‘If you had been with us’: mainstream press and citizen journalists jockey for authority over the collective memory of Hurricane Katrina

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Abstract
Using the anniversary coverage of Hurricane Katrina, this textual analysis explored how reporters and citizen journalists considered themselves and each other in their different versions of a specific news narrative. This research indicated that online citizen writers undermined the mainstream news story by offering an often contrary version of Hurricane Katrina. Their collective memory focused on personal experience, asserting their right to tell this societal story. By inserting themselves into the news production process of collective memory formation, these citizens renegotiated their relationships with journalists and with journalism. In some cases, this resulted in complete role reversals. The findings suggest that new patterns for information flow are being created, renovating the existing institutional power structure involving the press and society. The conclusion of this article suggests that theorists evaluate citizen journalism alongside mainstream journalists’ work, for they are now part of the same news production process.
Key words
authority • citizen journalist • collective memory • Hurricane Katrina • journalist • online journalism

Journalists perform as storytellers and watchdogs, guidance counselors and history writers from within the established American institution of the press (Cook, 1998; Jamieson and Waldman, 2003; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007; Zelizer, 2005). In news stories, citizens become ‘authorities’ or otherwise serve as representative exemplars in the event. People have relied on journalism to guide them in everything from their jobs to relationships to commemorations. However, online interactivity changes these dynamics. The press is no longer a singular gatekeeping institution, rather a collaborative platform for constructing the news, and thus collective memory. We have entered a ‘communication revolution’ (McChesney, 2007) in which citizens can practise ‘gatewatching’ (Bruns, 2005), ‘networked journalism’ (Jarvis, 2006), or simply, ‘citizen journalism’ (Allan, 2006).

One recent American tragedy, Hurricane Katrina, offered a chance to explore how citizen journalists’ online writings about this event’s anniversary challenged the traditional roles of both the press and audience in forming an enduring collective memory for society. This textual analysis compared the journalism surrounding Hurricane Katrina’s anniversary in 2006 with citizen journalists’ coverage in cyberspace. The study attempted to isolate how reporters and citizen journalists consider themselves and each other in these transformative online roles that allow for new levels of agency. The research could help in understanding what internet interactivity means for the distributed information hierarchy of mass communication.

The findings indicated that online, citizen writers undermined the mainstream news story by offering a new, often contrary version of Hurricane Katrina at its anniversary. This citizen-produced collective memory focused on individual experience and personal connection in a way that asserted the citizen’s right to tell this societal story. Citizen journalists recast themselves in the news narrative with new roles that often contradicted and challenged their depictions in print. By inserting themselves into the news production process of collective memory formation, these citizens renegotiated their relationships with journalists and with journalism. In some cases, this resulted in complete role reversals. These findings suggest that new patterns for information flow are being created, renovating the existing institutional power structure involving the press and society. The conclusion of this article suggests that theorists evaluate citizen journalism alongside mainstream journalists’ work, for they are now part of the same news production process.
THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN COLLECTIVE MEMORY

This research is most concerned with the press’s role in forming collective memory, which is an agreed-upon version of a news event’s remembrance according to the contemporary circumstances of society. Collective memory scholars suggest that the journalists’ role is to explain tragedy through stories that help to guide society in healing while reaffirming the dominant set of values and ideology (Edy 1999, 2006; Halbwachs, 1992[1925]; Kitch, 2003; Zelizer, 2005). Journalists report on and contribute to societal rituals of processing grief, but also politicize and contextualize them (Kammen, 1993; Kitch, 1999; Schwartz, 1998; Zelizer, 1998).

In such stories the narrative often ends up being as much about the profession as it is about society. For example, in the Kennedy assassination, reporters inserted themselves into the story, employed omission and synecdoche to craft a careful narrative, and then declared the coverage a ‘triumph’ of journalism (Zelizer, 1992). Reflexivity – where a reporter highlights their role in the press as an institution within the news story – occurs when the media are ‘part and parcel of the drama of structuring and releasing information that would become the basis for the shaping of knowledge’ (Tuchman, 1978: 190). Any self-revelation on the part of the journalist is chosen carefully, with the intent of enhancing the collective authority of the group (Zelizer, 1990).

It is inevitable that much information is ignored in transmission, especially that which does not fit the symbolic mold of the agreed-upon story (Bennett and Edelman, 1985). When an individual contradicts the pack, journalists ‘repair’ the story by reframing the information back to the consensual story (Bennett et al., 1985). Rarely are reporters depicted in press scholarship as working autonomously; they are always part of a larger ‘pack’ (Crouse, 1973) or ‘interpretive community’ (Zelizer, 1997[1993]). All of this helps journalists to achieve authority, so that their profession is relevant to society.

Citizens’ journalistic roles

When people appear in news stories, they tend to be symbols of the institutional power elite (Bennett et al., 2007) or archetypal characters who relay societal ideologies and values (Gans, 1979; Lule, 2001). In the collective memory scholarship most relevant to this study, researchers have shown ‘regular’ working-class people to be cast as heroic exemplars in the September 11 coverage (Kitch, 2005), and individuals with AIDS representing an entire disease in news stories during the late 1980s (Sturken, 1997). In general, citizens are portrayed as passive, disengaged and two-dimensional, with little agency or even a desire for agency (Lewis et al., 2005).
Studies have shown that people’s memories of an event mirror the mediated version (Lang and Lang, 1989; Sturken, 1997). Readers seek comfort in news stories (Vincent et al., 1998[1989]). Although people influence news construction (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996) and actively decode its product (Hall, 1986), citizens’ literal production agency and participation has been impeded by the existing information structure.

**Online shifts in journalists’ and citizens’ roles**

New roles are created once people outside of accepted institutions have the ability to disseminate and manipulate information (Jenkins, 2006; Marshall, 2004; Meyrowitz, 1985). In particular, the internet is forcing a ‘realignment’ between journalists, their sources and audiences (Pavlik, 2001: 1). Interactivity chips away at singular authorial power (Heim, 1987). Indeed, the interactive nature of the internet obligates people to have an active agency in producing societal narratives (Bruns, 2006; Gillmor, 2004; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007). Many citizens have answered this call.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

For the purposes of this article, citizen journalists are defined as those people who are making use of the tools available to them to participate in the information world as bloggers and forum contributors. Much has been written about how citizen journalism is adding diversity to the public sphere, changing press routines and providing new democratic opportunities (Allan, 2006; Gillmor, 2004; Glasser, 2004; Thurman, 2008; Tremayne, 2006).

These online writers represent a new class of information disseminators, and one of the main goals of this article is to explore their influence on a particular news story. This research compares how journalists and citizen journalists jockeyed for the authority to form the collective memory of a story of national proportions, Hurricane Katrina. The research questions that guided this work were as follows:

RQ1: How did media reports portray journalists and how did citizen journalists write about media in this collective memory story? How were these portrayals different from each other, and from what scholars have found previously about the journalistic role as traditionally presented in the news?

RQ2: What roles are citizen journalists starting to play in collective memory-making? In other words, how did people who were sharing (information, memories, news) online consider themselves in this particular story, compared to how the press portrayed ‘regular people’?

RQ3: How are journalists and citizen writers exercising their role in the information world online?
METHOD

Study selection
This study answered these questions by examining the coverage of Hurricane Katrina’s anniversary during August 2006. National traumas tend to accentuate the relationships between journalists and their audiences while emphasizing the press’s societal function. Hurricane Katrina, which blew through New Orleans, MO and Biloxi, MS, in late summer 2005, was no exception. The massive destruction of entire cities and diaspora of hundreds of thousands of people captivated the nation for weeks. The tragedy was exacerbated by inadequate local, state and federal response. Reporters descended on the cities, particularly New Orleans and its notorious Superdome, which became a center of mayhem for people trying to survive the hurricane. Scholars studying Katrina showed that mainstream news ‘articles portrayed a multitude of community and public officials working to repair damage and to ensure a return to normalcy’ (Kitch and Hume, 2008: 39). Reporters did not rely merely on official sourcing, but also turned to the populace (Durham, 2008). In addition, journalists declared themselves to be the heroes of the crisis (Fry, 2006), which allowed them to assume the authoritative role in the tragedy (Littlefield and Quenette, 2007). Across the country, people entered cyberspace to blog, post comments, email and otherwise contribute to the news narrative, which touched on national ideology involving ‘race’, class, community and other such topics. Katrina’s citizen journalism blurred the boundaries of physical and virtual and allowed the marginalized voice to be heard (Allan, 2006).

The hurricane’s anniversary offered a moment when journalists and citizen journalists could recreate the Hurricane Katrina story in newspapers and online to form an enduring collective memory, perhaps highlighting the theorized growing tension between the traditional roles of journalists and their audiences. Thus, this event was particularly suited to exploring the research questions.

Sample
The sample for this study comprised both national and local news coverage of the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina between 24 August 2006 and 10 September 2006: anniversary articles in CNN, National Public Radio, New York Times, USA Today, Los Angeles Times, Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, The Times-Picayune, the New Orleans television stations WWLTV and WDSU – in all, about 200 news articles, video and radio broadcast stories. The corresponding online sample included all of the reader forums or blogs with commentary of those publications that were available (CNN, MSNBC, Nola.com; www.nola.com) as well as the
The four most popular Hurricane Katrina blogs (Tim’s Nameless Blog, http://timsnamelessblog.blogspot.com; Thanks Katrina, http://thanks-katrina.blogspot.com; Beyond Katrina, http://www.hurricane-katrina.org; and Metroblogging New Orleans, http://neworleans.metblogs.com) as identified on Technorati (www.technorati.com), the blogging database. About 300 blog entries and comments, chosen with the search words ‘Hurricane Katrina’ during the sampling time period, were analyzed. These print and online publications were selected in order to have both local and national authors and several different genres of media. The unit of analysis for this sample was the news article, blog entry or the individual comment.

Data analysis

The sample underwent a structural textual analysis, informed by Goffman (1974) and others’ use of framing methodology. Frames are particular ‘schemata of interpretation’ for organizing experience in such a structure that presents a particular way of seeing the world (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974; Pan and Kosicki, 1993). By textually analyzing media artifacts, researchers can reveal the ‘encoding, interpreting, and retrieving’ process that journalists and other authors exercise to construct a meaningful text (Pan and Kosicki, 1993: 57). Within these frames exist a pattern of social relations that represent a dominant system of rule playing out in mediated texts (Foss, 1996): ‘The idea elements in a culture do not exist in isolation but are grouped into more or less harmonious clusters or interpretive packages’ (Gamson and Lasch, 1983: 198). For any particular idea element, Gamson and Lasch suggest deciphering its ‘signature matrix’ made up of metaphors, depictions, catchphrases, exemplars, roots, visual images, consequences and appeals to principle. The analysis of that framework could deduce the nature of a particular news discourse (Pan and Kosicki, 1993; van Dijk, 1988).

This study’s ‘idea elements’ entailed the normative roles of the press and citizen journalists in the formation of collective memory. Thus, the signature matrix included the following.

- Character depictions – how was the author presenting himself and his sources, particularly the press, citizens, and citizen journalists? What kind of action did they perform in the narrative?
- Main themes – what were the underlying themes in the overall story? What is the author’s main point?
- Descriptors – how was the information relayed and characterized? What kinds of anecdotes are relayed? What tone is used?
- Overall message – what was the overriding lesson that the reader should learn about the press and citizens from the piece? Who can be depended upon for accurate, credible information in this story?
• Strategy for establishing authority – how did the author attempt to assert their right to tell this story? For example, did they attribute information, use quotes, cite official documents, or report eyewitness accounts?

Each story or comment was deconstructed for each category by examining the following:

• word and image choices – particularly their symbolic connotation, such as ‘bride’ or ‘flag’;
• activity or passivity of characters;
• audience considerations – such as a familiar tone, use of the second-person ‘you’ and references to specific locales and individuals;
• authorial self-reflexivity – use of the first person or other indication of the author’s thoughts and actions in the work;
• presence of ‘official’ sources; and
• other evidence of journalistic functions – such as repair work, documentation techniques and explanation of authorial purpose.

For example, the analysis showed 10 roles for journalists and citizen writers in both the mainstream and online coverage, including ‘hero’, ‘witness’, ‘narrator’, ‘partner’ and ‘villain’. These categories derived from the literature on both news accounts and collective memory (as laid out in Fry, 2006; Kitch, 2005; Lule, 2001; Zelizer, 2005 and others). A character was coded ‘hero’ if the only details in the article involved their overcoming some adversity for the greater good in an altruistic move (and often, the descriptor ‘hero’ was actually used). In contrast, a ‘villain’ depiction involved someone with impure motivations and no redeeming qualities (described using only negative words and images).

RESULTS

The press as portrayed in mainstream coverage
In the coverage of Hurricane Katrina’s anniversary, journalists followed Barbie Zelizer’s (2005) cataloguing of press’s roles in society, from authoritative witness to diligent watchdog to history writer. As in the JFK coverage (Zelizer, 1992), reporters personalized their accounts with self-reflexivity that demonstrated the press’s presence: ‘And may I say that the crew was extraordinary ... One of my cameramen has worked with a broken foot since 9:00 o’clock this morning to try to get this story to you’ (Cooper, 2006). In three-quarters of these stories, reporters assumed the roles of hero and watchdog for society (Carr, 2006; Stanley, 2006). New York Times
reporter David Carr wrote about a *Times-Picayune* food critic as someone persevering despite personal anguish, quoting him as saying:

> The practice of journalism has been a tool for coping and for dealing with what has happened. The notebook, the pen, the deadline, it all forces you to not live in denial. (Carr, 2006: C1)

In relating the specific detail of the broken foot or by pontificating about the purpose of their jobs, journalists emphasized their bravery and persistence in reporting the story, i.e. in performing their traditional function for society. One can see here how journalists offer up newsgathering secrets selectively, in order to bolster the professional impression as a benevolent authority.

Journalists often connected their role to community-building and societal improvement – major themes of their self-portrayals: ‘[T]he question a year after Katrina is not who will save us the next time but how will we save ourselves’ (Ripley, 2006: 51). The inclusion of the ‘us’ in this sentence reminds audiences that journalists are subject to the same tragedies and humanity as those they are writing about. Similarly, in this *New York Times* piece, the anchor of the *NBC Nightly News* is described as a ‘nonresident’ rather than as a journalist:

> Even nonresidents couldn’t shake their sense of ownership. Mr. Lauer asked Mr. Williams, who hails from New Jersey, about his personal attachment to the story. ‘If you had been with us in the Superdome, Matt’, the anchor of ‘The NBC Nightly News’ replied, ‘this would be your cause’. (Stanley, 2006: 19)

The implication here is that ‘nonresidents’ and journalists are not supposed to have a sense of ownership, which in this situation they could not ‘shake’. Williams employs the term ‘us’ here to mean all of the people who suffered in the Superdome (although in truth, he had resources available to him in that place which the masses did not). The journalist is perceived as an experienced witness, as someone in the know and a credible source with the right to speak for the whole.

One lesson to be learned from both local and national mainstream coverage was that people can count on the press in times of crisis, as in this CNN broadcast:

> Soledad, tonight a year since Katrina, trailers wasted, deadlines unmet, money unspent or misspent and promises not kept. Still, we’re keeping them honest, looking for progress and talking with people. (Cooper, 2006)

The catchphrase ‘we’re keeping them honest’ relays a sense of responsibility, establishing the watchdog function for CNN. Journalists were part of an elite group whose job it was to guide Americans in moving forward from this tragedy. The press was highly cognizant of its role as a
meaning-maker (Duncan, 2006; Larson, 2006). These journalists revealed private parts of themselves or their newsgathering, but offered only those scenes that reinforced the enduring story about the hurricane they wanted to convey, as well as the journalist’s authority to tell that story. This act represented a certain self-promotion on behalf of the profession, but it was also a form of communal promotion, as Lule (2001) suggested: their self-reflexivity provided a strategic means of authority and a way to lace the story with American values, as well as a blueprint for moving forward according to those national ideals. Almost half the mainstream sample included some kind of self-reflexive accounting.

The press as portrayed in online coverage
In cyberspace media were heroes and eyewitnesses (about 50 percent of the time), but they were also sources, partners, neighbors and friends, children and villains. Citizen journalists reassured media sources that their role as a history writer and meaning-maker was acknowledged (‘Anderson Cooper’s blog on 360’, 2006; JoAnn, 2006; Lily, 2006; Schneider, 2006; Wood, 2006). Many of these writers addressed their posts directly to the reporter in a gesture of familiarity.

Citizen writers connected their own remembering of the hurricane to the media, acknowledging the role of the press in constructing that memory (Florita, 2006; Milwaukee, 2006; Sonu, 2006): ‘Katrina taught us a lot as long as we don’t forget what happened. History has a way of repeating itself when we forget. Keep us all honest, Anderson’ (Fairfield, 2006). Here we see the CNN catchphrase ‘keeping them honest’ used for another purpose: to accept the press’s position as a watchdog and an authority. People remembered Hurricane Katrina through media images (Linda, 2006; Melinda, 2006):

> The thing that made it ‘more real’ (if that makes sense) for me was reading about it in your book. That was when it became more personal for me. Thanks for that. I’ll see you tonight. (Milwaukee, 2006).

The concluding ‘I’ll see you tonight’ solidified this feeling that the journalist (in this case, Anderson Cooper) had become part of individuals’ personal rituals (such as in Toronto, 2006; Wood, 2006). ‘My Katrina story is based on the images I saw on your show’ (Toronto, 2006). For these people, the journalism represented the real in their minds (a concept going all the way back to Lippmann, 1921). Such comments served to reinforce the traditional function of the press as a hegemonic vehicle which provides a sense of stability and guidance in times of crisis.

However, more often in this sample, citizens used the forums and blogs to question the journalistic version of the story. Anti-media sentiment bubbled up on these forums and blogs, as in ‘MSN has missed the point on
this (Anonymous, 2006a)’ and, ‘First, for the press. Please stop fueling this fight with mis-information’ (Anonymous, 2006e). Citizens expressed rage: ‘SICK OF THE MEDIA AND THE KATRINA STUFF!!!’ (Anonymous, 2006b); and disdain: ‘Irresponsible journalism at it’s [sic] most pathetic’ (Wemtiechick, 2006); and sarcasm: ‘With all the media hype in town, it’s a media’s playground and just like for the President, it’s another photo op’ (Schneider, 2006). Some posts provided alternative reporting (Wbennetti, 2006). The phrasing ‘missed the point’ indicated that citizen writers not only rejected MSN’s version, but also that the citizen writer knew the real ‘point’. In declaring media coverage to be misinformation, these citizens were asserting their right to recognize and relay ‘truth’. Writers assumed a didactic tone with journalists (Schneider, 2006): ‘Please don’t be afraid of becoming emotional over a story like this one, the minute you deny your own humanity it is time to quit’ (JoAnn, 2006). Furthermore, citizens critiqued and guided the journalists: ‘It would be so nice if you would cover a working class evacuee family with a FATHER and mother as they rebuild their lives’ (Wemtiechick, 2006). Subtly, a balance shift was occurring here.

In some posts, reporters were considered partners:

The idea is that old and new media seem to be coming together in a way that is more than either and bigger than both and that’s really what excites me about blogging. (Beyond Katrina, 2006a)

The blogger Beyond Katrina suggests a new relationship for media with citizens as ‘coming together’. Citizen writers were considering themselves on a par with the trained professionals: this was a key strategy for citizen writers to establish authority in relation to the press. By commenting on the journalists’ newsgathering, these citizens were situating themselves as being privy to that backstage, and thus in the ‘know’ and in possession of the real ‘truth’. The media portrayals in the citizen anniversary coverage ultimately undermined the press-fueled perception that journalists have any special jurisdiction over information.

Citizens as presented by media, citizen journalists in mainstream coverage
In the mainstream coverage, citizens showed up in the narrative as officials and other institutional characters representing US authority. Characters play out the dominant values deemed important by the reporter, who wants each source to bring credibility, drama and meaning to the story. In these narratives, journalists wrote about people as heroes and victims, officials and soldiers (Chapple, 2006). In other words, people were not merely ‘regular people’ in these news stories, but symbols and metaphors advancing narrative
plot. In the following example, Mr Davis is an exemplar for American perseverance:

Out in the neighborhoods Tuesday, work went on, painfully and defiantly, in the 100 degree-plus heat. Plunging on ahead with rebuilding, as more than one demonstrated they were doing Tuesday, was a way of remembering too – of not being conquered by the long-tentacled disaster and its aftermath … ‘What happened has happened’, he said, proudly showing off his ‘totally gutted, reframed’ house. Living quarters, for now, is a FEMA trailer in the back yard. ‘We’ve got to move on,’ Mr. Davis said. (Kornblut and Nossitger, 2006: A1)

The writer employs Mr Davis to construct the moral, ‘We’ve got to move on’. In the aftermath of the battle between man and nature, Mr Davis will ‘remember’ by not being conquered; he is a soldier, representing endurance and will. Note that Mr Davis does not complain about the heat, or memorialize about lost loved ones, or even elaborate on the ‘pain’ that is mentioned. Every detail points to rebuilding – the main message in the journalistic coverage (as in Nolan, 2006).

Indeed, it is not so much citizens who show up in this narrative as the concept of citizenship (Scott, 2006; Simon, 2006). One CNN journalist selected the Tulane University president to suggest that the hurricane had been a blessing, a way to reinvent itself in true American fashion:

Ms. Frierson: There’s a new sense of citizenship. You know, we’re reaching out to each other like never before. They say this mutual support that has emerged after the storm crosses racial lines. (Scott, 2006)

The terminology ‘emerged after the storm’ symbolized a cleansing that will transcend the racial problems of the past. In this rebirth, the collective ‘reaching out to each other’ will trump adversity.

Often in this coverage, journalists assumed the role of citizen (Farris, 2006; Hezeau, 2006): ‘But then there were the faces of people like mine, soaking wet, uncertain and scared’ (Hezeau, 2006). Here, the WWLTV reporter positions herself as a victim, one who was authorized to tell the story of the hurricane because she witnessed it alongside other victims. She continued:

So a year later Katrina continues to affect our lives. It’s in our thoughts, actions and the recovery is always in our hearts. And yes, I will be a Katrina bride.

The reporter makes a point of advancing the grand narrative toward redemption and recovery. She even invoked the label ‘bride’, which symbolizes a beginning. *The Times-Picayune*, local radio stations, CNN, the books that were published, even *New York Times* articles – all wrote stories with the pronoun ‘we’ to situate the news organization and its individual
journalists as part of the citizenry. In this WWLTV piece, reporter Meg Farris shares her thoughts about the hurricane a year later:

When people ask me what I am going to do, I tell them I want to build, way off of the ground with hurricane windows and solar panels. I have the chance to not be a victim again. We all have the chance to do it right this time in so many aspects of our personal and community lives. (Farris, 2006)

For a brief moment, the reader glimpses Meg the Person, albeit an empowered American. Because the reporters had proven themselves to be part of society as citizens, they became sanctioned to write everybody’s story.

**Citizens as presented by media, citizen journalists in online coverage**

Online, citizen writers considered themselves storytellers, journalists, whistleblowers, counselors, journal writers, history drafters, meaning-makers, and opinion leaders:

One of the really interesting things about being a citizen journalist is I sometimes get to turn the tables on the traditional journalists. We’re all inquisitive storytellers at heart so when you get a few of us in the room together there’s just no telling what might happen. (Beyond Katrina, 2006a).

Here, the blogger was in a figurative as well as a literal ‘room’ with the journalists. In this place, Beyond Katrina asserted himself as one of the ‘us’ usually reserved for the press’s exclusive interpretive community. He defined himself as a ‘journalist’ and identified with reporters. The bloggers and forum contributors practised reporting (becoming watchdogs, for example). Many of the blogs introduced their own characters and sources as a way to provide information. ‘I just heard from New Orleans blogger and Rising Tide Conference organizer, Mark Folse reporting on the situation at the 17th Street Canal’ (Beyond Katrina, 2006b). The citizens recast themselves as characters performing in this new narrative:

I just got a tip about residents of a housing project in NOLA who are being confronted by New Orleans police because they won’t leave their property ... I am not sure if there is anything to it, but I have passed it on to local media. (Beyond Katrina, 2006c)

These messages positioned the writers as sources at the beginning of the newsmaking loop. For example, in a previous comment, the blogger Beyond Katrina had declared himself to be a citizen journalist with the power to ‘shape the stories ... through powerful inquiry’ (Beyond Katrina, 2006a). Here citizens have assumed a new agency in the distributed information architecture inherent in the media system.

Those authors who failed to play the part of credible informer in a competent manner were portrayed in other posts as being lazy, and their
comments were ‘repaired’ (Anonymous, 2006c; Anonymous, 2006d). Citizens were hyperaware of how they were being depicted in the press and elsewhere:

And I especially cringe when I hear folks call those impacted by Katrina, ‘victims’. No victims here as far as I’m concerned ... only good, honest, decent, ordinary folks who are going through a major transition. But for the sake of brevity, if we’ve got to have a label to describe a population of people who’ve been impacted by the disaster, I prefer to use ‘survivors’. (Beyond Katrina, 2006d)

In one lengthy Nola.com forum posting, Debra Mercer (writing under the handle ‘Arkgurl’) blasted all the dominant institutions, including government and the media:

Now that the hurricane has come and caused mass devastation everyone is on tv wanting ‘to be honest’ and tell the truth regarding the safety of our community … I feel a complete lack of ‘HONESTY’ for what is being told to the people who once populated our neighborhoods. No, no one told us to live there, no one told us that all of our elected officials were lying to us, but I feel that ommision [sic] is betrayal. (Arkgurl, 2006)

Like many other writers, Mercer felt compelled to correct people’s impressions of the ‘reality’ of New Orleans’ recovery. She co-opted the press’ catchphrase ‘honesty’, manipulating the context so that it suited her point. She employed the first person, including herself as one of those who knows the ‘real’ story; thus, she has the authority to tell this story (i.e. to fix the story put out by the media) properly.

In this rewriting, different themes (or at least thematic foci) developed. In contrast to the theme of citizenship, these citizen journalists wrote most often using a theme of personal connections. Citizen journalists were in control of what information they shared; many revealed private selves in this public sphere, as in this Nola.com piece: ‘Re: How much did you CRY today? very tough day ... many mixed emotions, but mainly felt blessed’ (Alquima, 2006), and this one:

Each day I do what I need to do to keep myself sane, maybe even happy, and don’t worry about the rest. If I have time to help clean, write letters, campaign, volunteer – great. If I don’t, I don’t and I don’t feel at all guilty. (Sistasista, 2006)

In some ways the forums were the first draft of people trying to construct some kind of meaning from the event, as in this comment on Beyond Katrina: ‘The truth is, though, I’ve been searching for my own unique place in the story. I haven’t been able to find it’ (Saizan, 2006). The comment was followed by a discussion of whether such a ‘unique place’ would ever be found in such a story. In commiserating together, the participants created
that unique place – a public place of private remembering where collective memory of Hurricane Katrina was reformed with the press’s influence. The journey had become more meaningful because it was both public and collective, but on a personal level; they could share it with others in cyberspace, as in Oseeanbeauty (2006) and the following entry:

What will you be doing to commemorate Katrina’s anniversary? I will be doing what I love, sitting right here at this computer being a blogger, a citizen journalist, a story teller, a life coach focused on large scale healing change – and using this new medium as a vehicle for that larger cause … Drop a line, a comment, share your thoughts … get connected … be part of the story. (Beyond Katrina, 2006e)

Within these posts, they recreated and remembered, trying to find some sense of connection to those that experienced the hurricane:

Yeah this is me ‘Patrick’ the Navy guy … I left N.O. the day before Katrina and took Merlin and Sid, my two roommates and we ended up in TEXARKANA … they are fine, I email them regular. I am in NYC now working for Dept of Homeless Services (go figure) as an engineer. My email is [address omitted]. Write me. (pwalsh, 2006)

The ‘Navy guy’ chooses to reveal that he had been in New Orleans, which imbued the writer with authority. In giving his email address, he offers a direct way to create a connection. He and his friends are portrayed not only as survivors, but also as people with community. The forums and blogs became a tool for self-definition, self-renewal and self-expression of both the individual and a group community (as opposed to a nation or citizenry). It was this willingness to share private details (emotional and otherwise) that seemed most valued in these citizen journalism places, creating new collective memories via individual chronicling.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In their coverage of Hurricane Katrina, journalists assumed the roles of hero, witness and watchdog in order to assert their authority to tell the story. In their writings, citizens were institutional officials or archetypes guiding audiences in recovery. Online, citizen journalists had the opportunity to rewrite that story, and recast both journalists and themselves in the narrative. While some of their posts reaffirmed the roles of the media, many instituted a complete role reversal. To these new authors of the story, journalists were also partners, friends, children in need of guidance, villains and naive scapegoats. Citizen journalists wrote about the press as an entity whose authority is not inevitably entrenched in society. They practised self-repair and self-assertion, often in contrast to the journalism and their assigned archetypical characters. Table 1 demonstrates the particular Hurricane
Katrina anniversary matrix for the press and citizen or citizen journalist portrayals according to character depictions (media or the citizen), main themes, descriptors, overall message and strategies for authority construction.

In cyberspace, some citizens are undermining the role that journalists have long determined for them, and are asserting their right to be part of the collective memory construction in a formal way. This role shift indicated vulnerability in that established hierarchal information structure (which Bennett et al. (2007) referred to as a power prism). Furthermore, some citizen journalists in this coverage rejected the traditional understanding of the press–audience dynamic in order to (re)position themselves as more authoritative than journalists. Taken together, this evidence suggests that citizen writers are trying to occupy a dominant place in the tiers of the information hierarchy as co-producers of collective memory.

The field could benefit from research that explores how the increasing mass co-production of collective memory (or any cohesive news story) will alter what we know about ourselves as well as how we can move forward as a society with some sense of a larger community still intact. In particular, triangulating this research with in-depth interviews of journalists and citizen writers online combined with an audience study would offer a more complete understanding of authority construction. This study’s limitations lie in its lack of ability to be generalized, but also the always tricky maneuver to sum up 500 articles’ worth of content from several dozen different authors into something cohesive, constructive and accurate.

However, this evidence does seem to suggest that citizen journalists are strategically presenting themselves in new narrative realms, thus creating

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**Table 1** Signature matrix for press-citizens in mainstream vs. online coverage

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>PRESS PORTRAYAL</strong></th>
<th><strong>CITIZEN/CITIZEN JOURNALIST PORTRAYAL</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character Depiction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Main Theme</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hero, watchdogs</td>
<td>Friend, partner, villain</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Redemption</td>
<td>Mediated reality/fiction</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Descriptors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal anecdotes</td>
<td>Relationships with press</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall message</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘We were there’, press can be depended upon</td>
<td>Press not an exclusive institution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy for authority construction</td>
<td>Self-reflexivity, ‘repair’ work</td>
<td>Newsgathering strategies revealed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Journalism techniques, individual experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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new information flows and dynamics that will have implications for information power structures. If these roles for citizens are changing, so are the expectations for journalists, understandings of information authority, levels of productive reciprocity and contiguity of content (Papacharissi, forthcoming 2010; Yaros, forthcoming 2010). Boundaries of information and, most importantly, information control are becoming liquid and diffused (Deuze, 2007). Indeed, it is the quality and level of connectedness that seem to matter (Jung et al., 2001). If an information producer can prove their right to connection (and establishing connection), they have achieved a certain authority in this new world.

If the press writes to ensure its longevity as an institution and does this through these strategic techniques such as eyewitness accounts, self-reflexivity and repair work, we must ascribe the same motivations to bloggers and citizens online. Seeking their ‘own unique place in the story’ (Saizan, 2006), citizens are rewriting and overwriting the journalistic account and sometimes bypassing that account completely. The resulting news narrative (in this case, the Hurricane Katrina collective memory) is a patchwork of journalism and citizen work that represents the acting out of the tensions from these role shifts. As news scholars and other media watchers move forward in evaluating news stories, their research should consider the new roles that citizen journalists are occupying. Their versions online have become part of the ‘curriculum’ of coverage that James Carey (1986) once implored media scholars to consider.

References


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