achieve similar success with sites based on citizen contributions of news articles, but the results to date are inconclusive. Companies like Backfence (aimed at serving small communities, currently not active), Topix (customizing content and supporting conversations based on location), Nowpublic and many others are based on gaining audience (and hence advertising) thanks to content created or gathered by a community of users. But there is as yet no strong evidence that this all-volunteer model that has been rightly celebrated for its success in the Open Source software movement, in Wikipedia, and in some of the popular political or technical sites, can support the broader reporting functions of traditional news media.

But the simple categorization of entities with content created by these new authors along a commercial-to-non-profit spectrum is not adequate to describe the variety of the participatory media world. In some cases, commercial and non-profit sites face identical challenges, while two commercial sites may function completely differently. For example, in the Knight Citizen News Network directory of citizen news sites, over half of respondents identified their sites as for-profit or "For-profit, even if you're not profitable yet." But many of those organizations reported having no paid staff. It seems likely that many of these sites are more similar to the 30% who reported "non-profit" or "informal" business models than they are different.

Citizen Media Business Models
(based on 617 directory entries)
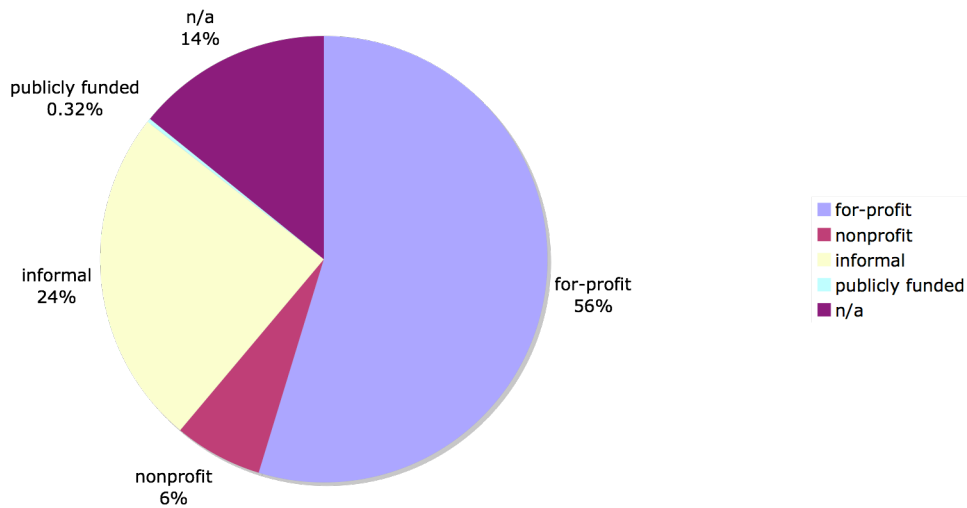
Source: Berkman analysis of data from the Knight Citizen News Network's directory of Citizen Media Sites: http://www.kcnn.org/citmedia_sites/

In moving away from the commercial/non-commercial professional/amateur model, we considered a lengthy list of media characteristics, from their size (in employees, revenues, audience), to the scope of topics covered and the characteristics of their target audiences. Eventually, we created a generalized framework that covers all media types. Some of these models are more commonly found in traditional media and others found only in the new media. Despite the inclusive framework, we focus most of our attention on new media types and online media.

This typology is based upon the functions that different elements of the media world play in the creation and distribution of news. We start by looking at functional roles involved in the production and distribution of news:

Authors - We define an author as anyone who contributes to the creation or elaboration of a story, whether through original reporting or by adding significant value to an existing story. This might mean adding new information to an evolving story, providing additional context, or lending clarity or analysis. Authors may be reporters, columnists, producers, bloggers, podcasters, filmmakers or

cell phone camera owners. We do not assume that an author is a person that makes her/his living in this way.

We divide authors into two broad categories: 1) **Reporters** – those who create new stories; and 2) **Commentators** – those who elaborate on and add value to existing stories. Commentators may include columnists, editorial page writers, television commentators or a blogger writing about a story found in a newspaper. The commentator category also includes bridge-bloggers and translators as they often make a story accessible to a new audience. The creators of video mash-ups fall within this category as well.

Drawing a clean distinction between reporters and commentators is impossible. Moreover, many if not most authors do both. Yet the difference between those on the far ends of the spectrum, from primary news gathering to pure opinion, is too important to ignore.

Editors – Editors are people other than the author who contribute to shaping a story prior to publication.   Editorial duties can include assigning stories; selecting and curating third-party materials; fact-checking, promoting or killing stories; editing stories and commissioning additional reporting.

Publishing – We define the publisher as the person or entity that controls the release of the story and determines the terms by which the audience and other media outlets can access and redistribute the story. Publishing entails making the story available on the venues controlled by the publisher, whether over the airwaves, in print or on the web.

Distributors – Distribution includes any activity to further the availability of the published story or the publication containing it, such as delivering newspapers to subscribers and retail customers, "reverse-publishing" content from an online publication to paper, distributing via information agencies, sending the story (or a link to it) to a mailing list, podcasting or streaming audio or video, distributing audio or video materials via satellite, cable, or on disc. For many media companies, publishing and distribution are largely the same process.

Audience – This is the reader, listener, or viewer of any given story. Of course, any individual member of the audience can also perform any of the other functions. In addition, audience members can comment on stories within any of their places of publication. Within the typologies, we make a distinction between passive audience, those that only consume the news, and active audience, those that seek to add to, clarify or modify the news.   Audience may or may not contribute to the context for news and information.

In many cases, single individuals or groups fill multiple roles. Authors who self-publish (including solo bloggers) often carry out all of these functions themselves, including reporting, editing, fact-checking, and publishing. Publishers and distributors are often the same entity. Certain kinds of distributors make editorial decisions.

In addition to the functional roles that are combined within a single media enterprise, the source of content and control over distribution are key elements in this typology. Using these functional roles, we next describe five different ways that these roles are combined to create distinctly different media models.

Five Media Organization Models

Publishers

The *Publishers* are modeled on traditional media companies. These media outlets typically integrate all of the functional roles described above under the vertical control of one entity. They include reporters, commentators, and editors to produce stories, and manage the publishing and distribution of the stories to their audience. *Publishers* normally aim to build a loyal audience for a definable, consistent product and sell advertising and subscriptions. The overall editorial vision is more important than the identity or status of the authors and the publishers put significant effort, usually with a professional editorial staff, into maintaining those aspects of design, quality, timeliness, style, point of view, and coverage that they believe their target audience wants.

Publishers exist along a continuum based on the amount of primary reporting they do. Local newspapers and broadcasters have always included significant content from agencies or from networks to which they belong. With the previous barriers to entry for publishing removed and the geographic boundaries erased, this is the place where online publishing presents the greatest challenge to the traditional models. It is now relatively inexpensive to create a full-scale publication without many (or even any) staff reporters, relying on primary news gathering from other entities, such as news agencies. These online publications compete directly with traditional publishers that have expensive newsrooms to maintain.
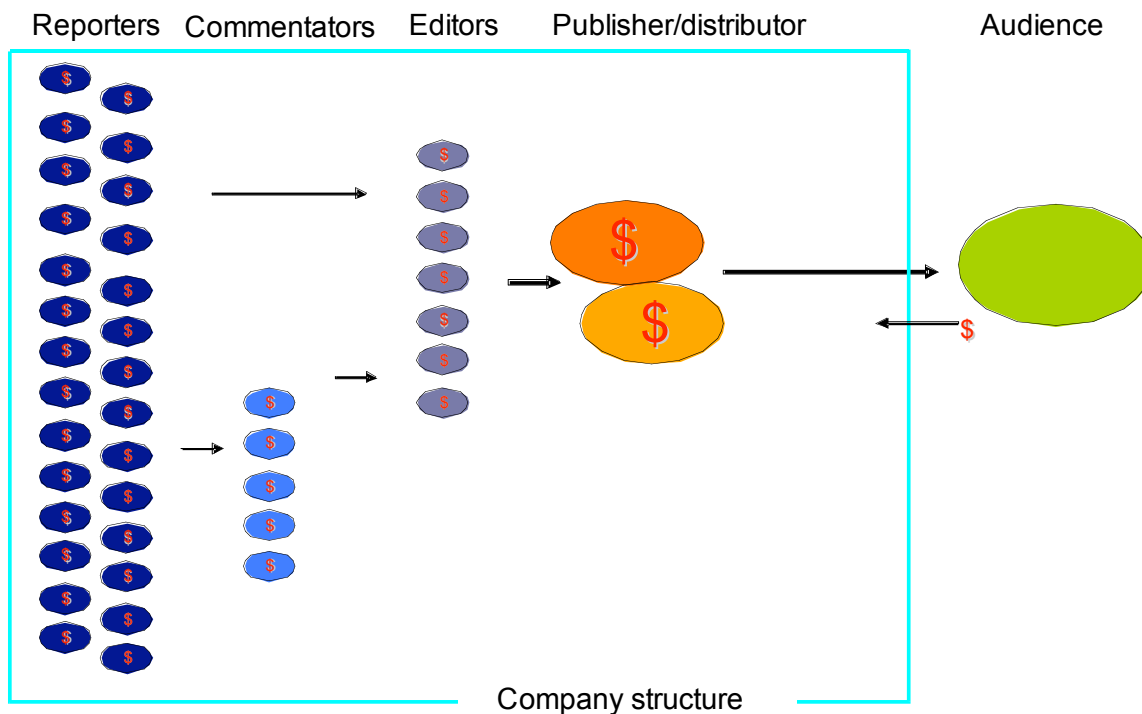

The clearest examples of *Publishers* are in offline traditional media, including print and television. These are also online-only media entities that fall within these type that draw heavily on the

traditional editorial and business models, in their news production, their marketing approach and financial strategy. Classic examples are Slate and Salon. A more recent appearance is the Huffington Post, which is a self-described "online newspaper." *Publishers* often produce large amounts of original reporting and commentary, but the output may vary considerably. The defining characteristic of the *Publisher* type is that the way stories are solicited, selected, edited, presented and released is determined by the publisher, not the author or other audience members. Another key characteristic defines this media type; the story production, editorial and distribution functions are carried out by different individuals or departments within the entity. This division of labor as well as the size of these media types means that a substantial cash flow is needed. (In most cases, earning money is the point of the enterprise.) For online *Publishers,* low distribution costs and the ability to aggregate volunteer labor has reduced the costs of running such an enterprise, but not enough to eliminate the need for revenue. Advertising and subscription revenue models have dominated this category.

News Agency

The *News Agency* acts much in the same way as a *Publisher* except that it resells its stories to other distributors rather than seeking out its own audience. The type relies on primary reporting as well as maintaining the quality of its stories and the breadth of its coverage. Reuters and AP are prime examples of this type, both of which now operate in online news markets as well.
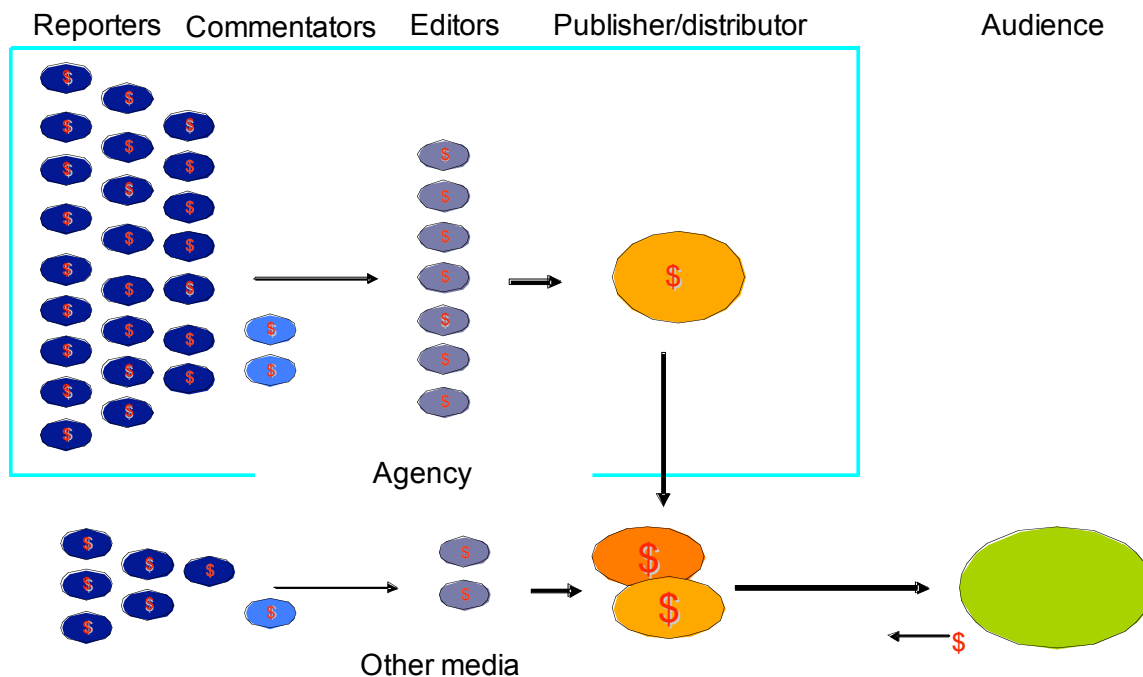
However, in the online world, the distinction between *Publishers* and *News Agencies* is less clear. This stems largely from the changes media companies are experiencing in distribution and revenue models. Because online content is so easily distributed and more difficult to lockdown, the link between publishers and audience is losing some of its definition compared to the offline world. Online readers are less likely to pay to read an article. Readers may also read selected articles from multiple sources and rely less on a single publication for news.

Global Voices is a notable example that might fall with the *Publishers* category given its production of news and commentary and the well-defined audience. However, it is most successful when treated as a news service with others redistributing the content to new users with no prior relationship with Global Voices.

The Author-centric model

This model captures those instances when a single author or group of authors controls the publication of stories. In contrast to the *Publishers* model, these authors also often serve multiple roles within the organization, acting as editors and distributors. In the case of a single blogger, the blogger is the organization.

This model has grown rapidly over the Internet, though is not restricted to the online environment. An example of the offline version of this model would be the self-published newsletter that is distributed by the postal system.

Author-centric sites are limited by the time and resources of their authors. Certainly there are many differences in the styles and formats adopted by different bloggers, as dissected thoroughly by others. This does not, however, change the logic of this model. As these entities grow, they may incorporate elements of *Audience-Contribution* or *Publisher* sites.

Reporter   Commentators   Editors   Publisher Distributor   Audience

In terms of affecting the mainstream news agenda, *Author-centric* sites have the most impact when they are amplified by others. When multiple bloggers take up the same topic, and extended and passionate discussions bubble up in the comments section, effectively creating a virtual community, the mainstream media is more likely to pick up and report on the "buzz in the blogosphere". Although research to date is inconclusive, it appears to be more common for stories to originate in the mainstream media and subsequently amplified in the blogosphere.

The low cost of distribution means that a dedicated author who can devote sufficient time is able to operate a small media outlet with no revenue. This is not unique to the online world though. What is new is the fact that the size of the possible audience is no longer linked to the amount of money invested in distribution.

Online advertising does offer a potential for revenue, which can range from nominal to substantial. Many authors create blogs or other sites in order to promote themselves and further their offline careers as writers, journalists, book authors, artists, lawyers, and so on.

Aggregator

The *Aggregator* is a media type particularly suited for the online world. The *Aggregator* employs no reporters or commentators and, in the "algorithm model," may have no editors as well. The *Aggregator* compiles news stories from other media outlets and redistributes them to readers. Yahoo News and Google News are two prime examples of this type.

Reporters   Commentators   Editors   Publisher/distributor

Company structure
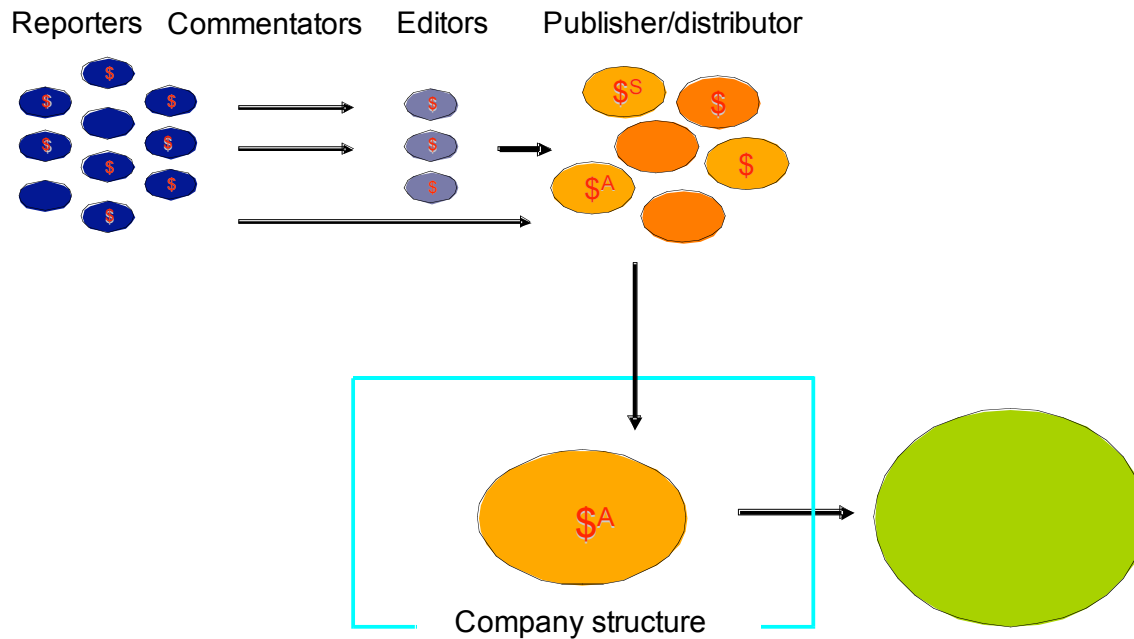
There are offline examples of *Aggregators*, including the Reader's Digest and the Week. Print versions of *Aggregators* rely on subscription or direct sales. Online versions are financed almost exclusively by advertising revenue.

RSS feeds and readers, among other tools, allow individuals to be their own aggregators, or to design their own aggregation model within an existing aggregator.

Audience-Contribution Model

In the *Audience-Contribution* media model, content creation relies on significant contributions from the community of audience-contributors who were not involved in founding the entity. Like the *Author-centric* or *Publisher* models, these sites may serve audiences that are defined geographically or by any number of common interests or needs. The audience that creates the content may be small or large, weakly or strongly linked, permanent or ephemeral.

A classic success story in the *Audience-Contribution* model is Slashdot, the technology-oriented site with a highly active community of contributors writing about their areas of expertise. Slashdot is based on a system that deploys volunteer editors and rankers to maintain standards. The *Audience-Contribution* type also includes social media sites like YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, and social networks

like Facebook, which provide platforms for multiple communities, both long-term and ephemeral. Social bookmarking sites, tagging aggregators, and recommendation and review sites are other examples of online media sites that fall within this category. Although the incremental value added by an individual user is small, the aggregate contributions of the community create a valuable product. These platform-based communities and the manner in which they process news and information deserve greater study.

There are many interesting commercial experiments that seek to replicate the success of entertainment and social interaction communities in community-driven general news sites. Some of these combine news search, localization and aggregation features with citizen reporting and community discussion tools and platforms. Many *legacy* media companies are also looking for ways to leverage their existing audience and brand recognition to create communities around the online versions of their product. There are no iconic successes in this genre yet. Many continue to search for the "secret sauce" that makes an online content-creating community viable.

| Reporter | Commentators | Editors | Distributor | Audience |
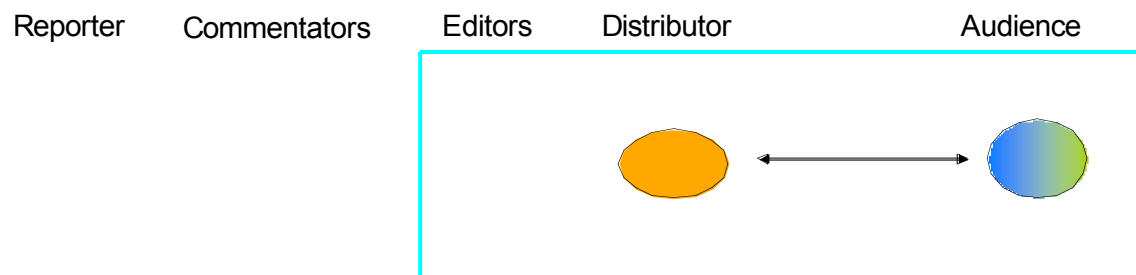
Chicago Public Radio's :Vocalo and Current.tv are two fascinating broadcast/online experiments in this area. Both rely on their audience for all or nearly all their content, and use social networking mechanisms on their sites. Both also have well-developed strategies for using very experienced professional staff to guide and package the audience-produced materials.

Without adequate levels of participation from the audience a community-driven site fails. The key difference between Digg and readers that respond to a story on Boston.com is that Boston.com will have the same content available regardless of how many readers actively interact with it. Boston.com is merely appropriating interactive features similar to those on community sites. The *Audience-Contribution* models are the most complex and fragile, but also potentially the most interesting. Unlike the other two models, the *Audience-Contribution* model has few analogues in the traditional media world.

An obvious attraction of the *Audience-Contribution* model is the potential for gathering a large quantity of free content. Many of these sites operate with a community ranking system to help users find the best quality content, and a policing function to remove offensive or illegal material. Compared to other media models, this type can generate material with a very small staff. The major expenses are generally the development of the technical platform, although some add significant editorial value to contributed materials.

Evolving Niches in the Media Ecosystem

These five models described here currently coexist in the media environment. In many ways they complement one another, and in some cases depend directly upon one another. In other cases, they directly compete with one another. One of the areas of greatest interest to this project is to identify and document how new media models augment or replace existing media.

Participatory media are viewed by some as a useful complement to traditional media, challenging it to perform better and to stop wasting energy on the things that others can do better. Others portray new media as a threat to the very existence of traditional journalism, a parasite bent on destroying its host. Traditional media packages, particularly the daily newspaper, will have to adapt to the addition of new players in the space. This means competing against free content and lower cost means of aggregating information. Editorial page writers have been joined by innumerable political commentators from the blogosphere. Classified advertising, product reviews and movie schedules are more easily accessible and searchable online than on paper. The impact of *Aggregators* on the print media is unmistakable. This model of course depends on the primary reporting of others, particularly news agencies.

Given the profusion of free online news sources, the competition for advertising revenues is increasing. Although traditional media are certainly selling online advertising as well, the prices do not come close to making up for the losses offline. As one newspaper executive explained, "We're getting 10 cents to the dollar." This is affirmed by statistics, that show that nearly 90% of online advertising revenues go to search advertising, with traditional media and others fighting over the remaining 10%. The unbundling of traditional media products seem inevitable. The questions are thus to what extent this disaggregated pieces can survive on their own and what reaggregation approaches will prove viable.

The disaggregation of media functions and the resulting changes to organizations imply that products that were previously cross-subsidized will be required to thrive on their own merits, or at least their own funding base. Many elements of the media environment will continue to be well covered through market-based mechanisms and professional salaried reporters, particularly the most popular media topics. Many niche topics already are well-served by new media entities. The outstanding question is which important news segments will not be adequately covered by either of these, how and when we'll know this, and how to best address these gaps in coverage.

Analysis of the current environment suggests that the *Author-centric, Aggregator* and *Audience-Contribution* models are robust media models online, though certainly not in the terms of traditional commercial media. Much of the success of these models is the ability to compete with low-cost content creation and distribution. Media organizations following these different models will compete with other news organizations, both within and between these categories. Many enterprises will succumb to the competition. Each of these models operates in distinctly different ways and will serve different purposes in the media environment. It is reasonable to project that all of these models will survive and complement one another, particularly in large markets. The future is less clear for organizations in smaller markets. Is the next successful incarnation of the small town newspaper more likely to be the *Author-centric* model, the *Audience-Contribution* website or a modified version of the *Publisher* model? These questions are most important and challenging in markets where only one or two entities are likely to survive.

What happens in the structure of media markets depends greatly on the ability of media organizations, both large traditional organizations and smaller entities, to continue to collect subscription revenue while competing against advertising-funded and volunteer-based content generation. The competitive edge of low-cost media models is compelling. However, it is reasonable to be deeply skeptical about the ability of these media types to replace the primary news gathering of the *Publisher* and *News Agency* models. Participatory and online substitutes do not appear to be viable substitutes for this broad news gathering role, though able to supplement and expand this coverage.

Identifying questions for further study

This brief description of media typologies portrays a rapidly changing media environment occupied by substantially different approaches to reporting news. We are convinced that online and participatory media organizations will play a meaningful and lasting role in the provision of news and analysis. However, the impact and effectiveness of these organizations is critically dependent on their interaction with other media types. Two of the media types might be able to survive on their own, the *Author-centric* and *Audience-Contribution* models, although even in these cases, they are much stronger as niche players in a large, diverse and vibrant media environment. The *Publisher* model from the world of traditional media is also able to survive alone, but is also the most threatened by new media entities. The future is unquestionably one of niche players and the biggest questions relate to the roles of different players. How will primary reporting be funded? Which models and combinations of models work best for different topics and markets? To what extent is the future of competition in media between the various niches within the enterprises or between enterprises? At the core of these questions is the issue of coverage and the quality of reporting. Using comparative analysis of case studies and other tools, this project aims to refine these questions and assess the best methods to answer these questions.