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ROLE CALL:

2008 Campaign and Election Coverage on the Websites of Leading U.S. Newspapers

Jane B. Singer

ABSTRACT: This study explores how websites affiliated with leading U.S. newspapers covered the 2008 campaign and election. The third in a series, it traces changes over a decade in which the internet moved from the periphery to the center of political, public, and media attention. Although the 2004 study suggested online editors were rethinking their function as information gatekeepers, this version indicates a reassertion of traditional journalistic roles despite an increase in options for user input.

In an election year when the internet overtook newspapers as a primary source of presidential campaign news¹ and online innovation was a hallmark of the winner's strategy, web journalists found themselves in the middle of the political action. They were increasingly central to the media action in 2008, too. U.S. newspaper website traffic grew 12% over the previous year – 8.6% in the fourth quarter alone, with 3.5 billion page views in the month before the election.² For the first time, Americans reported being more likely to regularly read online news than to have read a newspaper yesterday.³ Indeed, as newspaper readership and ad revenue spiraled inexorably downward, dragging editorial budgets and staff sizes with them, editors looked to web technology as “the savior of what we once thought of as newspaper newsrooms.”⁴

Online journalists planning and producing campaign and election content in 2008 faced decisions about how best to take advantage of this key political and industry position. Politics

sections of many newspaper websites swelled with new offerings, from live video chats to Twitter feeds, as well as slick extensions of earlier experiments with such features as interactive ballot builders and dynamic mapping tools. Multimedia content, particularly video, was greatly expanded as technical capabilities and journalistic skills began to catch up with the internet's potential as a visual medium. And for the first time, these websites offered multiple opportunities for users to contribute to political coverage.

This article, based on a survey of online editors, explores how sites affiliated with leading U.S. newspapers covered the campaign and election of 2008, a year when old and new media forms were “interdependent and often complementary.”⁵ The third in a series of studies starting in 2000,⁶ it traces changes in coverage over a decade in which the internet moved from the periphery to the center of political, public, and media attention. Although the 2004 study suggested online editors were rethinking their gatekeeping role, this latest version indicates a recommitment, amid economic turmoil, to a traditional view of the journalist's function in the political arena. Newspaper websites are including much more content from sources outside the newsroom, yet journalists are more apt to cite the utility and comprehensiveness of their own information in describing goals and accomplishments.

The Role of the Journalist

Journalists in modern democracies claim an exclusive social status and role, rooted in an occupational ideology surrounding the production of news.⁷ Since the 1970s, a decennial survey of U.S. journalists has traced practitioner perceptions of what this role entails. In the latest survey, in 2002, only two roles were deemed “extremely important” by a large majority: getting information to the public quickly and investigating government claims. Both also were

highlighted in 1992, but their ranking switched; though rated most important in 1992, getting information out quickly had slipped to a distant second by the 2000s.⁸

The authors speculated that perhaps journalists no longer see immediacy as the most vital aspect of their work because the internet has “snatched (their) franchise on being first with the latest.”⁹ However, online journalists were only slightly more likely than their print counterparts – and less likely than broadcasters – to put top priority on getting news out quickly. Greater percentages of online journalists than those working in either print or broadcast also attached extreme importance to investigating official claims, analyzing complex problems, and discussing policy. Only 3% of journalists overall in 2002 said it was extremely important to set the political agenda, by far the lowest-rated role among 15 options. Among online journalists, just 1% highlighted this role.¹⁰

The researchers clustered these role evaluations into broad journalistic functions. As in previous years, functions overlapped considerably, but the most important single function remained an interpretive one; nearly two-thirds of the respondents overall cited that role, and online journalists were particularly likely to see it as crucial.¹¹

The 2002 survey also suggested evolving views about the value of civic journalism. Most journalists favored enabling people to express their views on public affairs. But they were more cautious about their own contribution to civic engagement; overall, just 39% said letting people express their views or motivating public involvement were extremely important roles for journalists. Online journalists were less likely than their colleagues to highlight either role. Only 26% of journalists working in the interactive environment rated letting people express their views as extremely important, and even fewer placed a premium on motivating people to get involved, a finding the researchers highlighted as surprising.¹²

Implicit in these self-perceptions is journalists' belief that their central task is to make particular information available to the public. This "gatekeeping" role, first applied 60 years ago in a newsroom context, initially was seen as resting largely on each journalist's decisions about newsworthiness.¹³ However, individual gatekeepers represent their organization and profession; both limit decisions through the exercise of routines, norms, and structural constraints. Societal and ideological factors also are important.¹⁴

Media scholars have been particularly interested in the idea of information gatekeepers in a political context.¹⁵ If decisions made by citizens of a democracy are based on the information available to them, and that information comes primarily from the news media, then those media are indispensable to the survival of democracy itself.¹⁶ Journalists provide the information that citizens need to be free and self-governing.¹⁷ "As a profession, journalism views itself as supporting and strengthening the roles of citizens in a democracy," Gans wrote. "Informing citizens so they can play their democratic roles is the journalists' work and source of income."¹⁸

Journalism has been seen as especially integral to democracy in America, dating to colonial printers' role in fostering pre-revolutionary fervor. A historical look at occupational communication strategies suggests journalists claimed right from the start that their value lay in meeting a public need for political communication. Political information, "rather than another category of information such as commercial news, would become the foundation on which journalists would seek to build their occupation's legitimacy."¹⁹

This view of the journalist as informer of a democratic polity also has helped drive the evolution of mass communication theory, stemming from studies of political opinion formation and civic behavior -- notably attempts to discern whether information that journalists provide has a big effect, a small effect, or something in between.²⁰ Journalists, it turns out, have a key role in

helping citizens decide what to think about, how to think about it, and what aspects of selected topics to attend most closely.²¹ By making some items more salient, news content shapes the benchmarks that people use to evaluate political issues, leaders, and would-be leaders.²²

But the notion of autonomous professional power, which underlies agenda-setting and gatekeeping approaches, is deeply challenged in an environment in which the journalist no longer has much if any control over what citizens see, read, or hear. A vast variety of political information can be found easily on the internet, as can political commentary, conversation, and community.²³ Moreover, people can create content and publish it themselves – including on websites maintained by journalists.

Shared Space, Shared Roles?

By 2008, 58% of the nation's largest newspapers offered some form of content created by users, up from 24% the previous year. Larger majorities enabled users to comment on content their journalists produce; provision of social networking applications, such as an ability to create personal profiles, also was spreading.²⁴ At least in some ways, journalists seem willing to accommodate a news structure that is “more grassroots and democratic” than in the past.²⁵

But the transition to a more dialogic form of journalism²⁶ is not easy. Editors making room for users on their websites still have their elbows out when it comes to sharing not just space but also occupational roles. Scholarly attention since the advent of interactive “Web 2.0” functionality has focused on the interplay (or lack of it) between contributions from journalists and users. The literature suggests that though journalists are increasingly likely to say they view creation of news as a partnership with people outside the newsroom, the reality is that they still see what they do as distinct from what users do: They continue to see boundaries around roles even as they acknowledge the dissolution of boundaries around the means of enacting those roles.

Bloggers were among the first to challenge journalistic authority, performing similar tasks of information selection and interpretation while simultaneously exposing institutional journalism's vulnerabilities.²⁷ The challenges remain, but journalists have co-opted the phenomenon by talking up practices that "play to the strengths of organizationally based journalism, such as newsgathering and fact checking,"²⁸ as well as by using blogs as sources of information and ideas.²⁹ They also have become bloggers themselves. Nearly all major U.S. newspapers offered blogs – dozens, in many cases -- by their writers in 2008.³⁰

But independent bloggers were just the start. In recent years, journalists have developed an at times uncomfortably intimate acquaintance with contributors to their own media-affiliated websites. Academic interest in practitioners' interaction with users has highlighted the evident journalistic discomfort that close proximity evokes. A decade ago, Schultz examined *New York Times* online discussion forums and found that media involvement in energetic political debate consisted almost exclusively of monitoring for abuse. The forums were reactive rather than truly interactive – places for reader-to-reader communication that did not include the journalists.³¹

Deuze and his colleagues subsequently noted that participatory ideals simply "do not mesh well with set notions of professional distance";³² moreover, some organizations view "hard news" areas such as politics as too controversial to open to user contributions. When political content is fair game, two opposite problems have been documented. One is that users ignore it; for example, journalists' political blogs at 42 daily U.S. newspapers generated few or no user posts a week before the 2006 mid-term elections.³³ On the other hand, when users do respond, their remarks can be abrasive, even abusive.³⁴ Many newsrooms now fit comment moderation into their work routines,³⁵ creating a new power imbalance between journalists and users.

This may be one way of reasserting journalistic authority, which is diluted when control is shared over the constructed product, as well as the political and social reality it helps create.³⁶ While online editors understand the website is a location for interaction, not just consumption, they also continue to see themselves as gatekeepers and upholders of traditional journalistic standards.³⁷ User-generated content puts pressure on these norms and roles, raising concerns about the effects of engagement.³⁸ How those interactions might affect enactment of the journalists' political roles and functions is an area ripe for exploration. One recent study, in a Chinese context, suggests online public opinion can elevate an issue onto the national media agenda, as well as influence how it is framed.³⁹ But many questions are yet to be addressed.

Within this changing landscape, online newspapers in 2008 geared up to cover what promised to be a historic campaign. What course might they steer between occupational roles with centuries-old roots and a discursive political and media environment evolving by the second?

RQ1: In describing their goals and noteworthy achievements in covering the 2008 campaign and election, what journalistic roles and functions did editors of websites affiliated with major U.S. newspapers highlight?

RQ2: To what extent did these editors see users as sharing in the enactment of roles and the production of political coverage?

RQ3: In what ways have the views of editors of websites affiliated with major U.S. newspapers changed since 2000 and 2004?

Method

This study used the same sampling technique as those conducted in 2000 and 2004,⁴⁰ which it was designed to replicate and extend. Information about 2008 campaign and election coverage was solicited from editors at websites affiliated with major newspapers in the 50 states and District of Columbia. Such a purposive sampling method is useful in identifying respondents

likely to contribute data of appropriate relevance and depth.⁴¹ The information is not intended to be generalizable but instead reflects activities of market leaders.

The sample included the biggest paper in each state plus all other dailies with print circulations over 250,000, the largest Newspaper Association of America category, as indicated on the Audit Bureau of Circulations website in October 2008. The 2008 newspapers ranged in size from under 30,000 (the largest paper in its sparsely populated state) to 2.3 million; the average was around 380,000. Print circulation figures were used rather than online usage data both for consistency with previous studies and because familiarity with the newspaper seems likely to lead users to seek it online as a source of political content. The 2008 sample included 76 papers, down from 77 in 2004 and 80 in 2000, reflecting ongoing circulation declines.

Because of the longitudinal nature of this study, many questions mirrored those asked in 2000 and 2004. However, while both earlier versions were distributed by e-mail, the 2008 version was created in Survey Monkey,⁴² an online tool for generating questionnaires and capturing response data. The change meant some questions had to be structured differently. New questions also were added in an attempt to learn how growth in social media and other online innovations affected newspapers' political coverage.

As before, the survey included open- and closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions sought data related to such items as the presence of interactive components; open-ended ones sought editors' opinions about content and goals. The intent was to understand not just what was included but also why it was there, again in line with the earlier studies.

Newspaper websites were accessed in fall 2008 to identify an editorial staffer responsible for political news, typically the online editor or news editor. Following an introductory contact the week before the election, the researcher sent each editor an individualized link to the survey

on November 6, 2008. The questionnaire included information about respondent consent and the researcher's treatment and use of the data, in line with her university's human subjects protocol.

Three follow-up mailings were sent to non-respondents in November and December 2008, and in February 2009. Eventually, 46 editors answered at least one question, and 32 editors completed the survey, a response rate for completions of 42%. Although above the average for online surveys,⁴³ this is down from the 61% response rate of 2004 and 71% of 2000, reflecting a growing reluctance among journalists to respond to questionnaires.⁴⁴ However, full responses were obtained from the sample's largest and smallest papers, part of an overall group representing 28 states and the District of Columbia. Respondents included editors at 21 of the same newspapers included in both 2000 and 2004. Seven editors responded from papers included in one of the previous years; four were from papers not previously represented.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses to the closed-ended questions, which yielded mostly nominal data. Responses to the open-ended questions were categorized thematically, using the categories that emerged from the earlier studies as a framework. The data also were compared to identify changes. This sort of longitudinal analysis permits observations over time of individuals from the same population. It is especially helpful in exploring the effects of maturation and of social, cultural, and political change.⁴⁵

Findings

The website is becoming a destination in its own right rather than an online publishing arm for newspaper content, as was largely the case a decade ago. All the 2008 respondents said they published content online that was never available in print, and 73% (27 of the 37 journalists answering the question) said they published a lot of online-only material. In 2004, just 17% estimated at least half the website content appeared only online, while nearly 45% said very little

online material was unique. Moreover, all respondents in 2008 said they engaged in “web-first” publishing, putting content online before it ran in print; 19 of 37 journalists (51%) said they “always” did so. This question was not asked in earlier surveys.⁴⁶

All but three editors said their sites contained campaign or election content new in 2008, a wide range of items that one described as “really, too numerous to mention.” Virtually all were aspects of political coverage either unfeasible or impossible in print, including “live blogs,” podcasts, video, statewide Twitter networks, interactive voter guides and maps, fact-checking tools, and information databases.

Goals of Campaign or Election Coverage. As in previous years, the overwhelming majority of responses to a question about primary goals related to informing the public.⁴⁷ All 36 editors who answered the question cited an aspect of this informational role, typically stressing the greater speed, volume, and detail enabled by the internet. They adhered closely to the journalist’s view of democracy:⁴⁸ “We wanted to be the most complete source and best resource for news and information on our local elections,” one editor wrote. Seven respondents highlighted the contribution of this role to a broader goal of civic engagement, such as the editor who sought to “create a more informed local electorate and encourage people to vote.”

In previous years, a handful of editors cited goals related to discursive democracy – encouraging use of the website as a platform for civic or political discourse. That goal was all but absent in 2008. Despite a greatly enhanced capability to handle user input, as well as the fact that nearly all the sites did include campaign-related contributions from users, only one editor alluded to this capability in the context of identifying a goal -- and his reference was to providing a platform for candidates, not users in general, to “describe themselves and discuss issues.”

Six editors cited goals connected to revenue. Five wanted to build website traffic; one sought to “reduce use of newsprint for voter guides.” None cited these goals in isolation, however; all six also mentioned a desire to inform users, such as the editor wanting to provide “thorough, rich content (both text and graphics) that informs, educates and drives traffic.”

Twenty-eight editors said they had met their goal; another seven said their goal was partially met, mostly citing resource constraints as a limiting factor. Only one editor said his goal was not met because of “competition, expectations.” The quality and extent of information available was a criterion of success – “If people didn’t have enough information, they weren’t looking,” one said – and eight cited increased traffic as a key indicator.

Noteworthy Achievements or Sources of Pride. Editors were asked to list and describe up to three online-only campaign or election content areas of which they were proudest.⁴⁹ Results are shown in **Table 1**. Because one goal of this study was a comparison with earlier elections, the same categories were used. However, a caveat: open-ended responses, which guided the categorizations, indicate online content has become harder to place into discrete boxes. Many sources of pride blend a variety of capabilities and serve a variety of functions, contributing to comprehensiveness, timeliness, user engagement, and multimedia presentation.

Users could contribute to all but one of these websites, as discussed further below, but only two editors flagged such contributions as a source of pride. In fact, only an election-night chat hosted by a columnist was designed to incorporate input from ordinary users; the other item in this category consisted of convention blogs by local party chairmen. Although the nature of user contributions has changed over the years, this number is down dramatically from 2004 and even more sharply from 2000.

Another 10 editors in 2008 were proud of options for users to personalize material the newspaper provided. In addition to polls and quizzes, options included interactive voter guides or ballot builders; a customizable map of results; an interactive game about election issues; and a database of local campaign contributors.

Editors were much more likely to express pride about content matching journalistic roles and functions related to informing citizens. Twenty of the 31 editors answering this question cited as a source of pride one or more features that provided deep or detailed information; in all, such content constituted a third of the features mentioned, below the levels of 2000 and 2004 but still the largest single category. Examples ranged from historical profiles of the coverage area to comprehensive voter guides to demographically segmented results maps. Four editors cited their entire election section as a source of pride; those citations are included here.

Editors in 2004 were less likely than in 2000 to highlight Election Night updates as a source of pride, and the immediacy of the internet remains less noteworthy than it initially was. Even so, the ability to provide timely information was mentioned a dozen times in 2008. In addition to posting returns ahead of the printed paper – something all the 2008 respondents did – two editors cited the ability to keep voters informed about long lines or other Election Day polling problems. One highlighted this as “real watchdog journalism.”

Only two types of content were more apt to be sources of pride in 2008 than in either previous year. Multimedia content, primarily video, was cited 15 times – more than twice as often as in 2004. Editors cited both the amount of video and its attributes, such as the ability to “capture the emotion of the [election] night.” For some, their pride seemed less connected to the value of video than to the fact that reporters were becoming more comfortable shooting it, what one editor described as “a real change to staff mindset.”

Also gaining popularity in 2008 were journalist blogs, cited 18 times as sources of pride. Editors said newsroom blogs were popular with readers, describing them as “the leading edge of our coverage,” a place to provide “the inside story on our state’s politicians,” and a way to get a jump on competitors. “A competing reporter said to us: I feel like I’m getting scooped four and five times a day now,” one editor wrote. Included in this category are live blogs, created with applications such as Twitter and used in 2008 for the first time.

User Contributions. For the first time in 2008, the survey included questions about user-generated content (UGC). Editors were asked if their campaign or election website enabled users to contribute content or personalize content provided by the paper.⁵⁰ All but one of the 32 editors who answered the question said one or both opportunities were available. Those 31 editors then were asked additional questions about this material.

Editors’ descriptions of their goals in providing UGC options fell into half a dozen categories, in addition to a generic desire to “create user interaction,” as one said; 13 offered a multi-faceted goal. Nine editors sought to build users’ engagement with media content, for instance by trying to “make the election process more personal and exciting.” An equal number cited a desire to give users an outlet for expressing their views and opinions. Only three cited the ability of UGC to strengthen interactions among audience members.

Editors were more likely to see user contributions as an opportunity to strengthen the information product, in two ways. The first involved expanding the amount of material available, offering “different and new content from other perspectives,” as one of the eight editors to offer this goal said. The other involved creating a bigger pool of sources for journalists. All five editors who cited this goal mentioned it in conjunction with another, such as enhancing the site’s content; an example was the editor who wanted “to listen to our readership ... to tap into their

knowledge and experience and share that with the larger readership to create a better overall report/site.” Five editors mentioned a desire to drive traffic, seeing user contributions as “giving them reasons to come to our site as opposed to other venues or not at all,” as one said.

A separate question about goals in enabling users to personalize content provided by journalists drew responses along similar lines. Fewer editors, 23 in all, reported offering such options. Among those who did, the primary focus was on providing information “in a way that was most relevant for them,” for example by letting users construct hyperlocal ballots, and on engaging people to “allow them to feel part of the process.” One editor hoped that incorporating social networking tools such as Twitter and Facebook would draw “a non-traditional audience.”

Most editors – 19 of 31 (61%) answering the question – said some material from users was “reverse published” in print. Comments, notably from political blogs, were popular choices for reverse publishing; nine editors said user comments and/or blog posts ran in the paper. Four newspapers included user photos. Three editors reported taking content from political figures, and another three used reader questions for candidates. Only one said “reader stories” were used in print; another said the paper drew on user reports of polling problems on Election Day.

Seven editors said user contributions influenced their own coverage, generally by raising questions or suggesting angles for journalists to pursue. A couple said they drew on user input as a guide to what people thought was interesting or important, the only indication that UGC had any impact on the agenda of these media outlets in the 2008 election. “Occasionally we’d see a groundswell of people either asking a particular question or being confused on an issue. So we’d be sure to address that as we wrote more stories about whatever the subject was,” one said.

Overall, 27 of the 31 editors who answered the question deemed the options for users to contribute to and personalize political content a “partial” success. The rest said these options

were “wholly” successful, citing increased traffic; “any time we gain more audience, I’d say we are successful,” one said. Disappointing levels of user input were cited by several who saw only a partial success; “I was hoping for more direct responses from our users in more forms,” one editor wrote. Another said a political blog generated the most interaction, in the form of comments, but required “a lot of attention because the conversation can get out of hand.”

Responding to a separate question about Election Day and Election Night coverage, 18 of 32 editors (56%) said breaking news reports incorporated user material, in the form of text and/or photos (17 editors), video (three editors), and blog or live blog contributions (six editors).

Discussion

Websites of leading U.S. newspapers were increasingly distinct from the print version in 2008. Editors extensively used interactive and multimedia applications in their online campaign and election coverage, as well as material from users; indeed, compared with earlier years, user contributions at the papers included in this longitudinal study exploded in 2008. All the sites included online-only content, and most editors reported routinely running other material online ahead of print, indicating widespread acceptance of a “web-first” publishing policy.

Responses to the first research question, concerning online editors’ perceived goals and achievements in the context of traditional occupational roles, suggest that despite increased use of capabilities that further this divergence from print, long-standing roles and functions remain dominant in their self-perceptions. Nearly half the items listed as sources of pride involved informing the public through provision of more detailed or timelier political content than is possible in print; another cluster of multimedia items incorporated references to richer visual storytelling, another informational element. The interpretive function, highlighted by Weaver and his colleagues,⁵¹ also was suggested in the value placed on journalists’ blogs.

Although nearly all the papers in the 2008 study offered diverse opportunities for users to contribute to their websites, editors were considerably less likely to flag these contributions as noteworthy. Fewer than 15% of their sources of pride involved user contributions, and most of those involved personalization options such as ballot builders rather than original user content. The second research question asked the extent to which editors saw users sharing their role as producers of campaign and election coverage; findings suggest the answer is that they rate the value of user contributions well below that of their own offerings. Users and journalists may be co-producers in the literal sense that both publish in a shared online space, but the published items remain separate and unequal in journalists' eyes. Such findings support the insights of other researchers who suggest a reluctance to concede occupational turf to those outside the newsroom, perhaps especially in the realm of political communication so integral to journalists' ideas about their own role in democratic society.⁵²

In fact, despite the fact that both the types and sources of online political content were significantly expanded in 2008, these findings suggest a retrenchment in journalists' thinking about what it is they do. Their responses indicate a retreat from the greater emphasis given to user contributions in earlier years – when far fewer such contributions were available or, in some cases, even possible – and from earlier indications of a willingness to step back from their gatekeeping role over political information.⁵³

So the current response to the third research question, which involved changes over time, may seem puzzling. But perhaps it suggests a reassertion of the deeply held self-perception among journalists, documented in the literature, as the people whose occupational role makes them indispensable to the proper functioning of democracy. Journalists now work in a world in which that role is more obviously contested than ever. They are surrounded by a vast universe of

political information, an exponentially decreasing amount of which they provide. It is also, not coincidentally, a world in which the viability of the entire journalistic enterprise is just as contested. Their jobs are not safe; nor is their employer's future. Disturbingly, of the 76 editors initially contacted in October 2008 for this study, at least four no longer held their jobs by the time the survey closed; one newspaper, the *Rocky Mountain News*, had disappeared altogether.

In this extraordinarily challenging environment, journalists may be seeking to emphasize and reassert the ongoing value not just of their output through a particular medium but of their broader role in society – and, not incidentally, the economic value deriving from that role. The internet offers newspapers plenty of options to expand their political coverage through traditional journalistic functions of interpreting and disseminating information. These can be enriched by powerful storytelling tools such as video, as well as by the ability to update content instantly and continuously. Perhaps just as important is the removal of constraints -- physical ones of space and cultural ones that discourage the sort of personal voice integral to blogs, which are increasingly popular among journalists.⁵⁴ Skillful use of these capabilities offers a way to enrich journalism despite severe resource restrictions. Even more pragmatically, it helps attract and retain readers, a measurable achievement that the editors here were eager to emphasize.

Expansion of coverage also involves opening the gates to user contributions. Journalists are doing so, in a variety of ways – but user material barely blips the radar screen when editors consider the aspects of political coverage that make them proudest of what they have achieved. Rather, they are proud that they can do a better, faster, and more thorough job of fulfilling their traditional roles: holding to account those who would govern, getting information out quickly, analyzing complex issues, and the like.⁵⁵ Anyone can provide space for internet users, and anyone can fill the space once it is provided. These journalists seem to be asserting the

importance of a role that is their own historical franchise – and underscoring its value in a turbulent media environment. The study suggests they see those traditional roles as an anchor, one they hope will give them security in rough seas rather than drag them to the bottom.

This study has a number of limitations. The switch from an e-mailed questionnaire to one hosted on Survey Monkey also may have introduced some issues; one editor dropped out after reporting unspecified technical problems. The researcher chose to ask editors about options for user input after asking them to describe their achievements because of a desire to see if they would view user contributions as noteworthy without prompting. An answer (“no”) was obtained, but the responses may have been different had the question order been reversed. As with the earlier iterations, this study draws on a limited purposive sample of online editors from large and/or market-dominant newspapers; a random sample would not only encompass smaller outlets but also allow generalizability and richer statistical analysis. In addition, the disappointingly low response rate from an already-small sample exacerbates the potential for response bias: Editors who felt they had a good story to tell about their online coverage might have been especially willing to tell it.

Nonetheless, this study continues a unique longitudinal exploration of the evolution of online editors’ views in three successive elections, during a time when the internet moved to the center of the political and media stage. The research charts a shift from an emphasis on providing information in 2000, through a period of excitement about possibilities for user involvement in 2004, and back to a foregrounding of traditional journalistic roles in the depressed media environment of 2008. In doing so, it supports others’ findings about the resilience of these roles and journalists’ commitment to them in times of enormous change and uncertainty.

**Table 1: Editors' sources of pride
in 2008 campaign or election sections of leading U.S. newspaper websites**

Figures indicate the number of times a particular type of feature was mentioned. Percentages relate to the total number of features mentioned in each year (2008, 2004, 2000) and overall (last column). There were 31 respondents to this question in 2008, 37 in 2004, and 44 in 2000.

	2008	2004	2000	TIMES CITED 2008, 2004, 2000
Depth / detail	28 (32.9%)	34 (39.1%)	38 (40%)	100 (37.5%)
Updated information	12 (14.1%)	12 (13.8%)	29 (30.5%)	53 (19.9%)
Journalist blogs:	18 (21.2%)	16 (18.4%)	(not offered)	34 (12.7%)
Multimedia / animation, 2008:	15 (17.6%)	7 (8%)	10 (10.5%)	32 (12%)
User personalization options	10 (11.8%)	11 (12.6%)	4 (4.2%) ^a	25 (9.4%)
User contributions	2 (2.4%)	7 (8%) ^b	14 (14.7%) ^b	23 (8.6%)
TOTAL NUMBER OF FEATURES listed as sources of pride, per year	85	87	95	267

^a In 2000, the only personalization option offered was a "candidate match" feature.

^b In 2004 and 2000, user contributions consisted of forums, chats, and Q&As.

NOTES

¹ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press “Internet Now Major Source of Campaign News,” October 31, 2008, <http://people-press.org/report/467/internet-campaign-news> (accessed 8 July 2009).

² Jeff Sigmund, “Newspaper Web Site Audience Rises Twelve Percent in 2008,” Newspaper Association of America, January 29, 2009, <http://www.naa.org/PressCenter/SearchPressReleases/2009/NEWSPAPER-WEB-SITE-AUDIENCE-RISES.aspx> (accessed July 8, 2009).

³ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, “Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources,” August 17, 2008, <http://people-press.org/report/444/news-media> (accessed July 8, 2009).

⁴ Project for Excellence in Journalism “The Changing Newsroom: The Influence of the Web,” July 21, 2008, <http://journalism.org/node/11966> (accessed July 8, 2009).

⁵ Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach, “Lessons of the Election,” in *The State of the News Media*, Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009, http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2009/narrative_special_lessonsoftheelection.php?media=12&cat=1 (accessed 8 July 2009).

⁶ Jane B. Singer, “Stepping Back from the Gate: Online Newspaper Editors and the Co-Production of Content in Campaign 2004,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 83 (summer 2006): 365-280; Jane B. Singer, “Campaign Contributions: Online Newspaper Coverage of Election 2000,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 80 (spring 2003): 39-56.

⁷ Mark Deuze, “What Is Journalism? Professional Identity and Ideology of Journalists Reconsidered,” *Journalism* 6 (November 2001): 442-64.

⁸ David H. Weaver, Randal A. Beam, Bonnie J. Brownlee, Paul S. Voakes, and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist in the 21st Century: U.S. News People at the Dawn of a New Millennium* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁹ Weaver et al., *American Journalist in the 21st Century*, 140.

¹⁰ Weaver et al., *American Journalist in the 21st Century*, 140; 220.

¹¹ Weaver et al., *American Journalist in the 21st Century*, 141; 221. However, what the journalists say may not wholly reflect what they do. In their 1992 study, the Indiana researchers asked respondents to send in samples of what they considered their best work -- most of which turned out to reflect a primary emphasis on the role of information disseminator rather than interpreter. See David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist in the 1990s: U.S. News People at the End of an Era* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹² Weaver et al., *American Journalist in the 21st Century*, 221.

¹³ David Manning White, “The ‘Gate Keeper’: A Case Study in the Selection of News,” *Journalism Quarterly* 27 (autumn 1950): 383-90.

¹⁴ Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*, 2nd ed. (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1996); George A. Donohue, Clarice N. Olien, and Phillip J. Tichenor, “Structure and Constraints on Community Newspaper Gatekeepers,” *Journalism Quarterly* 66 (winter 1989), 807-12, 845.

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¹⁷ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001), 17.

¹⁸ Herbert J. Gans, *Democracy and the News* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21.

¹⁹ Patricia L. Dooley, *Taking Their Political Place: Journalists and the Making of an Occupation* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 129.

²⁰ Werner J. Severin and James W. Tankard Jr., *Communication Theories: Origins, Methods, and Uses in the Mass Media*, 5th ed. (New York: Addison Wesley Longman).

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²⁴ The Bivings Group, "The Use of the Internet by America's Newspapers," December 18, 2008, <http://www.bivings.com/thelab/presentations/2008study.pdf> (accessed July 8, 2009).

²⁵ Dan Gillmor, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2006), xxiii.

²⁶ Mark Deuze, "The Web and Its Journalisms: Considering the Consequences of Different Types of Newsmedia Online," *New Media & Society* 5 (June 2003): 203-30.

²⁷ Wilson Lowrey, "Mapping the Journalism-Blogging Relationship," *Journalism* 7 (November 2006): 477-500.

²⁸ Lowrey, "Mapping the Journalism-Blogging Relationship," 493.

²⁹ See Wilson Lowrey and Jenn Burleson Mackay, "Journalism and Blogging: A Test of a Model of Occupational Competition," *Journalism Practice* 2 (February 2008): 64-81; Kaye D. Sweetser, Lance V. Porter, Deborah Soun Chung, and Eunseong Kim, "Credibility and the Use of Blogs among Professionals in the Communication Industry," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 85 (spring 2008): 169-85; Marcus Messner and Marcia Watson

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³⁰ Project for Excellence in Journalism, "Changing Newsroom"; Bivings Group, "Use of the Internet."

³¹ Tanjev Schultz, "Mass Media and the Concept of Interactivity: An Exploratory Study of Online Forums and Reader Email," *Media, Culture & Society* 22 (March 2000): 205-21, 215.

³² Mark Deuze, Axel Bruns, and Christoph Neuberger, "Preparing for an Age of Participatory News," *Journalism Practice* 1 (October 2007): 322-38, 335.

³³ Larry Dailey, Lori Demo, and Mary Spillman, "Newspaper Political Blogs Generate Little Interaction," *Newspaper Research Journal* 29 (fall 2008): 53-65.

³⁴ Jane B. Singer and Ian Ashman, "'Comment Is Free, but Facts Are Sacred': User-Generated Content and Ethical Constructs at the *Guardian*," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 24 (1, 2009): 3-21.

³⁵ Alfred Hermida and Neil Thurman, "A Clash of Cultures: The Integration of User-Generated Content within Professional Journalistic Frameworks at British Newspaper Websites," *Journalism Practice* 2 (October 2008): 343-56.

³⁶ Sue Robinson, "'Someone's Gotta Be in Control Here': The Institutionalization of Online News and Creation of a Shared Journalistic Authority," *Journalism Practice* 1 (October 2007): 305-21.

³⁷ Sue Robinson, "Gateway or Gatekeeper: The Institutionalization of Online News in Creating an Altered Technological Authority" (paper presented to the International Symposium on Online Journalism; Austin, Texas, April 2006), <http://online.journalism.utexas.edu/2006/papers/SueRobinson.pdf> (accessed July 8, 2009).

³⁸ Singer and Ashman, "'Comment Is Free'"; Neil Thurman, "Forums for Citizen Journalists? Adoption of User Generated Content Initiatives by Online News Media," *New Media & Society* 10 (February 2008): 1-30.

³⁹ Yuqiong Zhou and Patricia Moy, "Parsing Framing Processes: The Interplay between Online Public Opinion and Media Coverage," *Journal of Communication* 57 (March 2007): 79-98.

⁴⁰ Singer, "Stepping Back from the Gate"; Singer, "Campaign Contributions".

⁴¹ Paul Oliver, "Purposive Sampling," in *The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods*, ed. Victor Jupp (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 244-45.

⁴² As of this writing, the survey can be accessed (but data cannot be entered) at: https://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=8_2buKB8ef7HOqmLNEx1vzpQ_3d_3d

⁴³ Kim Sheehan, "E-Mail Survey Response Rates: A Review," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 6 (January 2001), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol6/issue2/sheehan.html> (accessed July 8, 2009).

⁴⁴ Weaver et al., *American Journalist in the 21st Century*.

⁴⁵ Roger D. Wimmer and Joseph R. Dominick, *Mass Media Research: An Introduction*, 8th ed. (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth., 2005), 217.

⁴⁶ Editors also were asked their rationale for choosing a "publishing platform." The question came at the end of a series of items related to comparisons between print and online publication, and the researcher anticipated that respondents would provide an explanation for deciding where to publish campaign or election material. Unfortunately, a large number of editors instead interpreted the question as relating to their use of a content management system,

which in the newsroom is referred to as a publishing platform. Those who took the question in its intended context generally indicated that the internet was used for detailed and/or interactive content, but there were not enough valid responses to allow firm conclusions on this subject.

⁴⁷ The open-ended question about goals was: “What would you describe as the primary goal of your 2008 online campaign or election coverage? That is, what were you most hoping to accomplish with it?” Editors also were asked whether they met their primary goal (yes / no / yes and no) and to explain that response.

⁴⁸ Gans, *Democracy and the News*; Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements of Journalism*.

⁴⁹ Editors were asked to list “up to three online-only content areas or other elements of your 2008 campaign or election coverage that you are proudest of.” They then were asked to briefly explain why they were proud of each content area or element they listed.

⁵⁰ A series of questions addressed user contributions. First, editors were asked whether their 2008 online campaign or election section contained “any opportunities for users either to contribute content (comments are an example) or to personalize content that you provided (ballot builders are an example).” Options were yes for both, yes for one or the other, no, and “I’m not sure” (to allow for potential confusion about the type of information being sought). Responding “no,” which only one editor did, took the respondent to a page about Election Night coverage. All other responses led to a page asking for more details about user contributions, after which these editors went to the Election Night page.

A separate page of questions probed for details about user contributions. First, editors were asked what kinds of options were available for users to contribute. Sixteen options were listed in alphabetical order – from “announcements of campaign events” to “user photos or videos related to the campaign,” plus “none” and “other”) – and editors were asked to mark all that applied, as well as to explain any “other” options. They then were asked to describe their primary goal in offering these user-contribution options, followed by two questions asking whether the quantity and quality of user contributions exceeded, met, or failed to meet their expectations. Additional questions asked whether user contributions influenced their own political coverage, as well as whether any of the material from users was “reverse published” in the print newspaper.

They then were asked what kinds of options were available for users to personalize their 2008 online campaign and election section. Again, a list – this time of nine options, listed alphabetically from “ballot builders” to “social media applications,” plus “none” and “other” – was provided, followed by a request to describe their primary goal in offering user-personalization options. The final question in this section of the survey asked whether they would categorize the options for user contributions and/or personalization as “wholly successful,” “partially successful” or “unsuccessful,” with space provided to explain why.

⁵¹ Weaver et al., *American Journalist in the 21st Century*; Weaver and Wilhoit, *American Journalist in the 1990s*.

⁵² Deuze et al., “Preparing for an Age of Participatory News”; Lowrey, “Mapping the Journalism-Blogging Relationship”; Gans, *Democracy and the News*.

⁵³ Singer, “Stepping Back from the Gate”; Singer, “Campaign Contributions”.

⁵⁴ Bivings Group, “Use of the Internet”; Project for Excellence in Journalism “Changing Newsroom.”

⁵⁵ Weaver et al., *American Journalist in the 21st Century*.