



# Cooperation with the corporation? CNN and the hegemonic cooptation of citizen journalism through iReport.com

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## Abstract

The literature on online citizen journalism tends to construe user-generated citizen media as inherently counter-hegemonic, as the emerging, as yet unformed but nonetheless virile antithesis to the traditional media. This article argues that while the vigorous profusion of web-based citizen media has the potential to inaugurate an era of dynamic expansion of the deliberative space and even serve as a counterfoil to the suffocating dominance of the discursive space by the traditional, mainstream media, we are now witnessing a trend toward the aggressive cooptation of these citizen media by corporate media hegemony. To demonstrate this, I study 'iReport.com,' a YouTube-type, user-generated citizen news site launched by the Cable News Network (CNN). I argue that the trend toward corporate-sponsored citizen media may, in the final analysis, blur the distinction between citizen and mainstream journalism.

## Keywords

citizen journalism, CNN, hegemonic cooptation, hegemony, iReport.com, journalistic authority, online journalism, traditional journalism

## Introduction

The progressive drift toward the migration of news and information to the internet has conducted to the robust flowering and proliferation of web-based citizen journalism. Over the last couple of years, millions of web logs, or blogs, with thematic preoccupations that encapsulate a broad spectrum of human endeavors, have emerged and have continued to

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challenge, and even redefine, journalistic practices in many fascinating ways (Thurman, 2008). This development has inspired optimism in some quarters that what Herbert Schiller (1989) famously called the 'corporate take-over of public expression' by the traditional media is about to be subverted, perhaps even extirpated, by the unexampled discursive democracy that web-based citizen media enable (Dahlgren, 2005).

Some people who are enamored with this thought-process often construe user-generated citizen media as inherently counter-hegemonic, as the emerging, as yet unformed but nonetheless potent antithesis to the traditional media. Writing in the *Buffalo News*, for instance, Violanti (2004: C1) gleefully celebrates the fact that 'the mainstream media met their match' in blogs, which 'not only compete in a new media landscape but also answer to the competitors.' Implicit in this enthusiastic valorization of citizen media is the idea that they exist apart from and, in fact, in opposition to, the mainstream media. As Reese et al. (2007: 236) have pointed out, it has become customary to point to instances where news and public affairs blogs exposed inaccurate reporting by mainstream media as evidence that 'the online army of bloggers will supplant the work and value of traditional journalists.'

In this article, I argue that while the vigorous profusion of web-based citizen media has the potential to inaugurate an era of dynamic expansion of the deliberative space and even serve as a counterfoil to the suffocating dominance of the discursive space by the traditional media, we are now witnessing a trend toward the aggressive cooptation of these citizen media by corporate media hegemony. I deploy critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the implicit assumptions embedded in what might be called the manifesto of CNN's iReport.com to make the case that contrary to Thurman's (2008: 153–4) optimism that 'Online, self published current affairs journalism and news publications built on a preponderance of reader contributions are starting to offer alternatives to established news providers,' online citizen media are actually being coopted into the culture and conventions of mainstream media practices.

But, first, what is critical discourse analysis? According to Jager (2001: 32–3), critical discourse analysis consists of five key components:

What knowledge (valid at a certain time) consists; how this valid knowledge evolves; how it is passed on; what function it has for the constitution of subjects and the shaping of society and what impact this knowledge has on the overall development of society.

In applying this method to this study, I examined the knowledge claims of 'iReport.com,' a YouTube-style, user-generated news site launched by the Cable News Network (CNN). How did the website negotiate traditional conceptions of news with the notional understanding of how nonprofessional 'citizen journalists' conceive of news? What is at stake in this negotiation? What epistemological boundaries are being policed in this enterprise? I also analyzed iReport.com from the point of view of its functional utility for CNN, which increasingly uses material from the site for broadcast in its main newscasts.

Based on a critical discourse analysis of the content and ontological assumptions of iReport.com, I make the case that the distinction between citizen media and mainstream media will become increasingly hazy. However, to understand how CNN's iReport.com constitutes a blurring of journalistic genres as a prelude to the hegemonic cooptation of

citizen journalism, I first review the literature on models of journalism. What is citizen journalism? How is it different from traditional journalism and the related but nonetheless different concept of civic journalism? The next section answers these questions.

## A review of models of journalism

Nip (2006) identified five broad genres of journalism: (1) traditional journalism, (2) public journalism, (3) interactive journalism, (4) participatory journalism, and (5) citizen journalism. Although these terms have widely different significations for different scholars and do, in fact, overlap at different conceptual levels, there appears to be sufficient agreement among journalism scholars on their distinguishing features to justify delineating them as distinct journalistic models.

Traditional journalism, according to Nip (2006: 216), is the kind of journalism where 'professional journalists are the gatekeepers who filter through the happenings of the world, select the significant events, and report them for their audience.' This model has limited participatory content, except for letters to the editor and other kinds of audience feedback, which are sometimes no more than indecipherable crackles of background noise because they are merely reactive; they neither significantly inform the content of the news nor do they influence the process of newsgathering. In this model, professional journalists determine what constitutes news using frames of reference internalized from their professional training and associations. In most cases, news is little more than the actions of what Herman and Chomsky call the 'primary definers' of news: politicians, accredited sources in government, and other institutions that have access to the media almost as a matter of right (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: xvii). In this sense, as Woollacott (1982: 109) points out, the media serve 'to reinforce a consensual viewpoint by using public idioms and by claiming to voice public opinion.' This has been the dominant model of journalism practiced by the mainstream media for many years.

Public journalism, also called civic journalism, emerged as a response to the perceived inadequacies of traditional journalism. According to Jay Rosen, the concept of 'public journalism' first appeared in the United States in 1993 as a reaction to the deepening chasm between journalism and the citizens it professes to serve on the one hand and between the quotidian concerns of ordinary people and public life in general on the other (Rosen, 1999). The *Wichita Eagle* is the first notable newspaper to experiment with this model of journalism (Friedland, 2003). Public journalism, in essence, imposes on itself the task of actively seeking the input of local communities both in decisions about what constitutes newsworthy events and in how the news is presented. As Nip (2006: 216) points out,

Town hall meetings, citizen panels, and polls are common techniques used to tap the concerns of the community, which would then form the reporting agenda for the journalists. During the news-gathering process, professional journalists often report back to the citizens what they have found for generating discussion in search of solutions to the problems.... There have been cases where the citizens even partnered with the professionals in gathering the news.

Although this model represents a greater connection with the people than traditional journalism does, it still retains the professional journalist as the gatekeeper. That is why

some scholars aver that civic journalism, while pretending to be an improvement on mainstream news practices, is mere cosmetic reformism that leaves intact the fundamental essence of professional, mainstream media practices (see, for instance, Davis, 2000; Glasser, 2000; Woodstock, 2002). For one, it is market driven and is constrained by the institutional and organizational structures of the dominant mainstream news practices from which it purports to depart. As Woodstock (2002: 37) argues, 'traditional and public journalisms adopt similar narrative strategies to effect essentially the same ends: placing the power of telling society's stories in the hands of journalists.'

Now, how is interactive journalism different from public journalism? The interactive journalism model is not radically different from public journalism, although it seeks to improve upon some of the shortcomings of public journalism by taking advantage of the improved technical capabilities of media organizations in the last couple of years since the internet became a demotic medium. However, precisely what interactive journalism actually entails is still imprecise (Matheson, 2004). Following Iser, though, we can construe it as consisting in 'networks of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text' (Iser, 1978: 34) and in which the reader 'is less massified and more open' (Matheson, 2004: 453). Hujanen and Peitikainen (2004: 383) also define interactive journalism as 'the increasing opportunity to communicate across "old" boundaries of time and place, and between journalists and citizens.'

According to Brian Massey and Mark Levy (1999), there are two important dimensions to interactivity: content interactivity and interpersonal interactivity. Content interactivity is said to be present when readers can have the latitude to liberate themselves from the one-dimensionality set by professional journalists as well as to have the liberty to avail themselves of a wide variety of choice of content on a given site. Interpersonal interactivity occurs when users can interact with professional journalists through exchange of emails, chat sessions, or when the 'comment' pages of news organizations can serve as a site for the push and pull of views in response to a news story on a news website. Interactive journalism, in this sense, is little more than computer-mediated public journalism.

Participatory journalism goes a step further than interactive journalism by actually engaging consumers of news in the newsgathering process. In this model, users do not merely interact with the news and with professional journalists; they also participate in some fashion in a many-to-many collaborative journalism. Like interactive journalism, it is also enabled by the technology of the internet, as it allows a new generation of internet users to become content creators. Bowman and Willis (2008) define participatory journalism as:

The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.

They add that participatory journalism uses what they call a 'publish, then filter' model instead of the traditional 'filter, then publish' model (Bowman and Willis, 2008). Some of the features of the model, according to them, include discussion groups, user-generated

content, weblogs (blogs), collaborative publishing, peer-to-peer systems, and web syndication. Although public journalism allows the participation of news users in the news-gathering process, the process is still controlled by professional journalists within mainstream institutional journalistic structures. The OhmyNews site in South Korea is often credited with pioneering this brand of journalism. On this site, readers generate the bulk of the news stories, but the stories are edited by a full-time staff of a few dozen editors. Yeon-Jung Yu, writing in the *Japan Media Review* says, 'Most are written by housewives, schoolkids [sic], professors and other "citizen journalists"' (Yu, 2003). San Jose *Mercury News* columnist Dan Gillmor predicts that the many-to-many collaborative journalism model of Korea's OhmyNews would define the direction of news business: 'OhmyNews is transforming the 20th century's journalism-as-lecture model – where organizations tell the audience what the news is and the audience either buys it or doesn't – into something vastly more bottom-up, interactive and democratic' (Gillmor, 2003).

Among prominent news organizations that have adopted this model are: the BBC's 'Have Your Say' ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking\\_point/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/default.stm)), which invites news users to express their views about the news and then publishes them in a particular section of the news product, and the relatively less successful MSNBC's Citizen Journalists Report (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6639760/>), where an editor suggests assignments for whoever is interested in reporting on specified aspects of developing news stories, and so on. In both examples, however, a corps of professional journalists sits in judgment over what stories get published.

Citizen journalism is the model of journalism that allows a wider range of participants, including what Rosen (2006) has called 'the people formerly known as the audience' to perform 'random acts of journalism' (Lasica, 2003: 70). Citizen journalism is different from the preceding four models precisely because it eliminates the authority of the professional journalist. It can be initiated and sustained by just one person. It can also be practiced by a group of people, an activist organization, the non-paid staff of a non-governmental organization, news websites, community radio stations, and so on. However, not all unfiltered, user-generated content on the internet is citizen journalism. To qualify as journalism, the content needs to include 'some original interviewing, reporting, or analysis of events or issues to which people other than the authors have access' (Nip, 2006: 218).

The Indymedia site, a transnational multimedia news outlet that became prominent for opposing the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999, is often cited as one of the pioneers of the citizen journalism model. More generally, news-based weblogs can also be categorized as practicing citizen journalism since the defining feature of citizen journalism is that it is wholly user-generated, is free from the encumbrances of professional news judgment and gate-keeping, and is concerned with news events.

The five models of journalism discussed so far vary on the extent and form of people participation, with citizen journalism involving the people to the greatest extent, and traditional journalism the least. Interactive journalism empowers users after the news is published, whereas participatory journalism gets the users to gather the news. Public journalism encompasses a wide range of experimentation in engaging citizens as advisers and partners in news gathering while also allowing interaction after news publication. It is clear that none of these models are immanent, self-sufficient containers of meaning.

For one, they are not self-conscious journalistic models isolated in time and space. And they constantly overlap. It does appear, though, that citizen journalism is the only model that can be reasonably thought of, with some qualification, as distinct, even new-fangled, from the point of view of traditional newsgathering practices; the rest are mere adaptations of or improvements on traditional journalism. However, as the next section shows, the reality of corporate-mediated user-generated citizen media complicates this easy categorization.

### **CNN's iReport.com: a fusion of journalistic models?**

The iReport.com, launched on August 2, 2006 (CNN.com, 2007), is a CNN citizen journalism experiment that gives ordinary people from everywhere in the world the opportunity to contribute unedited, unfiltered, and uncensored user-generated video and text-based news reports. It is precisely this feature that qualifies it to be labeled a citizen medium. Its structure appears to instantiate what Naim, editor in chief of the U-based *Foreign Policy* magazine, called 'the YouTube effect,' which he defines as 'the phenomenon whereby video clips, often produced by individuals acting on their own, are rapidly transmitted throughout the world thanks to video-sharing Web sites such as YouTube, Google Video, and others' (Naim, 2007: 104). But iReport.com has expanded the YouTube model by making its site truly multi-platform: although video clips are the most common materials posted on the site at the time of this study, there were also many photos and text-based user-generated news reports.

The site is divided into seven categories – latest, 'highest rated,' 'most viewed,' 'most commented,' 'most shared,' 'on CNN,' and 'newsiest.' It is these categories, which encapsulate the philosophical underpinnings of the corporate-sponsored citizen journalism experiment, that provide the locus for this study's discourse analysis. The core of iReport.com's professed philosophy revolves around the acknowledgement of the arrogance of normative canons of news judgment by professional media organizations. This acknowledgment seeks to reconcile what Carlson (2007: 265) calls the 'symbolic competition over credibility, legitimacy and cultural authority' between entrenched, traditional mainstream media and the emerging web-based citizen media. In this respect, iReport.com's 'About Us' page is worth reproducing in great detail because it appears to self-consciously address this tension.

Lots of people argue about what constitutes news. But, really, *it's just something that happens someplace to someone. Whether that something is newsworthy mostly depends on who it affects – and who's making the decision. On iReport.com, that is you!* So we've built this site and equipped it with some nifty tools for posting, discovering and talking about what you think makes the cut. Use the tools you find here to share and talk about the news of your world, whether that's video and photos of the events of your life, or your own take on what's making international headlines. Or, even better, a little bit of both. (iReport.com, n.d.a; emphasis added)

In this passage, we see a conflation of the notions of civic and citizen journalistic models. This manifesto of corporate-sponsored citizen media performs many symbolic functions here. It divests – or at any rate pretends to divest – professional journalists of the

exclusive right to define what news is. News, according to this manifesto of the convergence of traditional and citizen media, is denuded of grand, highfalutin intellectual accoutrements and is rendered as no more than ‘something that happens to someone someplace,’ and the decision to confer this ‘something’ the status of ‘newsiness’ is entirely arbitrary; it is determined as much by our social and material conditions as it is by these inherent *doxa* of power relations. By investing in the ‘iReporter’ the latitude to define news and report it unmediated by traditional (media) power relations, CNN creates the impression that it has democratized journalistic authority. This apparent discursive inclusivity appears to contradict the position of many journalism scholars who have pointed out that professional journalists in the mainstream media perpetually seek to consolidate their professional legitimacy and power by appealing to their authority and denigrating alternative perspectives that question their judgment (see, for example, Dahlgren, 1992; Easton, 1988).

However, as an analysis of the features of the website shows, CNN is merely deploying a more sophisticated hegemonic narrative of journalistic authority to simultaneously confer legitimacy on its notion of what constitutes news and to tap into the vast – and free – resources that abound in the citizen media. I use the term ‘hegemonic narrative’ in a Gramscian sense to refer to the ability of the capitalist ruling class to impose moral and intellectual dominance over subordinate groups in the society and persuade these subordinate groups to accept this dominance as ‘common sense’ and ‘natural,’ (see Femia, 1975; Mattelart and Mattelart, 1992), what Theodore Adorno once called the ‘abstract’ character of domination by the ‘dictatorship of the self-appointed elite’ (see Cook, 1996: 6–7).

By extending the discursive boundaries of what constitutes news and making the citizen journalists cherish the illusion of control over the construction and reportage of ‘news,’ CNN deflects attention from the many hidden assumptions on the iReport.com. In so doing, it constructs the ‘normality’ of prevailing conventions of news judgment and therefore helps in the reproduction of the hegemony of traditional journalistic practices and norms. For instance, although the iReport.com says news is ‘just something that happens someplace to someone,’ and that ‘whether that something is newsworthy mostly depends on who it affects – and who’s making the decision,’ it has a category called ‘newsiest,’ which subtly subverts this definitional democracy in news judgment. The ‘newsiest’ category rewards ‘iReports’ that conform to the conventional canons of professional news judgment and in so doing potentially achieves an understated ‘common-sense’ consensus about news that previous strategies of journalistic consolidation could probably not achieve. CNN’s criteria of what constitute the ‘newsiest’ citizen-generated news videos are instructive. It says,

Newsiest is a calculation that combines freshness, popularity, activity and ratings. The idea behind newsiest is that all the contributions the iReport.com community of users make to the site – stories, comments, ratings, pageviews – *and what CNN producers pick for their own stories could add up to tell us something new about what people think is newsworthy.* (iReport.com, n.d.b; emphasis added)

Although this definition appears to be egalitarian, it actually gives more leverage to a few CNN producers in the definition of ‘newsiness’ than it does to users and/or citizen reporters. An analysis of the 30 news videos that were honored as the ‘newsiest’ during the

one-month period that this study was conducted from April to May 2008 showed that they were disproportionately news videos that appeared on CNN's mainstream broadcasts. And there is a sense in which the airing of a news video on CNN is likely to attract more attention, increase its page views, and therefore increase its chances to be a candidate for the 'newsiest' news videos. It appears to be a self-replicating circle.

Winch (1997: 3) once made the point that journalism's hegemonic power to define newsworthiness 'depends on the ability of people to distinguish between it and other kinds of mass communication.' However, in the era of the proliferation of citizen media and the potential for the blurring of the boundaries between traditional and citizen journalism, it would seem that we are witnessing a reversal of Winch's observation. Now, corporate-induced user-generated media are leading the way in instigating a false sense of unity between everyday conceptions of news and time-honored, normative, professional news judgment in which the latter seeks to be normalized through the active consent by the former.

However, more than this, through this user-generated citizen media that has generated over 200,000 news videos as of the time of this study, CNN is tapping into a mine of free labor from all over the world. As Naim (2007: 103) observed, 'international news operations may have thousands of professional journalists, but they will never be as omnipresent as millions of people carrying phones that record video.' Wikipedia, the collaborative online encyclopedia, in fact, situated the emergence of corporate-sponsored citizen media on the desire of cable and broadcast networks to have access to instant news videos, particularly in the wake of the devastating tsunami in 2004 and the July 7 bombings in London. It added that, 'Pictures from both were difficult to obtain in the moments after each tragedy. Broadcast news outlets, depending on agency or bureau video, were fortunate to receive submissions from people on the scene. Developing this format became a necessity for cable and network news shows' (Wikipedia, n.d).

But that's not the only way iReport.com takes advantage of free creative labor. The iReport.com also has a section called 'Assignment Desk' where CNN producers list topics for 'iReporters' to investigate and report. Most of these reports end up being used on CNN, which in a way suggests that CNN, in fact, sets the agenda for citizen journalists. For instance, when news breaks in any part of the world, CNN producers encourage citizen journalists to contribute video and news content to the iReport website, most of which end up in the CNN main newscast. Feature-length assignments, such as the one that asks people to send reports on the topic 'Black in America,' were used in the main CNN telecast. This recalls the discussion about the singularities of participant journalism.

So, in addition to artfully incorporating potentially threatening citizen media into the hegemonic fold, this model of journalism also expropriates the creative labor of ordinary people from around the world since their viewer-submitted content is often used in the mainstream media without monetary compensation to them. This voluntary cultural labor is exploited by CNN, and other corporate media outfits that have embraced this model, for profit. Andrew Ross (2000: 6) perceptively characterized this phenomenon as the principle of 'cultural discount' whereby 'artists and other arts workers accept non-monetary rewards – the gratification of producing art – as a compensation for their work, thereby discounting the cash price of their labor.' This donated labor, he points out, has found its way in 'the funky milieu of the Webshops, where work looks almost exactly



like play. All in all, the New Media workplace is a prescient indicator of the near future of labor, which combines mental skills with new technologies in alternative environments' (Ross, 2000: 11–12).

It must be pointed out, nonetheless, that this experiment can also offer glimpses of the capacity for 'resistance.' For instance, the iReport website, for all its artful cooptation of citizen media into mainstream news practices, has a few videos and news texts that openly criticize CNN's coverage of certain news events. An example is a submission titled 'CNN Jack Cafferty's Hatred [sic] Speech Toward Chinese' by a Chinese contributor who fulminated against what many Chinese regarded as Jack Cafferty's racially insensitive remarks after he called Chinese people 'the same bunch of goons and thugs they have been in the past 50 years' during an interview in Wolf Blitzer's 'Situation Room' in a previous CNN telecast. The iReport.com was used as a platform to solicit signatories for an online petition drive against CNN.

Similarly, there are many citizen stories on iReport.com that give radical perspectives on the US economic recession. An iReporter from California, for example, posted a text-based iReport, titled 'No Recession or Depression.....It's a Class War,' that questions the dominant perspectives on the economic crisis in the corporate media (iReport.com, n.d.d). In the comment section of the report, a commenter instructively remarked: 'This is interesting information, but I doubt you would see this in CNN's headline news.' This is a powerful illustration of Gramsci's contention that in hegemonic battles, there is always contestation and that the volitional consent of the broad segment of subordinate classes has to be perpetually won and re-won. As Slavoj Žižek argues, a successful ideology always grants subjects the latitude to cherish an intentionally conceived distance towards an ideology's overt ideals and prescriptions, a phenomenon he calls 'ideological disidentification' (Boucher and Sharpe, 2005: xiv). Hegemony has never been about the elimination of opposition; it is, on the contrary, about the artful, nonviolent discursive containment of opposition.

Now, in what ways does CNN's iReport.com represent a 'hegemonic cooptation' of potentially threatening citizen journalism? The next section sketches the outline of the conceptions of hegemony and then shows how CNN's embrace of citizen journalism might be understood as a form of 'hegemonic cooptation.'

## **What hegemony is and why iReport represents hegemonic cooption of citizen media**

The concept of hegemony was popularized, but by no means invented, by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, in spite of assertions to the contrary from some well-regarded theorists.<sup>1</sup> The notion of hegemony emerged in an attempt to reconcile or explain the apparent disjunction between classical Marxian teleology and the reality of ideological reproduction, negotiation, and legitimation in capitalist society, which challenges or at least problematizes this teleology. In classical Marxist theory, it is customary to attribute the inability of the proletariat to extirpate capitalist relations of production to the blinding effects of a capitalist ruling class ideology, which is purportedly adept at inducing a 'false consciousness' in subordinate classes (Eyerman, 1981). For instance, in Friedrich Engels' oft-cited 'Letter to Mehring' (1893) he said, among other things, that:

Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker. Consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or seeming motive forces. (cited in Eagleton, 1991: 89)

Engels, in this passage, grapples with the notion that the process of the ideological legitimation of capitalist ethos percolates into and gets inscribed in the consciousness of workers through a direct, conscious manipulation. People who are manipulated by the capitalist system, including ‘the so-called thinker,’ he said, are blissfully unaware of this manipulation. However, later Marxists, beginning, to some extent, with Lenin derided this account of the process of the orchestration of dominant ideology as simplistic. These critiques clearly provided the epistemological template for Gramsci’s theoretical interventions.<sup>2</sup>

Gramsci transcended classical Marxist theory by rejecting the notion that the willingness by subordinate social classes in capitalist society to live with and even endorse their oppression is the consequence of a ‘false consciousness.’ As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) point out, Gramsci’s whole project was to fill what they term the ‘double void’<sup>3</sup> that became nakedly transparent in the traditional Marxian epistemological universe as capitalism advanced and mutated over the years.

Gramsci explained the inability of socialism to replace capitalism by the early 20th century by suggesting that capitalism entrenched its dominance not by means of political and economic coercion through violence, or through a manipulation of the working-class, but through a hegemonic culture in which the values of the bourgeoisie became naturalized as the ‘common sense’ values of all. Alvarado and Boyd-Barrett (1992: 51) quote Geoffrey Nowell-Smith as arguing that common sense is ‘the way a subordinate class lives its subordination.’ These values are subtly orchestrated in the everyday consciousness of subordinate groups through what, on the surface, appears like an indeterminate push and pull of the ideas of both the dominant group and of the subordinate groups. However, unlike classical Marxists, Gramsci emphasizes contestation. He noted that ‘common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself’ (Gramsci, 1971: 326). And, according to John Fiske (1992: 291), because hegemony is not a mechanical process of will imposition, ‘the consent of the subordinate groups must be constantly won and re-won, for people’s material social experiences constantly remind them of the disadvantages of subordination and thus poses a threat to the dominant class.’ Thus, a consensus culture develops in which the subordinate class identifies its own good with the good of the bourgeoisie, and helps to maintain the *status quo* rather than revolt against it.

Although the notion of hegemony emerged as an explanatory framework to account for the enduring dominance of capitalism in spite of the existence of ‘objective conditions’ for its demise, the concept has been expanded and extended over the years to explain the strategies for consensus-building in dominant practices. Condit, for instance, deployed – and extended – the concept of hegemony to explain the process of opinion formation and accretion in the mass-mediated discourse of reproductive technologies (Condit, 1994). González (2000) points out, too, that for too long the concept had been held hostage by theoretical abstractions and has moreover been associated with explaining

the dominance of capitalism and the relations between nation-states or the structure of the global order. He argues that 'we need a less confining understanding of hegemony to serve us well' (González, 2000: 107). A conception of hegemony that has utility for the practical, everyday world, he says, is one 'where hegemony is considered not as a direct stimulation of thought or action but a framing of competing definitions of reality to fit within the dominant class's range' (González, 2000: 107).

Torring (1999) also moves the notion of hegemony from its erstwhile limited concern with state structures to the dynamics of contestations for the definitions of social reality by various power blocs within a given system. He points out, for instance, that 'the political as well as moral-intellectual leadership of a hegemonic force (state, class, movement, other) hinges on the construction of a discursive formation that provides a surface of inscription for a wide range of demands, views and attitudes' (Torring, 1999:101). This view expands the terrain within which the concept of hegemony can be applied. Hegemony can be exercised not just between and within formal state structures but also between and within social movements, classes, professional practices, etc.

This perspective is a powerful explanatory framework within which to situate CNN's appropriation of a model of journalism that is traditionally located outside the mainstream of corporate journalistic practices. Since the 1990s when the anti-corporate Indymedia popularized citizen journalism, this model of journalism had luxuriated only on the fringes of the corporate, mainstream media. Now by 'mainstreaming' it through the iReport.com experiment, CNN is seeking to contain, or at least negotiate, its potentially disruptive effect on mainstream journalism through a hegemonic cooptation that actively seeks the consent of the practitioners of this fringe, newfangled form of journalism. As noted earlier, iReport.com does this by democratizing the conception of news – and in fact of journalism as such – in ways that both strategically negate the canons of journalistic orthodoxy and that seem intended to invite the approval and consent of non-professional journalists who dominate the practice of citizen journalism. In so doing, CNN hopes to generate 'cultural goodwill' from people who had been excluded from mainstream journalistic practices. However, as the analysis of the categories of iReport.com shows, CNN's apparent definitional inclusivity in its conception of 'newsiness' is actually in practice congruent with conventional journalistic canons as evidenced in the kinds of iReports it privileges for use in its news coverage, a fact that inspires many 'iReporters' desirous to appear on CNN and attract visibility and attention to their reports to do similar reports. Its 'Assignment Desk,' which encourages citizen reporters to 'share your story about one of these topics in the news and it may end up on CNN!' also favors the corporate media's particular conception of what constitutes acceptable news practices (iReport.com, n.d.c).

What is apparent from this is that CNN has sought to win over non-professional citizen journalists first by making its news values seem like, as Gramsci would say, the 'common sense' values of all and then by legitimizing these values not so much by manipulation as by active consent. Thus, many 'iReporters' see – or are encouraged to see – their news values as not differing from the news values of the corporate media after all. This conduces to the evolution of a consensus news culture that sutures the contradictions between citizen journalism and corporate, mainstream journalism. It is instructive to note, though, that this process is not uncontested. There is a perpetual process of negotiation and renegotiation. This means that the citizen journalists who practice their

'random acts of journalism' (Lasica, 2003: 70) under the watch of big media corporations are no dupes or thoughtless automatons. As the Slovenian philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek asserted, in an instructive extension of Gramsci's notion of hegemony, the efficacy of contemporary ideology lies in its capacity to secure the voluntary consent of the people about otherwise contestable policies and arrangements. As he put it,

[...] with a disarming frankness one 'admits everything,' yet this full acknowledgment of our power interests does not in any way prevent us from pursuing these interests – the formula of cynicism is no longer the classic Marxian 'they do not know it, but they are doing it'; it is 'they know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it'. (Žižek, 1994: 8)

CNN 'admits everything' by asserting on iReport.com that, contrary to the time-honored canons of traditional journalistic practices and in consonance with 'alternative' conceptions of newsworthiness, news is 'just something that happens someplace to someone,' and that 'whether that something is newsworthy mostly depends on who it affects –and who's making the decision' (iReport.com, n.d.a). Coming from a professional news organization, this is an almost self-abnegating admission. However, this admission has not stopped CNN from privileging and rewarding iReports that conform to canonical conceptions of newsworthiness and, in the process, negating its admission and encouraging citizen journalists to endorse the corporate view of news. Yet, as Žižek (1994) argues, people who are targets of hegemonic cooptation only voluntarily agree to this process if they believe that, in accepting it, they are giving expression to their free subjectivity. And, as Jacob Torfing notes, 'the political as well as moral-intellectual leadership of a hegemonic force (state, class, movement, other) hinges on the construction of a discursive formation that provides a surface of inscription for a wide range of demands, views and attitudes' (Torfing, 1999: 101). So the army of 'iReporters' who generate content for iReport.com are no victims of a 'false consciousness;' they actively participate in this corporate-sponsored brand of citizen journalism because the platform not only provides a vent for the expression of their subjectivities but also because it acts as a slate for the untrammelled inscription of their views and attitudes. This is precisely why the experiment has the potential to be an effective hegemonic cooptation.

Gramsci points out that hegemonic articulation usually takes one of two operational modalities: transformism and expansive hegemony. Transformism, he said, is an incorporatist strategy that seeks to dilute opposition and conflict through the cooptation of marginal groups within a discursive formation. Expansive hegemony, on the other hand, is an offensive strategy of a traumatized hegemonic bloc, which exploits the consensus in the polity to mobilize popular sentiments against a competing power bloc (Gramsci, 1971). CNN is clearly adopting the former. By coopting citizens who are otherwise on the other side of the spectrum of journalistic models in the production of news through its iReport site, CNN is pursuing a transformist hegemonic agenda that protects and preserves traditional industrial journalism from the threats of the plethora of citizen media that the internet has enabled through its strategic extension of the discursive formation of journalistic practices. This transformism may well define the response of the corporate media to the potential threats of citizen journalism as evidenced in the popularity of this experiment among US news media giants. The relative success and popularity of

iReport.com has already inspired other big US media corporations to initiate similar experiments. ABC, for instance, has come up with its own 'i-Caught.com,' Fox News with its own 'uReport.com,' and MSNBC with its 'FirstPerson.com.'

## Conclusions and recommendations

What is clear from the foregoing is that the iReport.com experiment in many ways represents a creative and symbolic convergence of journalistic models. It is at once traditional, interactive, civic, participatory and citizen journalism. Although CNN uses many stories freely posted on iReport.com, several reports on iReport.com are also informed by or are a response to the content of CNN news casts. Naim (2007: 103) calls this phenomenon the 'double-echo chamber:'

One is produced when content first posted on the Web is re-aired by mainstream networks. The second occurs when television moments, even the most fleeting, gain a permanent presence thanks to bloggers or activists who redistribute them through Web sites like YouTube.

The rearticulation of the relation between journalists and users and of the claim to authority made in news texts that this reality provides scholars of both journalism and new media with a case study of the adaptation of journalism to new contexts. Although this corporate encroachment, some would say 'invasion,' of the 'safe spaces' previously thought to be exclusive to citizen media does not necessarily herald the death or loss of the vitality of the inchoate genre of citizen journalism, it does potentially represent two things: a move toward big media's hegemonic cooptation of potentially oppositional citizen media and the expropriation of the labor and creative energies of ordinary people who contribute content to corporate-sponsored citizen media, especially since this user-generated content sometimes ends up being used in the traditional broadcasts of these stations without any monetary compensation to the originators of the stories.

But the cooptation of citizen media may also make possible the emergence of subtle yet consequential 'resistant' and 'emancipatory' forms of journalism in corporate-sponsored citizen media, as has been shown in the preceding pages. This is a powerful illustration of Gramsci's contention that in hegemonic battles, there is always contestation and that the volitional consent of the broad segment of subordinate classes has to be perpetually won and re-won. As Slavoj Žižek argues, a successful ideology always grants subjects the latitude to cherish an intentionally conceived distance towards an ideology's overt ideals and prescriptions, a phenomenon he calls 'ideological disidentification' (Boucher and Sharpe, 2005: xiv).

The hegemonic cooptation of citizen journalism is only just beginning to evolve. It is anybody's guess how this will all play out eventually. It is not clear, for example, if it will be profitable for the corporate media in the long run. It is also not clear how the surfeit of citizen media still located on the margins of traditional journalistic practices will react to this emerging phenomenon. Will most of them migrate to the spaces provided by the corporate media to practice their citizen journalism, or will they consciously resist the cooptation by the corporate media? These are all robust materials for future empirical research. It will also be useful to compare and contrast the assumptions and operations of all the corporate media

organizations that are now following CNN's lead in initiating their own corporate-mediated citizen journalism projects to determine if common themes and practices can be isolated in all of them and what implications this might have for citizen journalism.

## Notes

- 1 For instance, Laclau and Mouffe argue in their book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), that 'Only the isolated example of Gramsci ... can be quoted as a new departure producing a new arsenal of concepts – war of position, historical bloc, collective will, hegemony, intellectual and moral leadership theory' (p. ix). While Gramsci undeniably advanced the theoretical boundaries of the notion of hegemony, it is not faithful to the facts to argue that he represented a lone voice in departing from vulgar Marxian notions of ideology.
- 2 González (2000: 107) gives V.I. Lenin credit as the first Marxist to deploy the concept of hegemony to suture the contradictions of Marxism before Antonio Gramsci.
- 3 Laclau and Mouffe use the phrase to encapsulate the contradictions that attend the irreconcilability of the logics of two key Marxian concepts: spontaneism and historical materialism. Spontaneism contends that an isolated revolutionary ferment in one place of work can set off the motion for the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist socio-economic formation, not only in one country but all over the world – or at least the industrialized world. Historical materialism, on the other hand, has an almost metaphysical, even fatalistic, attitude to the overthrow of capitalism. It holds that the very nature, structure, and essence of capitalism create the basis for its inevitable dissolution – unaided by agency.

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