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# The News You Choose

## How User-Driven Content Differs from Mainstream Media

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If someday we have a world without journalists, or at least without editors, what would the news agenda look like? How would citizens make up a front page differently than professional news people?

If a new crop of user-news sites -- and measures of user activity on mainstream news sites -- are any indication, the news agenda will be more diverse, more transitory, and often draw on a very different and perhaps controversial list of sources, according to a new study. The report, released by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), compares the news agenda of the mainstream media for one week with the news agenda found on a host of user-news sites for the same period.

In a week when the mainstream press was focused on Iraq and the debate over immigration, the three leading user-news sites -- Reddit, Digg and Del.icio.us -- were more focused on stories like the release of Apple's new iPhone and that Nintendo had surpassed Sony in net worth. The report also found subtle differences in three other forms of user-driven content within one site: Yahoo News' Most Recommended, Most Viewed, and Most Emailed.

The question of whether citizens define the news differently than professionals is becoming increasingly relevant. The trend toward user-defined news started with sites offering visitors a sense of what others found interesting: what news stories were most emailed and most viewed? Soon, establishment news sites like CBSNews.com allowed users to make their own newscasts. Then, names like Digg, Reddit and Del.icio.us emerged as virtual town squares, a way to measure the pulse of what the web community finds most newsworthy, captivating, or just amusing. The trend continues, as even Myspace, the social networking site popular among 20-somethings, has launched a news page.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, these user-driven sites have entered the news business, or perhaps more accurately, they have entered the news dissemination business. Reporting is not a part of their charge. Instead, they turn to others for content and leaving users the task of deciding what makes it on the page.

What do individuals do with that power? What kind of events or issues do they choose to highlight? And how does it differ from the news the mainstream press offers?

To find out, PEJ took a snapshot of coverage from the week of June 24 to June 29, 2007 on three sites that offer user-driven news agendas: Digg, Del.icio.us and Reddit. In addition, the Project studied Yahoo News, an outlet that offers an editor-based news page and three different lists of user-ranked news: Most Recommended, Most Viewed, and Most Emailed. These sites were then compared with the news agenda found in the 48 mainstream news outlets contained in PEJ's News Coverage Index.

A total of 644 stories from the three user-driven sites and Yahoo News's three most popular pages were coded for the study and then compared with 1,395 stories from the same time period in PEJ's News Coverage Index. The report first compares the content of the user-sites with that of the mainstream press. Next, it compares the three user-sites with each other. Finally, the study looked at the three user-oriented pages on Yahoo News, comparing them with Yahoo's editor-selected news page, with the other user-sites, and with each other.

Key findings include:

- The news agenda of the three user-sites that week was markedly different from that of the mainstream press. Many of the stories users selected did not appear anywhere among the top stories in the mainstream media coverage studied. And there was often little in the way of follow-up. Most stories on the user-news sites appeared only once, never to be repeated again in the week we studied.
- The sources user news sites draw on are strikingly different from those employed by the mainstream media. Seven in ten stories (70%) on the user sites come either from blogs or Web sites such as YouTube and WebMd that do not focus mostly on news.
- The three user news sites differed from one another in subtle ways. During the study week, Reddit was the most likely to focus on political events from Washington, such as coverage of Vice President Dick Cheney; Digg was particularly focused on the release of Apple's new iPhone; Del.icio.us had the most fragmented mix of stories and the least overlap with the News Index.
- On Yahoo News -- even when picking from a limited list of stories Yahoo editors had already pared down -- users' top stories only rarely matched those of the news professionals.
- While the Yahoo News list of stories that people were most likely to mail each other generally corresponded to the list of Most Recommended or Most Viewed stories, some differences emerged. Recommended stories focused more on "news you can use" such as advice from the World Health Organization to exercise one's legs during long flights; the Most Viewed stories were often breaking news, more sensational in nature, with a heavy dose of crime and celebrity; and the Most Emailed stories were more diverse, with a mix of the practical and the oddball.
- Despite claims that the Web would internationalize consumers' news diets, coverage across the three user-news sites focused more on domestic events and less on news from abroad than the mainstream media that week. Yahoo News, both on its main news page and three most popular pages, meanwhile, stood out for being decidedly more international that week.

In short, the user-news agenda, at least in this one-week snapshot, was more diverse, yet also more fragmented and transitory than that of the mainstream news media. This does not mean necessarily that users disapprove or reject the mainstream news agenda. These user sites may be supplemental for audiences. They may gravitate to them in addition to, rather than instead of, traditional venues. But the agenda they set is nonetheless quite different.

This initial report is based on a limited sample -- a one week snapshot -- to get a first sense of differences and similarities in user-driven and mainstream media. PEJ intends in a future study to delve further into this area of research.

[Read the full report at journalism.org](#)

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Myspace launched its news page on April 19, 2007. The Project considered including MySpace News in the study but the site is still in Beta form and at the time of the study, user activity was minimal. On average, the top stories received just one vote and some on the home page of the site had no votes.

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