Amateurs striving for news production. Can they compete with professional journalism?

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of Web 2.0 the discussion about professional journalism changing radically or even becoming obsolete in the future has intensified. Up to now, empirical findings mainly stem from research on (micro-)blogging and show its complementary rather than equivalent function compared with professional journalism. Amazingly, the performance of collaborative amateur news websites with an explicitly journalistic approach has rarely been studied so far. Therefore, this paper compares the coverage of German *Wikinews* with a professional German mass media website and finds significant differences in various dimensions. It thus contributes to the growing empirical evidence and literature on citizen journalism.

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1. Introduction

Since Web 2.0 technology has simplified online publishing and empowered nearly everyone to distribute any texts, videos and photos to a potentially global audience, some authors have anticipated a fundamental shift in how journalism will be practiced in the future. As Dan Gillmor puts it, 'technology has given us a communications toolkit that allows anyone to become a journalist at little cost and, in theory, with global reach' (Gillmor, 2004, p. 7). What does such a vision mean for professional journalism? Could it soon be replaced by private blogs, user driven wikis and discussion forums, resources that are often referred to as 'citizen journalism'? Do amateurs have the potential to take on the role of journalists? Such questions have been discussed passionately in the past few years. In this context most attention has been paid to weblogs (e.g. Domingo & Heinonen, 2008; Lowrey, 2006; Papacharissi, 2007). Besides, the microblogging service *Twitter* is gaining more and more attention by academic research (André, Bernstein, & Luther, 2012; Neuberger, vom Hofe, & Nuernbergk, 2010; Poell & Borra, 2012). Meanwhile, relatively little is known about the news production on amateur wikis, where articles are written by a collective of users without any professional editorial staff acting as gatekeepers or editing material. For journalism studies, this becomes particularly relevant when such wiki-sites are explicitly dedicated to current

news reporting and committed to a journalistic approach. What kind of reporting do such collaborative citizen journalism websites offer? Which topics and news values are predominant? How close is their coverage to professional journalism? Before answering these central questions we will outline how the term 'citizen journalism' is used in academic literature. On this occasion, it seems to be necessary to clarify what role journalism is playing in general within society. In a next step, we will review which phenomena are usually considered manifestations of citizen journalism and report the main findings of the corresponding state of research. After doing so, we will present a study examining the content offered on the collaborative news website *Wikinews*, which is explicitly dedicated to news reporting and journalistic standards, but has scarcely been investigated yet in this context. We thus contribute new empirical evidence to the growing literature on citizen journalism.

2. Citizen journalism – a cloudy term for various phenomena

An increasing amount of online content, ranging from weblog entries to news comments on the websites of traditional media, is currently labeled as 'citizen journalism'. Therefore, it is not surprising that the term 'citizen journalism' is also used very inconsistently in academic literature. It sometimes refers to amateur contributions to mass media (submission of images, posting of comments, entries on discussion pages of news media websites, etc.) or describes any user-generated content available outside of news media websites (e.g. personal weblogs, discussion forums, etc.). In this latter sense it is used increasingly as a synonym for amateur publications *without* any involvement of professional journalists

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(e.g. Carpenter, 2008; Goode, 2009; Nip, 2006; Thurman & Hermida, 2010). This is the definition of the term we will use in this paper, too. Hence, citizen journalism is practiced *independently* and beyond the realm of professional journalism. Considering its difference from the mainstream media production model, it can be situated close to alternative or autonomous media (Atton, 2009). In contrast, the growing efforts of mass media to engage their readership to produce some content as well as these contributions themselves are mostly denominated as 'participatory journalism' (e.g. Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007; Paulussen et al., 2008; Singer et al., 2011; Thurman, 2008). This engagement of the audience may therefore comprise different degrees of user participation (e.g. re-actively commenting on published news stories vs. actively submitting pictures or articles), but the control and decision about what is published and how it is presented remain in the hands of professionals (Joensson & Oernebring, 2011; Singer et al., 2011). Participatory journalism thus can be seen as an adaptation of professional journalism to new media practices in the net. Hence, the distinction of these two types of manifestations – citizen journalism in the sense of independent *amateur publishing* on the one hand, participatory journalism in the sense of *citizen* or *amateur participation in professional journalism* on the other hand – is rather important. Focussing on citizen journalism in particular, it then becomes relevant whether it could be seen as being functionally equivalent to professional journalism and therefore potentially become its substitute or not (Schoenhagen & Kopp, 2007, p. 300).

If we talk about citizen journalism and want to compare it to its professional counterpart, we also have to clarify the specific functions or merits of journalism in general. Following Jarren (2000, 2008) and Wagner (1995) journalism's main function is to provide an up-to-date overview of the ongoing public discourse – by which society is perpetually generated and maintained (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) – and to serve as a platform for this discourse at the same time (Pietilä, 1992). Thus, journalism should mediate, in a concentrated form, the full spectrum of voices, interests, arguments and themes that exist within society and that are of general (i.e. not of individual or private) relevance. This continuous journalistic observation of society thus covers different sub-systems respectively thematic fields like politics, economy, culture, sports, etc. (Meier, 2007, p. 32). By means of a short literature review in the next section we will try to work out if this function is equally fulfilled by the broad range of online publications which are frequently labeled as citizen journalism.

3. State of research on citizen journalism

Most empirical evidence concerning citizen journalism originates from *weblog research*. In summary, it shows that weblogs act as a complement rather than a substitute for professional journalism (Neuberger, Nuernbergk, & Rischke, 2007). This applies both to bloggers' predominant motives and to the topics typically covered in weblogs. Several surveys have confirmed that it is important for bloggers to keep records of their own lives, to verbalize their opinions and to work through their emotions and experiences (Efimova, 2004, p. 6; Lenhart & Fox, 2006, p. 7; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004, p. 43). This subjective nature has also been reported for weblog contents (Papacharissi, 2007). Bloggers' selection of topics is determined by their personal concerns, their experiences or by the extent they are delighted with or annoyed by something (Armborst, 2006, p. 171). Accordingly, narrations and episodes of private life (often combined with photos) are among the most frequent topics, followed by stories about school or working life (Lenhart & Fox, 2006, p. 9; Schmidt & Wilbers, 2006, p. 13). Other surveys found a predominance of Internet-related topics, but they also highlighted that topics like politics or economy were hardly covered (Neuberger, 2005, p. 86–87). If such articles appear at all they rarely contain 'original news reporting' but tend to 're-mediate the news reporting and commentary of mainstream news organizations' (Haas, 2007, p. 138).

The lack of original reporting seems to be characteristic not only for the most common 'personal' blog type, but also for less frequent blog types such as 'political' blogs which may, however, reach a broader audience. Leccese (2009) found in an examination of the postings provided by the six most popular political US blogs that the majority of their hyperlinks led to mainstream media reports, meaning they heavily depended on the mass media agenda. Moreover, instead of providing an overview about political debates they mainly contained opinions and comments – resembling the contributions of newspapers' 'opinion columnists' (Leccese, 2009, p. 585, 587). Assessing the relation between political weblogs and mass media from agenda setting theory, other studies confirm that traditional media are among the most cited sources in the political blogosphere (e.g. Meraz, 2009; Messner & Distaso, 2008). Hence, it is often argued that first-level agenda setting rather takes place from the outlets of traditional media to independent blogs than vice versa. Nevertheless, political blogs may play an important role in so-called second-level agenda setting as they can re-frame and resuscitate issues on the public agenda that have been covered by mass media before (Campbell, Gibson, Gunter, & Touri, 2010, p. 42).

Often described as micro-blogging, *Twitter* has attracted significant attention in the last years. Especially during the Mumbai bomb attacks in November 2008, the post-election protests in Iran in June 2009 as well as during the 'Arab Spring' in 2011 the service became a focus of mass media news and commentaries (Arthur, 2008; Friedman, 2011; Weaver, 2010). It enables its users to send and read each other's messages of up to 140 characters via desktop computer or mobile phone (Armstrong & Fangfang, 2010, p. 222). These 'tweets' of individuals or organizations are sent to followers automatically. Furthermore, one can search all tweets that have run through the *Twitter* service unless they have been sent as 'direct messages' to selected friends (i.e. like an email). Some claim 'that what *Twitter* is doing is effectively journalism' (Ingram, 2008) or consider it a 'form of citizen journalism' (Hermida, 2010, p. 300) because the service allows sharing information fragments very fast from anywhere. Assessing the journalistic value of *Twitter* one has to consider, however, that messages – either received through subscription or retrieved by personal search – are not sorted by importance, region or in any other way that makes factual sense, but appear in the chronological order they have been posted in. Additionally, the service does not differentiate between the expression of personal opinions or feelings on the one hand and information that is socially relevant to a bigger group of people on the other hand, nor are the accuracy and trustworthiness of the messages checked or guaranteed. These characteristics apply, for the most part, also to weblogs as mentioned above.

Empirical findings concerning *Twitter* are growing. Having analyzed more than 11.5 million *Twitter* accounts in 2009, Cheng, Evans, and Singh found out that 24% or one quarter of all tweets have been generated by machine bots, by computer programs that run the same task automatically and repeatedly. These bots are operated by sources such as hotels offering deals, regional weather services, financial aggregators and so on (Cheng et al., 2009). However, for an evaluation of *Twitter*'s journalistic potential it is more adequate not to give the same weight to every singular of myriads of tweets but to concentrate on those messages that are re-tweeted (i.e. forwarded) by a high number of people and therefore become publicly more salient within the twittersphere. These so-called re-tweets are thus deemed to be relevant by a greater audience (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010). *Twitter* collects the most re-tweeted messages in its top tweet lists for various countries. Given this fact, Neuberger et al. (2010) looked at the top re-tweets ($n = 963$) from

Germany during a three-month period in 2010. They found that the vast majority (91%) of these tweets dealt with an issue of public relevance like politics and only a minority (9%) was dedicated to users' personal life or their private sphere. However, *Twitter* authors were mainly commenting on and linking to material that had been published elsewhere. Original reporting in the sense that *Twitter* users reported from the scene in the role of an eyewitness or observer of ongoing events did hardly occur (Neuberger et al., 2010, p. 77). Thus, these findings are quite similar to the empirical evidence from research on political weblogs.

Besides, many newsrooms have adopted *Twitter* as a further tool to rapidly disseminate breaking news (Palser, 2009, p. 54). Given this fact, *Twitter* seems to function partially as a distribution channel of content that already exists, including news produced by professional mass media. According to Armstrong and Fangfang (2010), who analyzed the tweets disseminated by nine news organizations during a four-month period, the main function of Twitter seems to be 'to drive traffic to the news site' (Armstrong & Fangfang, 2010, p. 232). In addition, *Twitter* may have become a relevant source for eyewitness accounts as well as for newsrooms, in the first minutes of a natural catastrophe when professional journalists are not on location yet or to compensate for lacking independent media in authoritarian regimes (Armstrong & Fangfang, 2010, p. 222). However, the service does not offer a continuous and compact overview of different subsystems of society (politics, economy, culture, sports, etc.).

A further manifestation of web-based amateur publishing are *readers' platforms* with only little professional editorial control. A quite popular example thereof has been the German forum *OPINIO* which was hosted by the newspaper *Rheinische Post* from 2005 until 2011 and has won the European newspaper award in the category 'innovation' in its starting year. The platform contained reports and anecdotes from readers of the *Rheinische Post* and other registered users. A selection thereof was regularly published in the newspaper. As empirical research conducted by Kopp and Philomen Schönhagen (2008) has shown *OPINIO* authors mainly reported on their personal life and posted short stories as well as poems. Like private bloggers, most of them were more concerned with subjects that affected them personally than with issues of social relevance. Although they covered a broad spectrum of topics, journalistic issues like politics, economy, local and cultural topics or sports played a secondary role. In analogy with the results of research on private weblogs these authors posted when they were pleased or annoyed, personally interested in an issue or if they could give a first-hand report (Kopp & Philomen Schönhagen, 2008, p. 84). Accordingly, their motives for publication were strongly personal, and they preferred 'own experiences', followed by 'friends and family' as their sources (Kopp & Philomen Schönhagen, 2008, p. 85). Very similar results have been generated by means of a survey of amateurs contributing to the German *MyHeimat* which is a user platform with a (hyper-)local focus where citizen from small towns and villages all over Germany can post their articles (Fröhlich, Quiring, & Engesser, 2012). Like in *OPINIO*, these online contributions are partially transferred to licensed print editions of various local dailies (Huber & Kaspar, 2010).[2]

(Hyper-)local citizen media offerings like the German *MyHeimat* are more popular within the United States (Metzgar, Kurpius, & Rowley, 2011; Schaffer, 2006). Carpenter (2008, 2010) compared the coverage of 72 US (hyper-)locally oriented citizen journalism websites with the online reporting of 50 US local newspapers. Significant differences have been found in various dimensions. Online newspaper articles featured less journalistic opinion than citizen journalism articles (Carpenter, 2008, p. 539). Furthermore, they contained more external sources (e.g. statements of representatives of government, profit and non-profit organizations, witnesses, anonymous individuals, etc.) (Carpenter, 2008, p. 538, 539). The percentage of *official* sources was thereby significantly higher than in citizen journalism articles (Carpenter, 2008, p. 540). Concerning the content provided by both publication types there was no difference found with regard to government topics, but professional newspaper websites offered significantly more information on economy, business as well as crime, whereas (hyper-)locally oriented citizen journalism websites offered more entertainment (Carpenter, 2010, p. 1074). Furthermore, citizen journalism websites included more hyperlinks to external websites and offered more multimedia content (photos, graphics and polls). In a similar way Lacy, Duffy, Riffe, Thorson, and Fleming (2010) compared (hyper-)locally oriented citizen blogs ($n = 86$) and news sites ($n = 53$) with the websites of professional local newspapers ($n = 63$). The authors found that the timeliness of the latter which published news articles on a daily basis was unmatched by the citizen offerings. Besides, they confirmed Carpenter's (2010) finding of a wider use of hyperlinks among citizen media and reported similar differences concerning formal attributes like uploading abilities and interactive features. In sum, the authors conclude "that citizen journalism Web sites (news and blog sites) are generally not acceptable substitutes for daily newspaper Web sites" (Lacy et al., 2010, p. 42).

Furthermore, so-called *social news websites* are partly considered to be a form of citizen journalism (Goode, 2009). Websites such as *Digg* (www.digg.com) or *Reddit* (www.reddit.com) allow their users to deposit hyperlinks leading to any content they found on the Internet and to vote for links they particularly like. Social news services thus provide a user-defined ranking of linked stories, pictures and videos (Schmidt, Frees, & Fisch, 2009), but users do not create content on such websites. Social news websites may therefore contribute to the dissemination of news, but reporting is definitely not a part of their service (Pew Research Center, 2007).

To sum up this literature review, empirical findings suggest that the manifestations of citizen journalism analyzed so far are not functionally equivalent to professional journalism. Amazingly, the discussion so far has particularly neglected that type of amateur publications which are explicitly oriented toward journalistic standards and typically claim – in contrast to most blogs – to work journalistically: collaborative news websites such as *Wikinews*, which will be portrayed briefly in the next chapter. Could they after all be able to realize the vision of producing journalistic output without professional journalists? To provide some initial answers to this question we conducted a content analysis comparing the output of the German version of *Wikinews*, a global news wiki with a journalistic approach, with the coverage of a national German newspaper's website.

4. *Wikinews*: journalistic standards – lack of research

Wikinews – a citizen media project hosted by the *Wikimedia Foundation* in Florida – has certainly not drawn the same attention as its sister project, the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, but it is probably one of the best-known news wikis. The German website (www.wikinews.de) went online in December 2004. With an archive of about 11,500 articles in September 2012 it ranks as the fifth largest (after the Serbian, English, Polish and French version) of 33 *Wikinews* websites existing up to now. On *Wikinews*

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[2] Both forums analyzed in the studies mentioned here are administrated by professional editorial staff that selects articles, pays attention to laws and morality, corrects formal flaws and sometimes provides a publication of selected content in one or several printed newspaper(s) (Engesser, 2008, p. 115). Thus, these platforms are settled between 'citizen' and 'participatory journalism' according to the terminology we discussed in Section 2.

the entire publication process from selecting a certain news item to contributing a first draft to editing and finally publishing the final version is collectively done by amateurs (Bradshaw, 2009). According to its mission statement the project's goal is 'to present up-to-date, relevant, newsworthy and entertaining content without bias'.[3] Furthermore, *Wikinews* considers itself as a project 'which aims to collaboratively report and summarize news on all subjects'.[4] In other words, the platform does not conceive itself as a monothematic publication channel to cover special interests but as a news outlet with a broader thematic scope. Regarding its mission statement[5] and different guidelines,[6] *Wikinews* definitely claims to be a *journalistic* offering. This is also confirmed by a survey of *Wikinews* reporters and professional journalists indicating that both of them have similar self-conceptions (Krauze, 2006). In sum, *Wikinews'* approach obviously corresponds to central dimensions of the general definition of journalism we gave before (see point 2). The platform commits itself to principles like timeliness ('present up-to-date news'), social relevance ('relevant news') and diversity ('news on all subjects') which are key aspects of journalism resp. journalistic offerings in general. We will come back to these aspects later. Yet, how far this approach is actually realized by the platforms' news output is an empirical question that remains to be answered.

The sparse number of studies analyzing *Wikinews* have different scopes. Thorsen (2008) as well as McIntosh (2008) focused on the *policy of neutral point of view* as mentioned above. Whenever a new article is proposed, the users can negotiate this principle on the so-called collaboration pages attached to each article. Both studies examine what notion of news and neutrality *Wikinews* users have and what strategies they apply to establish a neutral point of view. In a similar way, Traesel (2008) looked at the nature of the user interventions during the creation of seven developing *Wikinews* articles and found that the majority of the edits was constructive and pluralizing, not disruptive (Traesel, 2008, p. 79). Yet, neither these nor other studies have analyzed the published news articles and compared them to the output of a professional news website. Some authors suggest that the contributions to *Wikinews* are mostly 'recycled' and slightly adapted articles that have been published by mass media before (Allan, 2006, p. 137; Bruns, 2006; Thorsen, 2008, p. 937). Up to now, empirical evidence for this thesis has only been provided by a content analysis conducted by Vis (2009) who analyzed a total of 78 *Wikinews* articles covering hurricane Kathrina, which devastated New Orleans in August 2005. Only eight out of the 78 examined articles (8.9%) turned out to be 'first-hand news items written by Wikinews contributors reporting news events on the spot' (Vis, 2009, p. 67). Vis concludes that '[. . .] the site, struggling to produce original reports, continued to rely on a syndication of other news media' (Vis, 2009, p. 72).

Summing up these findings, there is a lack of research on *Wikinews'* thematic profile and output in general. Moreover, research comparing *collaborative* citizen journalism to professional news websites hardly exists up to now. Thus, an exploration of similarities and differences between *Wikinews* and a professional news website seems to be a reasonable first step of research. As shown above, there is only little evidence on the proportion of *Wikinews* articles that are taken over from mass media. Thus,

our first research question is: (1) *How many articles published in* Wikinews *are based on mass media news in general?*

As we have mentioned in Section 2, journalism's main function is to provide an up-to-date and pluralistic overview of the ongoing public discourse by covering news events of social (i.e. public) relevance. Its core aspects like timeliness, diversity and social relevance are guiding principles of *Wikinews*, too. Thus and as far as these dimensions are concerned, a functional equivalence to (professional) journalism is at least *claimed* by the amateur news outlet. Therefore, our next research question addresses the thematic and geographical diversity within the published articles: (2) *Which topics and regions are covered by* Wikinews *compared with the reporting offered by professional journalism?* Our third research question then pertains to the aspect of timeliness: (3) *How timely are the* Wikinews *articles compared with professional journalism?* In a last step, we address the social (i.e. public) relevance of news coverage. With respect to its operationalization, the concept of 'news values' is broadly accepted within media studies and journalism research (Arnold, 2009; Eilders, 2006). News values like 'impact', 'conflict/contestation' and 'valence' (including the notion of damages/risks and benefits/opportunities for social groups and society in general) are indicators of the public relevance of selected news items (Hagen, 1995; Schatz & Schulz, 1992). Consequently, a fourth research question refers to this dimension: (4) *What news values are predominant and what intensity do they have compared with professional journalism?*

While the studies mentioned above focused on the English version of *Wikinews*, empirical results on other language versions of the service are lacking up to now. Therefore, we have decided to examine the German *Wikinews* in our study.

5. Method and sample

As our research questions entail a comparison between amateur reporting on *Wikinews* and professional journalism, we have conducted our analysis with *sueddeutsche.de*, an archetype of a journalistic website hosted by a traditional news company. Two reasons may account for this choice: Firstly, *sueddeutsche.de* is affiliated with the same news company that publishes the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, one of Germany's top quality newspapers (Schrag, 2007, p. 152). Many of the articles are both published on the website and later in the newspaper. Secondly, *sueddeutsche.de* is one of the most visited news websites in Germany.[7] Nevertheless, it seems to be evident that neither can the website *sueddeutsche.de* totally represent professional journalism nor does *Wikinews* reflect the variety of citizen media projects in German-speaking countries. Any interpretation of our results will have to take this into consideration. However, our comparison will shed some light on the relation between collaborative news websites with an explicitly journalistic approach and professional journalism.

To get a sample that had approximately the same structure as the total reporting of both media types, we have chosen a three-month period of coverage from September to November 2009. The *Wikinews* sample covered all 199 articles that had been published within this three-month period. This equals two to three articles per day on average. In contrast, nearly eighty articles were published on *sueddeutsche.de* per day. To compensate for the smaller number of *Wikinews* articles available, a constructed one-week sample (Monday to Sunday) of *sueddeutsche.de* was created out of the same

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[3] Wikinews. (n.d.). Wikinews: Mission statement. Retrieved from http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Wikinews.

[4] Wikinews. (n.d.). About Wikinews. Retrieved from http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wikinews.

[5] Available for the German version under http://de.wikinews.org/wiki/Wikinews:Was_Wikinews_nicht_ist, retrieved.

[6] Available for the German version under http://de.wikinews.org/wiki/Wikinews:Journalistische_Grundsaatze, retrieved.

[7] The range of German newspapers and websites is verified and published by the IVW (Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern). Retrieved from http://ausweisung.ivw-online.de.
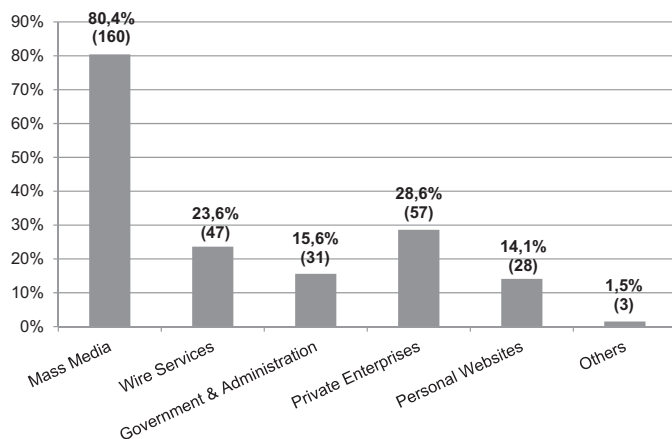
Fig. 1. News sources of *Wikinews* (*n* = 199).

three-month period.[8] This sample covered 533 articles. The corpus of totally 752 articles was examined by standardized content analysis.

6. Results

6.1. Amount of articles and news sources

As our sampling procedure has already shown, the number of articles published within the same three-month period highly differed for both publications with *Wikinews* posting 2.2 articles per day on average and *sueddeutsche.de* publishing 78.8 on average daily. This considerable difference may be a first indication that the amount and variety of information offered to their audiences is not equivalent for both media outlets.

To find out how much of *Wikinews* reporting is based on material that has already been published before in the mass media, we examined the 'source section' of each article in the *Wikinews* sample. This turned out to be a suitable procedure because *Wikinews* commits its users to declaring all sources of information they have used at the bottom of each article. After having done a pretest we distinguished six different categories of sources which we used in our subsequent content analysis: mass media, wire services, websites of government and administration, websites of private enterprises, personal websites and others. Fig. 1 shows how frequently these categories have been mentioned as sources (take note that more than one category could have been mentioned at the same time; sum >100%).

Four out of five articles on *Wikinews* (160 resp. 80.4%) mention mass media as their precedent information source. Among these are websites of popular newspapers (e.g. *welt.de*, *faz.net*, *suedkurier.de*) as well as of private or public radio and TV stations and their programs (e.g. *heute.de*, *tagesschau.de* and others). This means that only one fifth (19.6%) of the articles were investigated independently and produced without the use of mass media resources. Given the fact that *Wikinews* on average only publishes two to three new articles per day, it becomes evident that its journalistic performance does not correlate with professional journalism. *Wikinews'* reporting rather appears to be a reproduction of mass media content, e.g. when several articles about the same news item are collected from different online newspapers and summed up in one article. The use of other sources is marginal, on the other hand.

6.2. News topics

The main topic of a news article was encoded with help of a three level variable. On the top level, ten different thematic fields were distinguished: politics, economy, national and foreign security, social order (health, family, work, etc.), culture, sports, nature and environment, accidents and crime, services (insurances, career, fitness, etc.), human touch (celebrities, sensationalism, etc.). These fields were divided into more specific topics on a second level, which served as clusters of different incidents at the third level. If we have a look at the occurrences of the top thematic fields, there are strong differences particularly with regard to economy, culture and sports (see Fig. 2). On *Wikinews*, sports reporting is almost completely absent (2.5%), whereas it makes up one fifth (20.3%) of all articles on *sueddeutsche.de*. The thematic field labeled as 'culture' covered several different topics like education and research, religion, arts (literature, visual arts, music, film, dance, etc.), folk festivals, customs and media themes. On *Wikinews*, almost every third article (29.1%) is dedicated to one of these topics; on *sueddeutsche.de* it is only every ninth (11.6%). 'Economy' encompasses both articles about the general market and the economic situation (economic cycle, price increases, wages, taxes, etc.), as well as about individual enterprises (insolvency, annual profit, dismissals, etc.). While on *sueddeutsche.de* every eighth article (12.8%) dealt with one of these subjects, only 3.5% on *Wikinews* did so. Differences in other thematic fields are smaller. Overall, the reporting of the professional media outlet is thematically slightly more balanced than on the citizen media platform.[9] Given the fact that most articles on *Wikinews* are based on mass media output, it is not surprising that a similar spectrum of topics is reproduced on the citizen journalism platform, although with singular very significant differences.

In a further step, we looked at the thematic fields of *original reporting*. We defined articles as 'original reporting' if they did not refer to mass media as their source. In the case of *Wikinews*, only 39 articles (19.6%) fulfilled this condition. As far as *sueddeutsche.de* is concerned, the original reporting sample (*n* = 451) consists of all articles that have not been taken from the newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (print version) or other mass media websites. As Fig. 3 shows, the differences concerning economy, culture and sports get even bigger, when articles based on mass media content are subtracted. Although there is quite a small amount of articles on *Wikinews* (*n* = 39) to be interpreted, a clear thematic profile with an emphasis on cultural subjects emerges. Almost every other article deals with one of these topics. Politics is covered comparatively frequently as well. Economy and sports are totally missing as well as services and human touch. Overall, the citizen journalism platform does not cover the whole range of possible topics. It is unclear whether the small number of articles in the sample can fully explain these deficits. It appears that subjects with high frequencies in the total sample were even more frequent in the original reporting sample, whereas such with small frequencies were even rarer (or completely absent) in the original reporting sample. Looking at the overall distribution of topics as well as the original reporting, *Wikinews'* performance in reporting a variety of themes does not correspond to professional journalism.

6.3. Geographical references and timeliness

Besides examining the subjects of reporting, another research goal was to find out which regions *Wikinews* is covering and how
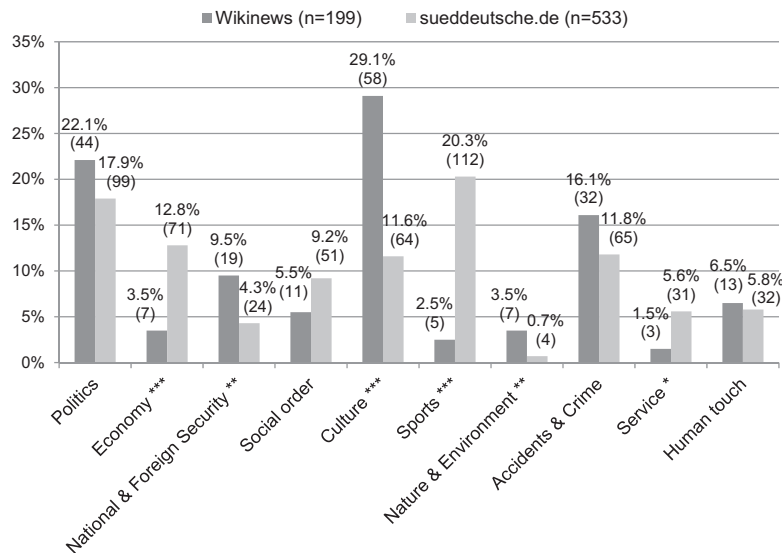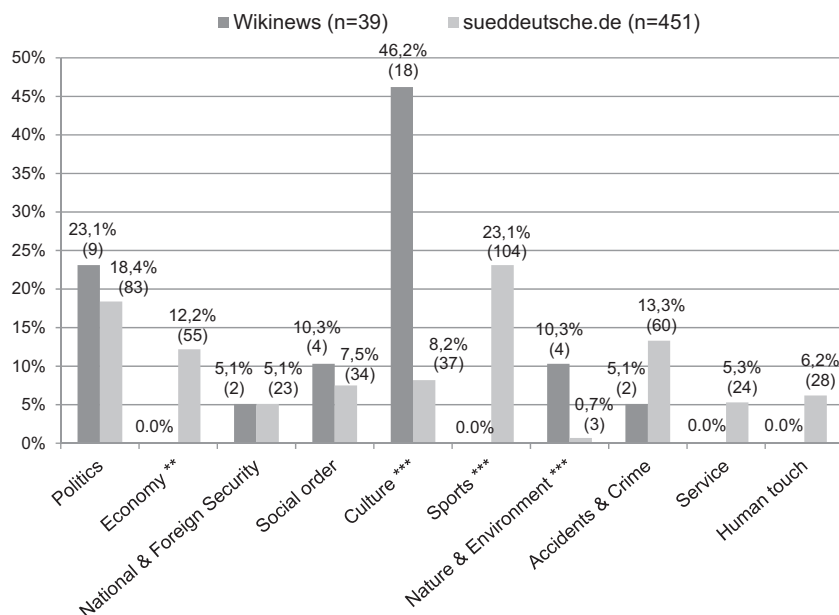

Fig. 2. Subjects of reporting. ***Extremely significant ($p < 0.001$), **very significant ($p < 0.01$), and *significant difference ($p < 0.05$). The χ^2-tests have been computed on the basis of all articles with a certain topic (k) compared with the total number of articles of other topics (not k) within both media types.

current its news articles are. As far as timeliness is concerned, the percentage of 'high current news events from the last 24 hours' is not lower on the citizen journalism platform than on the professional journalistic website (both about 30%). However, *Wikinews* seems to have some shortcomings with respect to the declaration of time in general. 28.6% of the articles do not indicate when the reported event took place, whereas time declaration is only missing in 17.5% of the cases on *sueddeutsche.de*.

The regions and countries covered by both media types do not differ significantly (see Table 1). Every other news article is dealing with a local, regional or national event in Germany (*Wikinews*: 51.8%; *sueddeutsche.de*: 52.8%). Countries from all over Europe are following with similar proportions in both media types (*Wikinews*: 15.1%, *sueddeutsche.de*: 12.8%). The USA come second (*Wikinews*: 11.1%; *sueddeutsche.de*: 7.8%). 22% of the articles on *Wikinews* and

26.6% of the news on *sueddeutsche.de* are referring to other regions and continents (Middle East, Asia, Russia, South America, Africa). The differences concerning these countries are small. For example, 3.0% of *Wikinews'* reporting covers South and Middle America, whereas only 1.4% of the news on *sueddeutsche.de* does so. Again, these similarities may be explained by the considerable amount of mass media content underlying *Wikinews'* reporting. However the high presence of foreign news may also indicate that *Wikinews* cannot be classified as one of the (hyper-)local citizen media projects that are quite prevalent in the USA (Metzgar et al., 2011; Schaffer, 2006) and which consequently should be compared with professional *local* media (Carpenter, 2008, 2010; Lacy et al., 2010). A look at the original reporting on *Wikinews* seems to confirm this impression. 59% of these articles refer to Germany, thus foreign news still is very frequent.


Fig. 3. Subjects of original reporting. ***Extremely significant ($p < 0.001$), **very significant ($p < 0.01$). The χ^2-tests have been computed on the basis of all articles with a certain topic (k) compared with the total number of articles of other topics (not k) within both media types.

Table 1
Geographical references.

	Wikinews (n = 199)	sueddeutsche.de (n = 533)
Germany	51.8% (103)	52.8% (292)
Europe (others)	15.1% (30)	12.8% (71)
USA	11.1% (22)	7.8% (43)
South & Central America	3% (6)	1.4% (8)
Africa	0.5% (1)	1.8% (10)
Middle East	3% (6)	6.3% (35)
Asia & Russia	7% (14)	3.4% (19)
Others	2.5% (5)	1.3% (7)
Multiple regions	2.5% (5)	8.5% (47)
Region not recognizable	3.5% (7)	3.8% (21)
Total	100% 199	100% 533

6.4. News values

As far as news values are concerned, there are significant differences between *Wikinews* and the professional journalism website. The news value 'impact' is equally frequent in both media types, meaning that four out of five articles give some specific information about the amount of people involved in or affected by a given event (*Wikinews*: 80.9%; *sueddeutsche.de*: 79.7%). However, as Fig. 4 shows, the *intensity* of this news value is very different. On *Wikinews*, articles about events with a low impact (single persons or small groups are affected) are more frequent than on *sueddeutsche.de* (52.2% vs. 39.7%). Consequently, more articles on *sueddeutsche.de* than on *Wikinews* are reporting on events with a high impact, where the population of a major city, a state or a country is affected (60.3% vs. 47.8%). Similarly, the news value 'conflict' (perceptible description of different points of view) occurs within both media types with the same frequency (about 36%). Again, the intensity of the value is different, however. *Wikinews* seems to prefer reporting on events with low conflict (description of different opinions on an impersonal basis), whereas *sueddeutsche.de* more often covers events and stories containing heavy conflicts (passionate quarrel, insulting accusations, legal actions). The large amount of contributions displaying little conflict on *Wikinews* may
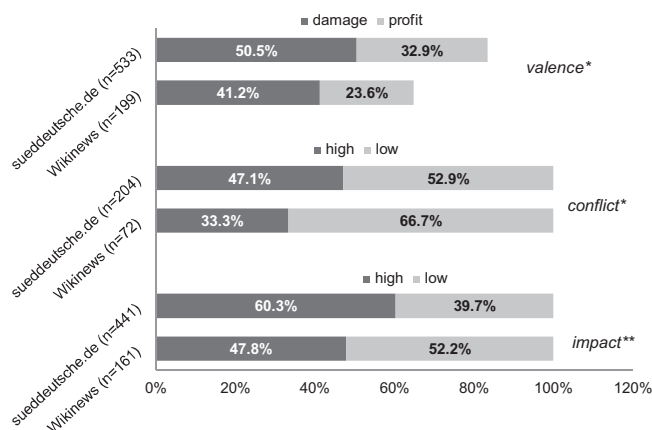
Fig. 4. News values. **Very significant (*p* < 0.01), *significant difference (*p* < 0.05).

be explained with its users interpreting *Wikinews'* mission statement and guidelines in a particular way. They may interpret the *policy of neutral point of view* as a call for complete abstinence from controversial news stories. But doing so would contradict an all-embracing representation of different positions and opinions within society – and thus a characteristic feature of journalism (see Schoenhagen & Kopp, 2007, p. 310).

The news value 'valence' (reporting on advantages/disadvantages resp. profits/damages) occurs unevenly within both media types. On *sueddeutsche.de* news articles more often indicate some profits or damages associated with a given news event than on *Wikinews* (damage: 50.5% vs. 41.2%; profit: 32.9% vs. 23.6%). The fact that news values generally are less intensive on the citizen journalism portal may indicate citizen journalists' differing news selection criteria as well as a complementary function of citizen journalism, which already has been pointed out in the context of weblog research (Neuberger et al., 2007).

7. Conclusion

This study examines the question whether so-called citizen journalism could be seen as being functionally equivalent to professional journalism and thus potentially become its substitute. This question could only be affirmed if citizen journalism offered news coverage that is similar to that of professional journalism. After a review of the literature on different online publications that have been labeled citizen journalism, we have focused on the examination of *Wikinews*, a website with an explicitly journalistic approach that is fully maintained by amateurs. The English version of *Wikinews* has already been the subject of several studies, but with perspectives different to ours. The assumption – especially formulated in English literature – that *Wikinews* is mainly using news articles that have been published by mass media before, instead of doing some original reporting has been confirmed by our study. The fact that about 80% of *Wikinews'* reporting is based on mass media coverage perfectly matches the findings of a special report on 'new media' by the *Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism*. The ongoing analysis of more than a million blogs and social media websites finds that 80% of the links are to U.S. 'legacy media' (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). *Wikinews* largely lives from mass media contents. Consequently, the replacement of mass media by citizen media projects like *Wikinews* is not plausible at all. Our initial goal was to find out if so-called citizen journalism could offer the same information and orientation as professional journalism. For *Wikinews*, this has to be negated with regard to the mere publication output. In our three-month period sample from September until November 2009, only two to three new articles per day were posted on the platform. It should be obvious that this cannot be equivalent to a professional journalistic outlet like *sueddeutsche.de*, where eighty articles were published per day on average during the same three-month period. Furthermore, a closer look at the original reporting revealed that *Wikinews* covers a smaller range of subjects, focusing especially on themes like culture and politics. Other thematic fields such as economy, sports or human touch were not represented at all.

A limitation of our findings certainly is the fact that a case study focusing on *Wikinews* can neither provide evidence for other collaborative news websites nor for other citizen media formats. Furthermore, given the fact that a huge amount of *Wikinews'* coverage in our initial sample was based on mass media content, the resulting original reporting sample for further examination was quite small. After all, our interest in *Wikinews* as a journalistic outlet was based on the explicit mission statement and various guidelines underlying the project. Thus, it would be appropriate for further research to also examine the authors' role conceptions and motives

to participate in the project. Do they really think of themselves as journalists performing journalism? Furthermore, we did not consider the audience, so we do not know who is actually reading *Wikinews* and if readers are authors at the same time. These questions remain to be answered by future research. However, with respect to the provision of current news, our findings contribute new empirical evidence to the growing knowledge about various citizen journalism offerings.

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