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Training or improvisation?
Citizen journalists and their educational backgrounds – a comparative view

Abstract: *While citizen journalists (citJs) hope to bring new impulses to mass media performance, it is often asked whether they are adequately trained for the production of 'newsworthy' stories. This paper focuses on educational aspects of citizen journalism, which, to date, have largely been disregarded by empirical research. A comparative analytical design illustrates the different ways in which citJs acquire and develop the skills that are necessary to undertake journalistic activities in the different journalism cultures throughout Europe. The authors carried out a multi-national analysis in six European countries (UK, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, and Poland). In each country, an extensive desk study helped to map the field of citizen journalism and highlight the most relevant examples. Semi-structured interviews with 54 practitioners in the field (representing different types of citizen journalism) made it possible to identify the alternative strategies that citJs employ to prepare themselves for news production initiatives. The research demonstrates that the educational backgrounds of citJs display differences as well as similarities – both within and across journalism cultures. While some of the actors in the field have a clear idea of what constitutes good journalism (and sometimes even aspire to work in a mainstream media organization), others seem to care little about journalistic standards and have only a vague idea about the identity of the profession. On the basis of these insights, the paper develops a typology of citJs that takes into account both their education and their journalistic scope.*

Keywords: news production, online journalism, citizen journalism, audience participation, user-generated content, journalism education

1. Introduction: citizen journalism and a profession in crisis

In the networked media environments of today, participatory strategies of content production are becoming more and more important. In this context, both newsroom experience and media research have shown that practices relating to the field of citizen journalism may lead to several advantages, such as easier access to neglected topics, more diversity, more authenticity etc. (e.g. Bruns 2011). However, despite these advantages, citizen journalists (citJs) around the world are facing severe criticism, as the quality of their coverage seems to be low in many instances (e.g. Holt and Karlsson 2015), and their motivation for publishing media content often follows "idiosyncratic self-interests" rather than professional journalistic standards (Fröhlich, Quiring, and Engesser 2012). This discrepancy leads to the obvious question of whether citJs are adequately trained for the production of 'newsworthy' stories.

What kind of background do citJs have? Do they receive any professional training or other practical advice to help them with their news production? And what actually motivates them to engage in journalistic work processes? To date questions like these have largely been disregarded by empirical research, but they seem to be important if citizen journalism wants to be taken seriously as a functional alternative to traditional mass media.

At present the need for such an alternative is being debated vigorously all over Europe – and beyond. Across very different journalism cultures, the journalistic profession is facing a severe crisis of confidence. For example, while the British system of media self-regulation has been shattered by the scandals exposed by the Leveson Inquiry (Jempson, Powell, and Reardon, forthcoming), German and Austrian journalists – because of their critical coverage of anti-Islamic protests – are accused by right-wing activists of being representatives of a "lying press" (*Lügenpresse*) – a politically charged fighting term that was common in Nazi propaganda (Hagen 2015). In Poland a new, highly controversial media law threatens press freedom (Szynol, Pacula, and Kus 2016), whereas in Switzerland public service broadcasting is under massive political pressure due to a Federal Popular Initiative that intends to abolish license fees (FMEC 2015). Similarly, political conditions in Italy restrain the technology-driven change of the news industry (Cornia 2016), and at the beginning of 2016 the press market is facing a new phase of concentration. In all of these and other instances, participatory online news outlets – that do not solely rely on official sources, but include the voice of audience members – are expected to offer new stimuli for media pluralism and democracy (e.g. Carpentier 2011). But, of course, the idea of user participation in the process of journalistic news production can only be positive if the participating actors know how to play to its potentials.

The research presented in this paper analyzed the backgrounds of citJs in digital media surroundings from a transcultural perspective. Focusing on the situation in both Western and Eastern Europe, it shows the different ways in which non-professional journalistic actors acquire and develop the skills that are necessary to undertake journalistic activities. In order to do this, a two-step research design was used in six countries that represent different journalistic cultures and different patterns of citizen journalism development: the UK, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, and Poland. In each country, an extensive desk study helped to map the field of citizen journalism and highlight the most relevant examples. Semi-structured interviews with practitioners (representing different types of citizen journalism within each country) made it possible to identify the prevailing educational strategies in the field.[1] Taken together, the analysis laid the groundwork for the development of a typology of citizen journalism education that may also have practical consequences for the implementation of future training programs, particularly in the case of participatory journalism in legacy news media. Before the empirical studies are presented in more detail, we take a closer look at the theoretical concepts that they are based on.

2. Definitions, concepts and open questions

In the wake of the digital revolution, research about user participation in public communication has become a favorite topic for media scholars around the world, and the term 'citizen journalism' still seems to be one of their essential catchwords. Different

facets of this topic have been analyzed in many studies (see, e.g., the overviews by Domingo et al. 2008; Lutz, Hoffmann, and Meckel 2014; or the editor's introduction to this special issue of *Journalism Practice*), which are hard to keep track of – and which often even blur the understanding of what citizen journalism actually is.

In our research project (and similar to Wall 2015), we followed a functional approach to define the object of our study. In this view, *citizen journalism* can be understood as *a mode of public communication that fulfills the same tasks as professional journalism*, i.e. the selection and dissemination of current topics for the self-monitoring of society. However, in the case of citizen journalism, *the relevant contents are produced by non-professional actors*, mostly media users who avail themselves of the participatory potential of digital media (Lewis, Kaufhold, and Lasorsa 2010). Their contributions can appear in various forms and on different levels – e.g. as a single photo or a video that is included in a journalistic production, as a news story that is completely authored by a citJ, or even as a blog or website that continuously publishes non-professional journalistic contents (Nah, Yamamoto, Chung, and Zuercher 2015).

In sociological journalism theory, it has long been customary to describe journalism as a self-organized social system with a clearly defined identity and widely recognized internal "programs" (i.e. rules and conventions) that guarantee the system's functionality (e.g. Görke and Scholl 2006). In this theoretical approach, other social systems (such as politics, economics, law, art, sports etc.), as well as the audience, were usually located in the environment of journalism, thus acting as "receivers" of journalistic communication, but being excluded from the production of news content. In contrast to this notion, technological developments of recent years have now made it necessary to think of audience members as active "produsers" (Bruns 2008), who are thus turning into an integral component of the journalism system (Loosen and Schmidt 2012). This trend has consequences for the journalistic mode of operation: on the one hand, the inclusion of the audience may bring new stimuli to a profession in crisis; on the other hand, it also nourishes the fear of a dissolution of journalistic standards, due to many of the newly empowered citJs lacking professional training.

Although academic analyses of citizen journalism are multifaceted, the educational background of citJs and its influence on production processes has not been a major concern of empirical media and journalism research up to now. While Deuze et al. (2007), as well as Domingo et al. (2008), have published seminal publications on participatory journalism, others, such as Hermida and Thurman (2007), have approached the issue of citizen journalism from the perspective of user-generated content. This latter area of research in particular has produced several studies, focusing not only on evolving production routines, but especially on the (shifting) boundary work between professional control and open participation (Lewis 2012; Nah et al. 2015). Lately, however, research is increasingly focusing on the people who stand behind

citizen journalism, what personal and social contexts encourage people to engage in the field (Kim and Lowrey 2015) as well as their professional values with regard to journalism, as seen by consumers and creators of citizen journalism (Holton et al. 2013).

However, most of these studies completely ignore the question about whether these citJs have ever been trained journalistically. By doing so, they take for granted that editorial output by laypeople magically becomes journalism, showing a blind spot when it comes to journalism education for non-professional actors. To a large extent it is exactly this kind of journalism-related educational context and experience that determine the quality of the editorial outcome, the professional norms and values, the practices, and eventually the way that citizens act as journalists.

Taking into account previous researches (Canter 2013; Nip 2007; Wall, 2015;) and the polymorphic nature of citizen journalism, we developed an integrated pyramid model of citizen journalism to exemplify not only the different kinds of citizen journalism, but also the different levels of autonomy and media-relation (see Figure 1). This model shapes also our strategies in selecting interviewees.

(FIGURE 1 HERE)

The base of the pyramid is composed of *individual or small-team citizen journalism* – and includes the largest group of initiatives because the implementation of such projects comes with several advantages: they request significantly smaller investments in infrastructure and less embedded production routines, but they also allow better insights into the audiences (Singer, forthcoming). This level includes highly individualistic and specialized projects such as hyperlocal news sites or (niche) news blogs run by non-professional (teams of) journalists. Their websites are located outside the institutionalized media field and thus have a limited audience, but are known in their local areas or in their topical field, which is why they might have more insight about their audience. The media-relation of such initiatives is low, with the exception of occasional collaborations with local or regional media, to non-existent – and thus the autonomy of the amateur journalists is very high, given that they are in control of the whole news production process.

The intermediate level of the pyramid concerns a different kind of citizen journalism that is more complex in terms of organizational structures and production processes. They are usually built around a central *platform* that collects contributions from different citJs with no or only limited connections between them. Such citizen journalism sites occasionally employ professional journalists. However, professional journalists are not merely used for diversity purposes, but rather to edit the contributions and to gain legitimacy within a new organizational field (Lindner, Connell, and Meyer 2015). As many of these citizen journalism platforms have an editorial staff, there is more control of the journalistic production process, although the organizational and creative

constraints may vary significantly. Similarly, the relationship between these platforms and established news media is closer, as laypeople working as journalists cover different roles for (local) news outlets “which flow between source, resource and collaborator” (Canter 2013).

The top-level form of citizen journalism can be labeled *participatory journalism* and it is strongly connected to the established news media and therefore located within the institutionalized media field. The editorial control by professional journalists is high, as contributors are not usually able to publish articles with limited control by professional journalists – although there are exceptions, such as the “Comment is Free” section at the UK daily newspaper *The Guardian*.

The understanding of journalistic communication on the different levels of our pyramid model, of course, stands in sharp contrast to the traditional notion of journalism as a profession.

Based on the literature review, we formulate a first overall research question that focuses on the state of the art of citizen journalism in each analyzed country.

- ORQ: How developed is citizen journalism in the six analyzed countries?

On the grounds of the findings related to the overall research question, the subsequent research questions concentrated on the educational aspects and its corollaries such as the motives for becoming a citizen journalism and the strategies for continuous education. Finally, we put the results about the educational characteristics newly into a comparative context:

- RQ1: To what extent have citJs benefitted from formal journalism training?
- RQ2: What are the motives of citJs for engaging in what they do?
- RQ3: What strategies of on-the-job training (if any) do citJs implement in order to meet traditional journalistic standards and/or keep up with the latest innovations in journalism?
- RQ4: How do these issues differ between the analyzed levels of citizen journalism and across countries?

3. Methodology: a two-step approach to understanding citizen journalists

In order to answer these research questions, a two-step empirical research process was carried out in six Eastern and Western European countries (Austria, Germany, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, and the UK), which represent different journalistic cultures within the continent (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 2012), as well as different sizes of media markets. The research included a) systematic desk studies evaluating the environment and development of citizen journalism in each country and b) semi-structured interviews

with 54 citJs (nine in each of the six countries). These two steps were treated as complementary and integrated.

Our *desk study* included three consecutive stages. First, in order to tentatively map existent citizen journalism projects, we employed the “Google News Scraper” tool[2], provided by the Digital Methods Initiative (DMI). After identifying three key terms that usually serve to describe citizen journalism and translating them into the languages used in the countries analyzed (“citizen journalism”, “participatory journalism”, “collaborative journalism”), we searched for those terms with the help of the "Google News Scraper" for the period from October 1 to December 31, 2015. With this procedure, over 1,000 items were collected that included Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) produced by citizen journalism websites or referring to citizen journalism websites. From those links we identified websites and platforms that define themselves as either citizen journalism or alternatively as collaborative and participatory journalism – or that were described in that way by other news outlets.[3] Second, our URL collection was then amended by a traditional desk analysis based on evaluations of pre-existing registers of citizen journalism initiatives (such as *kiezblogs.de* in Germany or a collection of hyperlocal newsjournalism websites in the United Kingdom available at *localweblist.net*) and on queries made by using the national versions of relevant Internet search engines. Finally, whenever feasible, we also asked interviewees (see below) to add other projects to our list. This three-phase procedure enabled us to create a sample of projects that either defined themselves as citizen journalism, that are regarded by traditional media to be part of that field or that collaborators and practitioners themselves see as a part of the field.

In order to select citJs for our *semi-structured interviews*, each project was evaluated manually so as to generate additional background data. Thus, for each country, we developed a database containing: the URLs of the identified websites, the general type of citizen journalism (see Figure 1) they adhere to (individual/small-team, platform-based, participatory), the economic background of the initiative (profit/non-profit), the topics covered by the given website, their geographic scope (local, national, international, mixed), and an assessment of general relevance of the projects in the national media system. The interviewees were then handpicked on the basis of these criteria, with the aim of reaching the highest possible diversity of perspectives in each of the countries studied. In addition to the evaluated data, when they were first approached by us we made sure that every respondent had a continuous involvement in citizen journalism practices..

In each country, nine citJs were interviewed from March to April 2016 – with the help of a semi-structured interview outline that took into account different aspects of our topic (such as the citJs’ previous experiences in journalism, their educational background, the project that they were working on, the methods and scope of their journalistic work, as well as their ideas about journalistic standards and professional

ethics). The interviews were undertaken in the interviewees' native language and took place via a platform of the participant's choice (i.e. Skype, Google, telephone) or face-to-face – and on average were 45-50 minutes long. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed in full in the original languages. Afterwards, the authors produced an English-language report of roughly 2,000 words for each interview, in order to facilitate a comparative appraisal. Ultimately, these reports were evaluated with the help of a qualitative content analysis, using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to identify similarities and overarching concepts.[4]

Obviously our evaluation does not have statistical value. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the systematic approach of our desk analysis and that we received in-depth accounts from people who have insider knowledge about current trends and developments in the field of citizen journalism, we can claim a certain degree of generalizability for our results.

4. Results 1: Citizen journalism in six European countries – an overview

Although we carried out an elaborate and systematic strategy to identify citizen journalism platforms in the countries, our selection was far from comprehensive. Particularly at the base of our pyramid model, the field is so dynamic – new individual blogs come up almost every day, while others stop publishing – and many of the projects are so fragmented that it is impossible to trace them all. At the same time, almost all traditional media companies provide some kind of user participation and it is sometimes difficult to decide which initiative can be labeled as citizen journalism and which not. In case of doubt, our sampling strategy was inclusive rather than exclusive. In some instances we even included projects that explicitly claimed to be different from typical citizen journalism, where their characteristics precisely matched those of our functional definition. Despite these limitations, the desk analysis proved to be useful to substantiate our integrated model of citizen journalism and to grasp current tendencies related to each of its categories. In addition, the desk study allows to get an understanding of the state of development of citizen journalism in each of the analyzed country. This is crucial in order to put the results from our interview study into context, since the characteristics of citizen journalism with regard to the education of citJ might be contingent upon the disparities in the level of development due to specific cultural and social differences. The following paragraphs summarize some of the key findings from our desk study – with the aim of giving an overview over the general state of citizen journalism in six countriesand to illustrate which of the three types of citizen journalism initiatives are prevalent in which parts of the continent.

Participatory journalism: in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the UK, examples of citJs collaborating with the mainstream media are particularly numerous – such as the "reader reporters" (*Leserreporter*), which many newspapers invite to contribute additional material (mostly photographs or videos) to their print and online editions (e.g.

in the case of the influential German tabloid *Bild*). Many national quality media (e.g. the Austrian *Standard* or the British *Guardian*), as well as a large number of regional news outlets, allow users to contribute to their online communities. Such initiatives appear to be less developed in Italy and Poland. In Poland, the term “citizen journalism” was highly debated between 2007 and 2011, when different traditional media houses started their own platforms – but only few of them survived. Generally, our desk analysis found less evidence for the use of the label among mainstream media as compared to the other categories of our model.

Platform-based citizen journalism: the level of platform-based citizen journalism is the most perceptible across countries. In Italy and Poland these platforms use the terms “participatory” and “citizen” journalism interchangeably, and their use is mostly reflexive (i.e., they invest much time and effort to define and explain their mission). In many cases, alternative citizen news platforms have a local or hyperlocal approach (e.g. the Southwest-German *Heddesheimblog*/*Rheinneckarblog* or *Meine Südstadt* in Cologne), in order to fill the gaps in the regional media landscape created by the economic crisis. Similarly, there are various citizen journalism platforms in the UK: projects like the community-oriented website *People’s Voice Media* or the investigative citizen journalism platform *bellingcat* that are becoming increasingly relevant.

Individual/small-team citizen journalism: in each of the countries studied the individual level seems to be the one where the label of “citizen journalism” is applied the least homogeneously. There are several reasons for this: 1) the economic crisis offered a chance for small hyperlocal news sites to grow, but they appear in different guises (and have obviously run through a process of professionalization in countries like Germany and the UK); 2) their impact on public discourse is usually limited (in all countries); 3) they often cover specific (niche) topics (in all countries); 4) the most important individual blogs are often run by professional journalists (e.g. in Austria and Italy); 5) few of the initiatives define themselves as a form of citizen journalism (e.g. in Italy and Poland).

In order to assess and compare the development of citizen journalism in the sample countries, we accounted for both quantitative and qualitative indicators. We counted how many initiatives existed on the different levels of our model, and evaluated their structural features – for instance, their public visibility, their business models, their newsroom structures, their style of writing etc.[5] The state of citizen journalism differs widely – both across and within journalism cultures. Not surprisingly, those countries usually considered as highly professionalized (first and foremost: the UK and Germany) display an increasing number of participatory initiatives driven by the mainstream media. On average, the level of independent platforms appears to be the most developed, except for Switzerland. On the individual or small-team projects’ level, the number of examples was high all over Europe, but their impact did not match the initiatives on the other levels for the most part (with the exception of the UK).

5. Results 2: Citizen journalists between formal training and on-the-job experience

In order to address the research questions regarding the educational background of citizen journalism in more detail, it was necessary to look more closely at the second step of our empirical research process: the semi-structured interviews with practitioners in the field. Summarizing the richness of perspectives and points of view that we collected during our research means inevitably providing a straightforward overview over a very complex and nuanced landscape. Nonetheless, drawing on the accounts of our 54 interviewees, we were able to map and systematize the multi-colored world of citizen and collaborative journalism. Using a grounded approach to evaluate the interview reports, we provide a detailed look at some of the core topics discussed in this paper. Our findings are presented in the following sections with regard to a) the interviewees' *journalistic education* before entering citizen journalism (RQ1), b) their *motives* as citJs (RQ2), and c) the different strategies of *on-the-job training* that they implement in their current projects (RQ3).

5.1 Journalistic education of citizen journalists

Citizen journalism is usually understood as a mode of public communication that is initiated and maintained by non-professional journalistic actors. However, our interviews with practitioners demonstrated furtherly - in line with the literature on the subject - that the relationship between professionalism and non-professionalism in the field of citizen journalism is not a matter of either/or. Instead, interviewees displayed very different degrees of previous education and experience in journalism. In some cases even journalistic laypeople were passing through a process of professionalization. It was therefore more realistic to describe the individual journalistic training of citJs as a mark on a continuum, between the poles "no professional training" and "extensive professional training and experience".

In our sample, the variance of the respondents' characteristics with regard to our continuum was huge. There were those who had never had any kind of journalistic training before their first attempts to work as a citJ – such as an elderly woman who is now regularly contributing to one of the largest German citizen journalism platforms, *myheimat.de*:

> I am retired now, and before that I worked in childcare and as an assistant to the management of a data processing center. Within my jobs I had nothing to do with writing, though it is easy for me and I like doing it. (Germany, platform, 5)

Similarly, there were many other citJs with very little previous knowledge of the profession:

> I have very little experience in journalism. Years ago I played in a floorball team and once in a while you were supposed to write a report about the game for a local newspaper. These were my first articles. Only with *journal b* I started writing texts that ended up in the public sphere. (Switzerland, individual, 4)

> I have no journalist training whatsoever, most of my staff have no journalist training, some have a media background, but essentially my guys are very good facilitators. My background is in community development and organizational development. (UK, platform, 1)

At the same time, others had once completed a basic journalism education and had made a living as a journalist working within the profession, before quitting their original job – either because of retirement or for other reasons:

> I started practicing journalism more or less 20 years ago. During my studies I worked for local newspapers and the local radio, trying to earn some additional money. Nowadays, I work as a lawyer, but I cannot "free" myself from journalism. I simply like journalistic work and I treat it now as a hobby. (Poland, platform, 6)

> At 16 I entered journalism as a local sports journalist, around 20 I became a political news reporter. After a long career in journalism – I was deputy editor-in-chief of a business newspaper – I entered media management. At a certain point I became completely independent and founded my own company. I created my citizen journalism platform as a media project out of a romantic-nostalgic idea, because it goes back to local journalism. (Switzerland, platform, 3)

We also talked to citJs who were somewhere along the training-continuum. This was the case for several younger interviewees who were hoping to find jobs in the media landscape in the future, but did not yet have enough experience. For example, one was studying communication sciences and another had completed an internship in the newsroom of a local newspaper. They saw their occupation in citizen journalism as an opportunity to get more practical experience and on-the-job training, which might help them to get closer to a career in professional journalism:

> I want to learn as much as possible from every field of media work, ... and I am going to stay connected. (Germany, participatory, 1)

> I somehow slipped into journalism. Because I studied communication sciences as a minor my interest in different media products grew considerably, which is why I briefly worked for a magazine of a real estate publisher. ... However, right after the university I started my own citizen journalism project together with two friends, where I really learned a lot about journalism. (Switzerland, individual, 7)

Our analysis of citJs shows that their points of departure are by no means the same. Instead, their professional history seem to be as multifaceted as the field of citizen journalism itself. Across all types of platforms there are clear signs of a

professionalization of the field, which we took as an invitation to rethink the concept of nominally non-professional citJs. How far this was necessary for all of the analyzed countries still needs to be considered.

5.2 Motives for being a citizen journalist

The educational background of citJs is inevitably intertwined with the motives (i.e.: the reasons for citJs' involvements into the field of information production). Using the accounts of the interviewees, we can suggest a typology that highlights five different actor groups according to the reasons that made them engage in the field. Obviously, across these weberian ideal-types we discuss below, a sixth type exists: those citJs that have as a motive the professional involvement in the field. They are not necessarily those who had a journalistic education.

The typology differentiates between the ideal types of the programmer, the expert, the activist, the humanist, and the community builder.

The *programmer* is the type of citJ who engages in the field mainly to practice and exercise his computing skills. This type was more common at the very beginning of the diffusion of citizen journalism, when specific technical expertise was necessary to bring an online platform – or a newsletter – to life. In many cases, the "open culture" and "information wants to be free"-concept of computer scientists was applied to the circulation of news (see also Lewis and Usher 2012). Some citJs use the Internet mainly to gain and spread new information:

> 16 years ago the Internet was not so widespread. I started to inform myself from different sources and I ended up informing my friends about topics we care about. Some asked me to send the news I selected to other people, so I used open source software that people could subscribe to, applying a filter that allowed them to receive just the news they were interested in. At the very beginning it was just a newsletter, after that we also launched the website (Italy, individual, 1)

> I am a web developer, but I have been collaborating a lot with media practitioners. I read a lot about media innovation in the Anglo-Saxon world. In my opinion, they are always ahead of Europe when it comes to the implementation of new and innovative ideas. It takes ages until new ideas cross the sea, then they first get to the UK and finally to us as well. (Switzerland, individual, 6)

Some of interviewees considered that social media have been a propellant for some initiatives in the field of citizen journalism because they have reduced the technological expertise required to spread information. Facebook and Twitter have redefined practices and concepts linked to citizen journalism.

The *expert*, on the other hand, is a citJ who has (or assumes to have) extensive knowledge about a certain topic. His intent to act as a citJ is to share this knowledge via citizen platforms:

> Our authors have the freedom to cover the topics they are specialized in. We have, for example, one author who is very keen on historical topics because of his background and expertise – so we cover high-quality historical topics from the *Südstadt* in Cologne. (Germany, platform, 2)

> I write my blog as an expert, a researcher, but also as a citizen. I want to participate in the public discussion about security issues, in order to enhance the situation in this dimension. (Poland, individual/platform, 5)

Some actors in this category can claim to have expertise in niche topics that are not covered by the mainstream media. Thus, citizen journalism is their only vehicle to get publicity for their topics.

In contrast, the *activist* is a citJ eager to produce news and comments, in order to openly support an issue, a campaign or a topic. Their motive to engage with citizen journalism initiatives is linked to their social activities on the topic they support or even fight for:

> I treat citizen journalism as a part of my professional and social activism. I cover topics that I find important and relevant, also from the point of view of my local community. (Poland, individual/participatory, 1)

> What we are is a storytelling movement. Our goal is to give people a voice, to challenge perceptions and allow them to describe their own reality. So we largely target people who want to tell their own story. We take those stories, we curate those stories into features to create conversations of change with publications and organizations. ... Because what we are trying to do is create a movement of social change. (UK, platform, 1)

Conversely to what Couldry and Curran (2003) rightly note about other kinds of media participation, in this case the cause that citizens stand for is often about media power itself: they provide information because they regard the coverage by traditional media as biased. In this regard their motive is to become agents of counter-power by engaging in socio-political action through their writings:

> Looking at the status of our news mainstream, I understood the bias between what I knew about my topic and what the media usually say. (Italian, individual, 1)

> I wanted to show things as they were – not as state officials wanted us to see them, so it was not beauty I documented but the things behind the curtain. (Germany, participatory, 3)

Opposite to this approach, the *humanist's* main motive is to write just because he likes to or because he wants to engage in an intellectual exercise. Those included in this ideal-type have generally a humanistic background, for instance they have studied or appreciated to study literature, or they had or still have ambitions to be a writer.

> I started writing for the community in order to publish analyses and to train my writing skills. It really helps me to build a career as an essayist and author. In fact, I have always liked writing. I write

> fiction, essays and political analyses. … I never had professional training in writing, I just did it and it improves by doing it every day. (Germany, participatory, 7)

> My degree is in the Humanities. I have always loved writing poems. Since I started to collaborate with the citizen journalism platform, it has been amazing to dedicate myself to writing again. (Italy, individual, 4)

> I just needed this creative outlet; that is why I started posting. (Austria, individual, 2)

Finally, there is an ideal type of citJ that we can define as a *community builder*. They deal with local affairs and try to build a sense of sharing and belonging.

> Greifswald in fact was in desperate need of another journalistic medium for there was and still is just one newspaper and a local private broadcast and TV station – a monopoly regarding written news and coverage of local affairs. … The local media failed to cover controversial subcultural stories, therefore creating a counter-public was my main motivation to give it a try. (Germany, individual, 4)

> Our goal was to build up an online community with registered users who could write and comment on different political issues. On other platforms there has never been a real discourse on political issues. Compared to the user comments in established news media, where a discourse hardly ever occurs, we really wanted to launch a moderated and controlled discussion on social and political issues – something that is not happening on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. (Switzerland, platform, 8)

Of course, the categories of citJs in our typology are far from being exclusive. In practice, motives are often intertwined, and frequently specific expertise about a topic is directly linked to the intention of spreading that kind of knowledge or supporting the causes of the people involved in it.

Combining our integrated model of citizen journalism (Figure 1) with the different types of citJs in relation to their aims and motivations, and we were able to identify three main areas where citizen journalism was flourishing:

- experts, who are usually running individual projects,
- activists, who manage either or both politically and socially engaged citizen platforms, and
- community builders, also to be found on the individual or small-scale level (although some small communities might refer to larger participatory journalism projects, coordinated by mainstream media organizations).

5.3 On-the-job training

As described above, citJs enter the field with a certain degree of previous knowledge and individual motives that influence their approach to practical newswork. However, their journalistic skills change once they are a part of the journalism system and they become used to the routines of the profession. The interviewees referred to a variety of different methods and strategies that influence this formation process, which we define as on-the-job training. More specifically, we can distinguish explicit and implicit forms of on-the-job training.

Explicit forms of training are observable when citJs get used to typical journalistic routines because of a direct interaction with professional actors – be they representatives of the traditional mass media or collaborators at independent citizen journalism platforms. In the process of communication, these professionals provide hints, tips, and feedback that help professionalize the citJ's contribution. Being supervised by professional journalists is essential for their choice of platform, particularly for younger actors who want to learn the trade and work for the mass media in the future.

> [It is important] to have someone to ask when I have an ethical conflict and that there is some authority preventing sexist and racist comments and posts. I would not collaborate with a platform without any editing. (Germany, participatory, 7)

> There are several platforms to which you can contribute that usually change the title you have chosen for your text. I consider that to be important, because it helps you to improve and to understand. (Italy, individual, 4)

Many media platforms also provide explicit guidelines that define the roles and functions of citJs. In some cases these guidelines are broad in scope, in other cases they just contain formal regulations. Nonetheless, even formal guidelines can include helpful statements about good journalism and professional ethics, as several interviewees acknowledge:

> Though I have heard about many topics before in university lectures, they gave me a real guideline of how to work, how to really use the freedom of information act, how to complete the actual form. They were like cooking recipes for all the tasks as well as for the rights and skills of journalists. (Germany, participatory, 1)

> The administrator of one of the platforms I cooperate with, *sztab.org*, communicated some rules regarding the publication of articles on his website. He sent me a list of such rules by e-mail. I think it was very fair. (Poland, individual/platform, 5)

There is also smaller group of citJs declared that they were interested in gaining additional skills and expertise through workshops, (online) tutorials, or journalism conferences. This phenomenon was observed more frequently in the German-speaking

countries than in the other countries in the sample. Specialized blogs or news sites from the Anglo-American world were among the most often quoted sources of information.

Our study also made it possible to identify several forms of *implicit on-the-job training* which refer to different aspects of journalistic activity – from the number of clicks a particular news items received (see also Striphas 2015; Tandoc and Edson 2014) to the open criticism verbalized by readers. The interviewees described this training as helpful to judging the quality of their journalistic output:

> You can understand if your news item works on the basis of how many persons read it. (Italy, individual, 4)

> The people often approach me and say: That piece had a very nice style. This is a great motivation to get going, of course. (Austria, platform, 1)

> In the future, I want to be more disciplined regarding the length of texts, they are too long sometimes, I know that myself, and I have heard this critique. It is important to work on such qualities as well, because if you want people to read what you write, you also have to work on the form. (Germany, individual, 6)

There is also a unique case, where citizen journalists specialized in a certain area – while not getting any on-the-job-training themselves – provide training to professional journalists working in news organizations. This is the case for an interviewee working for the open source investigative platform *bellingcat*:

> I train news organizations with the kind of what we do at *bellingcat*… So I provide training, but don't go to one. (UK, platform, 2)

6. Discussion and outlook: from the periphery to the center?

While most citJs hope to bring new stimuli to mass media performance, there is often the question about whether they are adequately trained for the production of 'newsworthy' stories. This paper intended to illuminate the different ways in which the actors in the field acquire and develop the skills that are necessary to undertake journalistic activities in the different journalism cultures throughout Europe. With the help of a comparative analytical design we were able to show that, despite a global convergence of media systems, the state of citizen journalism still differs widely across countries and levels – as do, at least in part, the educational backgrounds of citJs.

Both the desk study and the semi-structured interviews provided us with a solid empirical basis in order to analyze specific educational aspects of citizen journalism in six European countries. It also allowed us to compare different journalistic cultures and see whether there were any notable contrasts between the formal journalistic education of citJs across countries and between the different levels of citizen journalism. The findings presented in this paper indicate that there are differences as well as similarities

in journalism training – both across countries and levels of integration. The findings also shed light on the question of how the aims and motives of citJs to engage in what they do differ – with some surprising results.

In terms of *educational aspects*, a large proportion of the interviewed citJs across all of the countries analyzed did not benefit from any formal journalistic training, particularly at the higher education level. Although we expected this result, it was interesting to see how many interviewees fell into this category. A considerable number of interviewees declared that learning by doing was the most important (and often the only) learning method at their disposition. Thus, most amateur reporters rely on improvisation and try to follow their own, self-imposed norms and values – or, at least, try to emulate their peers.

However, differences were noticeable, not only across countries, but also within the national fields of citizen journalism, which are far from being homogeneous. Quite a few citJs – from all of the countries studied – were striving towards the center of traditional journalism (sometimes aspiring to a future job in a mainstream media company), while others were keen to remain on the periphery of the system. This development clearly poses a challenge for traditional journalism theory, which still does not know how to include non-professional "produsers" in its conceptual framework. It is however interesting to see, that most citJs that aspire to become professional journalists one day are active either at the level of individual/small-team journalistic initiatives or at the level of platform-based projects - often even in managerial roles to further enhance their journalistic portfolio. This is somehow surprising, since citJs that are more closely working together with professional journalists – those active in different forms of participatory journalism – do have generally less journalistic experience and do not strive for a journalistic career. This is another indicator that the definition of citizen journalism – too often too general – has to be rethought in terms of motives and its closeness to professional journalism.

Certainly, the current re-arrangement of the configuration of the journalism system also leads to challenges for traditional newsrooms. If professional actors want to profit from the undisputed potential of citizen journalism, they have to develop a clearer strategy about how to include user-generated content into their coverage. Such a strategy should not stop with inviting "reader reporters" or establishing online communities – these have become commonplace in most of the countries covered by this study. Instead, it seems reasonable to intensify previous efforts to educate and train non-professional contributors, by explaining and supervising relevant work routines and ethical standards – and thus laying the foundation for a sustainable dialogue between journalism's center and its periphery. This includes also a stronger network-oriented understanding of journalism rather than one limited to a newsroom-based elite. Our research has provided a first collection of examples that illustrate how various explicit and implicit strategies of on-the-job training can be realized in the field of citizen

journalism. Further measures need to be designed and tested in practice before it is possible to evaluate their functionality.

As with all scientific research, this study is not without limitations. First, the two-step approach to understanding citJs might be convenient when it comes to an explorative study, but it is not appropriate as a strategy for representative and quantitative analyses of citizen journalism in a given country. However, in a qualitative investigation like ours it may well be an appropriate strategy if the goal is to identify certain types of citJs – which was exactly our purpose, as well as offering a new theoretical model. Second, as always in comparative studies, the selection of the countries analyzed could be challenged. Yet, few studies have tried to analyze citizen journalism from a comparative perspective, particularly with regard to the (missing formal) education, opting instead, in most cases, for national studies. Based on the classic Hallin and Mancini model (2004) we tried to close this gap by including countries from all models.

Of course, further research activities are needed to compensate these limitations, but they could also accompany and enhance our own results in a constructive manner. First, it would be desirable to further analyze the norms and values of citJs. As Örnebring (2013) notes, most citJs do not "have too little autonomy but too much of it: they are not subjected to the same editorial quality control that professional journalists are". What does that mean in terms their ethical compass? It could be interesting to map the ethics of citJs and to see whether there are any differences with regard to the three levels outlined in our integrated model of citizen journalism. Second, future publications should also try to advance the heuristic discourse on citizen journalism in relation to the more traditional conceptual framework of journalism theory. The on-going disruption of the journalism ecosystem makes this issue full of twists and turns. However, the growing networks between professional and citJs, content creators and "prosumers", as well as between traditional news outlets and hyperlocal amateur news blogs have to be taken into account at the center of journalism theory, too.

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[2] https://tools.digitalmethods.net/beta/googleNews/

[3] Of course, the collection of links needed to be adapted and refined before it could produce the expected results; e.g., if we found an article written by *corriere.it* talking about *REC24.it*, we first had to verify that the latter was indeed a project of citizen journalism, before we could include it in our desk analysis.

[4] In the following sections, each interviewee is identified by her/his country of origin, the project he or she works for (labeled as “individual”, “platform” and “participatory”), and finally a sequential number from 1 to 9 for each country. The first interview made in Germany is therefore identified by the signifier “Germany, participatory, 1”.

[5] We assumed blogs with a lot of comments have higher public visibility than blogs with hardly any comments at all. Simultaneously, websites that discernibly made financial profits were expected to have a higher level of diffusion than non-profit sites. Helped by indicators like these, we were able to differentiate between a high, medium or low prevalence of citizen journalism initiatives on the different levels of our model in each of the countries studied.