



The expansion and contraction of the journalistic field and American online citizen journalism, 2000–2012



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ABSTRACT

While previous research has considered patterns of homogeneity and heterogeneity in the journalistic field, existing literature has largely ignored the factors that contribute to the growth and contraction of the field. Using citizen journalism (CJ) as a case study, we examine how four forces – organizational population dynamics, technological innovations, exogenous political events, and endogenous disruptions elsewhere in the field – shaped the growth of CJ over time and, consequently, the journalistic field. Using a snowball sampling method, we collected a “near-population” of U.S.-based, English-language CJ sites ($n = 1829$) to measure yearly density and rates of foundings and mortalities. The population of CJ sites increased through most of the period, foundings declined after a spike in 2005, and mortalities rose dramatically after 2010. The results provide evidence that organizational population and technological change affected the size of the population of CJ sites, while political upheaval and disruptions within professional journalism held less sway.

1. Introduction

To say that citizen journalism (CJ) has generated recent interest is an understatement. The phenomenon has inspired dozens of thinkpieces in the mainstream media (Gillmor, 2004), attracted substantial funding from non-profit foundations (Lewis, 2011; Schaffer, 2007), and provided the grist for a small industry of academic studies (e.g., Carpenter, Nah, & Chung, 2013; Waisbord, 2014; Wall, 2015). Scholars and popular commentators have celebrated CJ's potential to shift power over popular discourse to the people, to resist some of the troubling patterns in professional journalism, and to pick up the slack in communities where newspapers have disappeared (Schaffer, 2007). Even critics of CJ, who have shown that CJ sites are not usually an adequate replacement for newspapers, attribute great cultural weight to the form (Fico et al., 2013).

Inclusive, equitable, and civil deliberative discourse are essential to any democratic society (Habermas, 1989). For Habermas (1989), in the ideal “public sphere,” people of all sorts would engage in rational-critical discourse as part of civil society. With a disregard of status and the willingness to engage across differences, individuals and groups would determine the agenda and move toward collective action (Dahlberg, 2005). More recent adapters of Habermas' thinking have conceptualized the Internet, blogs, message boards, and other online communities as holding the potential to revive the public sphere (Benkler, 2006; Dahlberg, 2001).

By contrast, modern commercial media tends to echo elite preferences, “pre-structuring” public discourse (Habermas, 1989) and failing to provide the “mobilizing information” necessary for civic engagement (Lemert, 1981). Habermas' hope for democratic discourse lay with civil society, not a professionalized class of journalists.

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The great enthusiasm for CJ from many quarters stems from its potential to be part of a reinvigorated space for equitable and inclusive democratic deliberations (Benkler, 2006; Gillmor, 2004), to challenge “industrial journalism,” and to reconceive what journalism ought to be (Anderson, Bell, & Shirky, 2012; Deuze, 2003; Rhinesmith et al., 2011; Waisbord, 2014). The promise is that CJ might disrupt and transform the journalistic field, pulling it into civil society, where it could be governed by a new set of values and routines (Vos, Craft, & Ashley, 2012).

There is good reason to be skeptical of the loftiest claims about CJ. Research has shown substantial professionalization within CJ, with many sites adopting the organizational structures and routine practices of professional journalism (Carpenter, 2010, 2008; Lindner, Connell, & Meyer, 2015). Nonetheless, even among researchers recognizing its limitations, there seems to be a consensus that “citizen journalism is now an essential part of news gathering and delivery around the world” (Wall, 2015, pg. 1). For its boosters, CJ’s primary contribution is to expand, diversify, and democratize the journalistic field (Carpenter, 2010, 2008; Goode, 2009).

Several studies have explored how political media (Rohlinger, 2007), blogs (Vos et al., 2012), and “debate ensemble” formats in French media (Benson, 2009) contribute to heterogeneity in the journalistic field. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1993) field theory, this literature has shown how the journalistic field acts a “site of struggle,” where different types of news outlets vary in their levels of cultural capital and provide different types of news coverage. Alternative forms of media, like political media, debate ensemble formats, tweets, and blogs have shown some capacity to provide more inclusive, civil, critical coverage with greater dialogue and deliberate discourse across difference (Barnard, 2016; Benson, 2009; Rohlinger, 2007; Vos et al., 2012).

While previous research has considered patterns of homogeneity and heterogeneity in the journalistic field (Benson, 2006), existing literature has largely ignored the factors that contribute to the growth and contraction of the journalistic field. CJ is an organizational population nested within the journalistic field. Its expansion contributes to the growth of the broader journalistic field as a whole. And it can exert influence in the field only when the population has the strength in numbers to be seen as legitimate by other agents in the field. Consequently, the case of CJ offers an opportunity to bring together the very different theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu’s field theory and organizational population ecology to better understand the conditions that lead to expansion and contraction of organizational populations within the journalistic field.

The current paper contributes to our understanding of the journalistic field by documenting the population of English-language, U.S.-based citizen journalism sites online from 2000 to 2012 and by exploring social and historical dynamics that may have contributed to the form’s growth and subsequent decline. We begin by discussing existing literature on field theory and organizational population ecology. We also review research on the emergence of CJ, noting a number of important factors that may have contributed to CJ’s expansion and contraction as a part of the wider journalistic field. We introduce an innovative dataset constructed from the most exhaustive sample of CJ sites to date and use the data to chart organizational foundings, mortalities, and density. In doing so, we consider which factors seem likely to have had the largest impact on the rise (and, perhaps, fall) of CJ.

2. Literature review

2.1. A population in a field

Bourdieu’s (1998, 1993) field theory holds that fields are social spaces structured by exogenous (e.g., the market, historical events, technological changes, etc.) and endogenous forces (e.g., features of culture like norms and values). In fields, actors and organizations of varying strength compete to define, dominate, and maintain the field. Bourdieu considered fields including sport, politics, and fashion (Bourdieu, 2005, 1984), but, media scholars in recent years have drawn particular attention to his notion of a “journalistic field” (Barnard, 2016; Benson, 2009, 2006; Krause, 2011; Rohlinger, 2007; Vos et al., 2012).

Within the journalistic field, a shared “system of presuppositions” known as *doxa* leads to some level of homogeneity (Bourdieu, 2005, pg. 37). These presuppositions can include patterns of organizational structure, journalistic practices, status hierarchies, and beliefs about journalistic ethics. At the same time, Bourdieu (1993) sees fields as fundamentally “sites of struggle” defined by two poles. The “heteronomous pole,” representing forces external to the field (usually discussed in existing literature in terms of economic forces), and the “autonomous” pole, representing forms of cultural capital particular to the field (e.g., the type of serious investigative reporting that wins awards), are at odds. Individual journalists and media outlets occupy positions between the two poles, with intellectual publications like *The New Yorker* hewing toward the autonomous pole, and market-driven, “if it bleeds, it leads” news clustered close to the heteronomous pole. In this way, the journalistic field is both homogenous via its shared *doxa*, but also defined by the heterogeneity that exists between the two poles.

The journalistic field is not static. New entrants to the field create possibilities for change, shifting the field toward one pole or another. As Vos et al. (2012) write, “the journalistic field is perhaps now more than ever subject to transformation because of the influx of new agents in the age of the internet” (pg. 3). In a content analysis of media criticism by bloggers, Vos et al. (2012) find that the bloggers largely accepted the *doxa* of the field, critiquing traditional media by traditional standards rather than attempting to disrupt or transform cultural capital within the field.

Existing research has attended to the role of new entrants in producing heterogeneity within the journalistic field, while largely ignoring the factors that contribute to the changing size of the field. One reason for that is because fields, as Bourdieu conceived of them, are messy. Unlike studies of organizational populations, where researchers count the number of similar organizations (e.g., daily newspapers), fields are made up of dissimilar and sometimes hard to measure parts. The journalistic field includes newspapers

and TV news programs and media workers, but also foundations that support journalism, academics who study it, and the norms and values that hold sway within the field. Moreover, one of the primary struggles in any given field is over who and what counts as part of the field. As a result, a field's boundaries are always contested. For all of these reasons, measuring the size of a field is difficult.

Organizational population researchers, on the other hand, are extremely attentive to the changing size of populations, but they have largely failed to incorporate Bourdieu's insights at the field level. The conversational gap between field theorists and organizational population researchers is due, in part, to some important differences in their conceptualizations and assumptions. First, as noted, population researchers treat all units equally; field analysts emphasize size and forms of capital. Second, organizational population researchers tend to have rigid inclusion criteria to be counted as part of the population, while Bourdieu described his own boundary-drawing procedure as "less than a method...and more than a simple theoretical intuition" (Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008, pg. 7). Finally, though both theories conceptualize conflict, they differ in focus. For Bourdieu, the primary contest is over the prevailing ideas and norms within the field. For organizational theorists, conflict takes the form of competition between units in a population (e.g., between CJ sites) for scarce material and symbolic resources. For a review of the differences between field theory and the tradition of organizational analysis, see Emirbayer and Johnson (2008).

Because of these differences, the two research traditions have rarely been in conversation even though they have much to offer each other. We argue that organizational populations can be understood as nested in fields.¹ A field is more than the sum of a set of organizational populations. Still, the populations nested within a field offer an important proxy measure of the size of the field and tracking the growth of these various populations can tell us something about their relative power within the field. Organizational researchers see population growth as a sign of increasing legitimacy for that organizational form, but it also should be seen as increasing the odds that the population can exert influence within the larger field. In terms of journalism, a growing number of CJ sites would mean that the organizational form of "the citizen journalism web site" is coming to be seen as a legitimate category. It would also mean a substantial number of new agents entering the journalistic field with the potential to shift the balance of power in the struggle to define the field.²

This "strength-in-numbers" argument assumes that the insurgent agents share a set of beliefs and practices that challenge existing cultural capital within the field. Thus, population growth is necessary but not sufficient. For CJ to transform the journalistic field, it requires population growth, but also shared capital among the new agents. There is some evidence to suggest that this might be the case. Citizen journalists have been shown to engage in a number of journalistic practices distinct from traditional reporting (Carpenter, Boehmer, & Fico, 2015; Carpenter, 2010, 2008; Lindner et al., 2015). By contrast, other studies have pointed to the existence of different subsets of CJ, including political CJ sites and community CJ sites, with different beliefs and practices (Wall, 2015). For this reason, our research tracks growth in the subsets of political and community CJ sites in order to more accurately assess the magnitude of the potential influx of transformative new agents.

It is worth noting that many professional journalists refute the notion that CJ is part of the journalistic field. For at least some professionals, citizen journalists are a bunch of amateurs, who lack the training, journalistic values, and the layers of editorial gatekeeping necessary to produce legitimate news copy (Robinson & DeShano, 2011). Ironically, nothing could be a stronger indication that CJ is a part of the journalistic field than professional journalists balking at their inclusion as part of it. As Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) write of Bourdieusian fields, "What makes the determination of a field's boundaries so very challenging, then, is that those boundaries are always at stake in the object itself..." (pg. 8). Professional journalists who critique CJ are safeguarding their own position and defending the prevailing cultural capital within the field. They do so because some readers now see CJ as credible (Netzley & Hemmer, 2012), their own editors are requiring them to follow CJ sites (Robinson & DeShano, 2011), and any number of scholars, pundits, and foundations have celebrated the contributions of CJ to the journalistic field. Of course, not all professional journalists are hostile to CJ and some evidence suggests that younger journalists may be welcoming of the idea that "everybody is a journalist" (Blaagaard, 2013). Whether rebuffed or welcomed by professional journalists, CJ is not firmly planted as a population within the journalistic field.

In field theory, the mass entry of new agents is only possible with important shifts in the external factors (traditionally the market) structuring the field. We analyze how the market and a wider range of factors may have contributed to the growth and contraction of the population of CJ sites within the journalistic field. These extra-market factors include organizational population dynamics, technological transformations, and significant political events. This analysis contributes to field theory by conceptualizing the factors shaping the expansion and contraction of populations nested in fields.

2.2. Tribes of citizen journalism

Among the most problematic issues for existing research on CJ is the lack of a consensus on a definition (see Wall, 2015 for a review of the debated definition of CJ). Allan (2013), for example, adopts a somewhat romanticized vision that emphasizes spontaneity, describing CJ as "random acts of journalism" conducted by "ordinary individuals" often in a time of crisis (pg. 9). For Allan, prototypical CJ would be tweets from protests in Tahrir Square, Egypt or videos of the Boston Marathon bombings posted to blogs or

¹ In this paper, we use "field" to refer to the broader journalistic field in Bourdieu's sense, encompassing both professional and citizen journalism. We use "population" to refer to the number of self-identified, U.S.-based, English language CJ sites in any given year. We use "subset" to refer to sub-groups of the population of CJ sites (e.g., political CJ sites and community CJ sites).

² Large numbers of new agents are not absolutely essential to transforming *doxa* within a field. In fact, a small number of highly influential agents can shape cultural capital in the field under certain circumstances. We are merely arguing that changes are somewhat more likely to occur with a larger number of agents challenging practices in the field.

CNN's iReport.³ However, as Wall (2015) notes, not all forms of CJ are dramatic. Community journalism and political journalism have, at times, been regarded as synonymous with CJ (or at least essential areas of CJ). In fact, both are forms of journalism that extend beyond the boundaries of CJ and neither defines it.

One development within journalism has been the trend toward hyperlocal, community journalists seen as filling in the gaps where local reporting has vanished (Fico et al., 2013). Losses in subscribers, declining advertising rates, and consolidation of ownership in the newspaper industry have all contributed to the death of a large number of newspapers, especially in small communities. Between 2000 and 2010, more than a hundred daily newspapers went out of business (Curran, 2010). The remaining news organizations have adopted a range of cost-cutting tactics that have led to a further decline in local reporting. Many such organizations have signed cooperative content-sharing agreements that allow both parties to operate with fewer staff and journalists, minimizing profit losses (Potter & Matsa, 2014).

In this context, communities have lost investigative reporting on pressing local social problems as well as important coverage of local events and civic announcements. Community sites often work to fill this gap. As Wall (2015) writes, these “deputy journalists... do not reject journalism but instead want more of it” (pg. 5). Though much of what appears on community sites are announcements about Girl Scout troop meetings and water pipe bursts, there are also politically-minded community sites, like the Atlantic Yards Report (<http://www.AtlanticYardsReport.com>), which engaged in muckraking journalism to oppose the development of a stadium in downtown Brooklyn.

Non-profit foundations have been particularly enthusiastic about promoting the hyperlocal community subset of CJ. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, in particular, has committed resources to multiple projects that have the explicit mission of “distribut[ing] news in the public interest” to local communities (Lewis, 2011). In a report by J-Lab, a Knight Foundation-funded project, Schaffer (2007) writes, “[citizen media] have watchdogged local government, provided news that couldn't otherwise be had, nudged local media to improve, helped their community solve problems, even, to a degree, increased voter turnout, and the number of candidates running for office” (pg. 2). More than the Tahrir Square, activist mode of CJ, foundations seem to have promoted a professionalized, community-oriented, “newspaper replacement” model (Fico et al., 2013; Lewis, 2012, 2011).

But are they citizen journalists or is community journalism a separate population altogether? To be sure, foundations and scholars have, at times, used the terms interchangeably (Carpenter et al., 2013; Carpenter, 2010, 2008; Fico et al., 2013; Lacy, Riffe, Thorson, & Duffy, 2009; Schaffer, 2007). However, not all citizen journalists focus on local issues; in our data, only 33% of CJ sites were oriented toward a local geographic community. Many were engaged with national, global, or identity-based issues. Further, many community journalists do not describe themselves as part of CJ. We cannot pinpoint whether they are unaware of the terminology of “citizen journalism” or whether it carries connotations that do not reflect their conception of their work. Whatever the reason, we must conceive of community journalism as overlapping with, but not the sole form of CJ.

Political journalism, too, is sometimes conflated with CJ. Some scholars have seen CJ as one population within a broader field of ideological political journalism (including political blogging), others see political journalism as a subset of CJ, and still others use the two terms as synonyms (Carpenter et al., 2013; Harcup, 2011; Kim, 2006). Meadows (2012), for example, argues CJ is political by nature and fundamentally addresses “democratic deficits.” By contrast, Goode (2009) argues, “there may be little gain in restricting analysis of citizen journalism to sites that are set up explicitly as *alternatives* to ‘mainstream’ or ‘traditional’ journalism” (pg. 1289).

CJ does not have a monopoly on political analysis or radical thought. Professional journalism has a long history of political reporting and analysis, including the work of journalists whose topics and ideas are seen as “alternative” or at the margins of mainstream thought. Yet part of the promise of CJ is its potential to dramatically expand the number and type of voices contributing to public discourse, even when those voices are neither political nor “alternative” in nature. As Wall (2015) emphasizes, “The Resistance” is simply one *type* of CJ. By equal measure, political CJ sites are part of a much larger swatch of hundreds of thousands of political blogs (Hindman, 2009). Only a tiny fraction of these sites identify themselves as outlets for citizen journalism.

Extant literature has debated how to define the boundaries of CJ as a population. Our goal is not to resolve that debate, but to acknowledge and document the various subsets of CJ. By avoiding arbitrary restrictions, we are able to map the broader body of CJ and see it as it is, rather than how it might be in ideal typical form.

2.3. Forces of field expansion and contraction

We have identified four factors that may contribute to the expansion and contraction of journalistic field by promoting the growth and later reduction of the population of U.S. CJ sites. These forces are organizational population dynamics, changes in technological infrastructure, exogenous political and economic developments, and endogenous economic disruptions elsewhere in the journalistic field.

The first important force follows patterns established in the literature on organizational populations. As early as Hannan and Freeman (1977), organizational researchers have demonstrated that the size of the population of similar organizations exerts great influence on the fate of each individual organization. In studies of credit unions (Barron, West, & Hannan, 1994), wineries (Delacroix, Swaminathan, & Solt, 1989), and newspapers (Freeman, Carroll, & Hannan, 1983) alike, the populations of organizations tend to

³ While Allan's definition (2013) allows for collaboration between citizens and mainstream media outlets under the banner of CJ, other scholars describe citizen-produced content facilitated by traditional news organization as “participatory journalism” (Goode, 2009) – a category distinct from CJ. For the purposes of this study, we avoid most restrictions on what “counts” as CJ. However, we do accept the distinction between CJ and participatory journalism. We define digital CJ as any online content that self-identifies as “citizen journalism” or “citizen media” so long as it is not connected to or facilitated by a professional media organization.

follow a curvilinear pattern of growth. As the population grows, the industry gains legitimacy, lowering the risk of entry for new organizations. At some point, however, “competitive processes in an environment with a finite carrying capacity” lead to substantial organizational mortalities (Delacroix et al., 1989, pg. 246). In this second phase, smaller, weaker, or otherwise unstable organizations are unable to compete and, eventually, close up shop. Thus, initial growth in a population is associated with more organizational foundings, but later growth in density leads to organizational mortalities. Researchers have found extensive support for these “competition-and-legitimation” effects, known as “density dependence” (for a review, see Carroll, Feng, La Mans, & McKendrick, 2009).

Within a given field – here, the journalistic field – various organizational populations mature at different times. Initial growth in new populations, like CJ, leads to growth in the overall size of the journalistic field, potentially shifting the larger field toward either the heteronomous or autonomous pole. At times, the new population may pose a threat to other established populations (for example, professional journalism), leading to a net reduction in the field. Either way, as the organizational population matures, we would expect the field to contract to a sustainable “carrying capacity” (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

In the case of CJ, the period of its development is both brief and recent – essentially, the term and concept of CJ (though not the practice itself) did not exist prior to 2000. The relatively low entry cost for creating a web site likely lowers the risk typically associated with organizational foundings. Unlike, say, opening a restaurant, which requires significant financial investment as well as time, expertise, and labor costs, anybody can set up a free blog on a whim. As the number of CJ sites grew, it legitimated the organizational population, making new foundings more likely. At the same time, whimsical foundings may give way to guilt-free mortalities. The great risk to web sites of all sorts is creating a soapbox with no audience. If the theory of “density dependence” holds with regard to CJ, we would expect that within a larger population of CJ sites, the competition for audience, advertising dollars, and other valuable resources would have become too fierce, leading to a rash of mortalities. Accordingly, we expect that CJ sites, like other organizational populations, had large initial growth, followed by subsequent declines.

A second important force affecting the size of populations with fields is change in the relevant technological infrastructure. Technological innovations have the capacity create many new opportunities within a field or reduce its size very rapidly. The observed period, from 2000 to 2012, was one of enormous transformations in the infrastructure and culture of the web. A key issue for any field or population of a field is the cost of entry. Even as the code underlying web sites has grown more complex, the broad trend has been a dramatic decline in the technological expertise, financial cost, and time commitments necessary for an average person to create and maintain a site. Before the introduction of blogging platforms, most popular hosted sites offered static web pages, which required users to create a series of pages and manually update the content of each. Even when several popular hosting sites offered site creation tools that let users create without knowing HTML, blogs still required a significant time investment. Blogger and Livejournal, launched in 1999, dramatically lowered the cost of entry by offering free hosting, simple templates and posting tools, and eliminating the need to create new pages and manually update a front page. Still, many of the hosting sites of the early 2000s had strict data transfer limits or allowed only a single static page. These restrictions required web site creators with ambition in terms of traffic or control to purchase server space to host their sites, and that came with financial costs and required some degree of technological knowledge (Hindman, 2009). In 2003, Google purchased Blogger and WordPress launched, creating a wider range of attractive features available to the public. According to one account, there were 23 blogs in 1999 and, by the middle of 2006, there were 50 million (Chapman, 2011).

Though forms of social media had existed earlier, 2006 brought two important moments that may have affected the population of CJ sites. First, Facebook, previously a private network for college students, was opened to all and introduced its news feed, effectively changing the site from a collection of profiles to an all-in-one message board and news site. A second important development was the introduction of Twitter, the microblogging platform (Murthy, 2013). The first iPhone and its Android competitors in 2007 made these social media more readily available.

Several popular accounts have argued that, like video and the radio star before it, social media killed the blog. As *The Atlantic Online* writer Meyer (2015) wrote, “No one actually blogs anymore, except maybe undergrads on their first week of study abroad.” If the cost of entry for blogging was low, the argument went, the cost of exit – unlike a failed restaurant – was non-existent. For many community CJ sites, it may have been easier to post upcoming events and announcements to a Facebook Page and close down the old web site. Given such important shifts in technological infrastructure, we would expect to see substantial growth with the blog expansion between 2003 and 2006 and declines in the site-based form of CJ after 2006–7, with the public release of Facebook and other relevant developments in social media.

A third force affecting the size of populations within fields are exogenous political and economic events. Broader economic growth injects new resources into all manner of fields, while recessions undercut them. During recessions, the fields of sport, fashion, and journalism all have fewer consumers; fewer organizations and workers within the field are necessary to serve them. Exogenous events occurring in the adjacent political field can also stimulate growth in within the journalistic field. Presidential elections bring more engaged consumers; media outlets frequently hire additional political staff during elections, expanding the field.

The period from 2000 to 2012 was also a significant and dramatic one historically and politically. Among the many important moments were the 9/11 attacks; U.S. military conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as closely contested U.S. presidential elections in ‘00, ‘04, ‘08, and ‘12; and the Great Recession. If one of the great potentials of CJ is that it opens the public sphere to a greater number and diversity of political voices, each of these significant historical events represents an opportunity for citizen journalists to investigate, weigh in, and challenge prevailing narratives. Particularly for political CJ sites, we expect waves of new foundings in election years and surrounding significant news events. On the flipside, we would expect to see more mortalities between election cycles as citizen journalists lose interest. The exogenous political and economic events create new possibilities for growth and contraction of the larger journalistic field.

The final force considered here is endogenous economic disruption elsewhere in the journalistic field. To be sure, both wider economic conditions and technological innovations contribute to the economic well-being of the field, particularly for organizational populations clustered closer to the heteronomous (more market-driven, profit-sensitive) pole. However, losses elsewhere in the field can contribute to growth in other areas. A robust new population can pull new agents into the field, leading to overall expansion.

As we have noted, the period from 2000 to 2012 was a turbulent one for professional journalism with losses in revenues, a shrinking number of newspapers, and mass lay-offs of media workers. To the extent that community CJ sites were founded by laid-off professionals or were founded to replace local coverage abandoned by newspapers, we would expect the pattern of foundings in community sites to mirror professional journalist unemployment rates. Such a pattern would provide evidence that the disruption in professional journalism was a boon for CJ and suggest that *endogenous* disruptions can lead to expansion elsewhere in the field.

2.4. Mapping citizen journalism

Despite the immense interest in CJ among both academics and the popular press, there are some very basic historical and sociological facts we have not yet established about CJ. Theoretical and qualitative case studies have provided us with valuable analytical frames and vivid images of how CJ can operate to transform discourse. But they still lack the empirical evidence and/or the large samples respectively to generalize to the larger population (Allan, 2013; Goode, 2009; Waisbord, 2014).

Most quantitative work has rightly focused on the nature of the content CJ sites produce, comparing them to newspapers and other routine practices of journalists (Carpenter, 2010, 2008; Fico et al., 2013; Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, & Jeong, 2007). It has, however, largely neglected two sets of the fundamental questions that the current study examines. First, how common are various subsets of CJ sites (e.g., community sites, political sites) within the larger population? Is CJ largely a political population? Is it dominated by hyperlocal reporting? Some existing research has noted the existence of these different types (Goode, 2009; Lindner et al., 2015; Wall, 2015), but, to the best of our knowledge, no study has attempted to document the relative proportions of each form for English-language, U.S.-based population as a whole. A second set of fundamental questions essentially asks, “How big is it?” Existing research has not attempted to establish the number of CJ sites, how the population has changed over time, or how population changes vary among different forms of CJ. These simple questions are essential to our understanding of CJ as part of the wider journalistic field.

We suspect that part of the reason these questions have not been answered is because they are very difficult to measure with confidence. As we explain below, though our sample is, by far, the largest to date, it is, at best, a “near-population” of the rise and seeming decline of the field of English-language, U.S.-based CJ sites between 2000 and 2012. Nonetheless, after establishing the patterns of CJ site foundings, mortalities, and population density over time, we consider how the four forces described above may have contributed to the expansion and/or contraction of the population of CJ sites and, consequently, the journalistic field. Because many of the forces are historically co-occurring, we do not make causal claims. Rather, our analysis allows us to identify which forces are more or less likely to have played a role in changing the size of the journalistic field.

3. Methods

To evaluate our hypotheses, we constructed a near-population of citizen journalism web sites. Here we describe our data collection, measures, and analytic framework.

3.1. Data

The unit of analysis in this study is the CJ web site. The data for the current study were drawn from a quantitative content analysis of a near-population of English-language, CJ web sites in the United States. Over a three-month period in June and July 2013, a team of three researchers conducted a variety of Internet searches for “citizen journalism,” “citizen media,” “citizen reporting,” etc. Because our goal was to collect an exhaustive list of English-language, CJ web sites in the United States rather than a study of the results certain search terms yield, the researchers attempted an enormous number of Internet searches across multiple search engines, refining and adapting the terms throughout the process. Through these searches, we identified both individual CJ sites and directories of CJ sites. We then used a snowballing sampling method to pull in self-identified CJ web sites over a three-month period in 2013, following links on those sites to expand our sample.

Sites included in our sample (1) had to explicitly self-describe (typically in the title or the “About” page) as being engaged in CJ or be identified as CJ by another source; (2) had to be based in the U.S. and available in English, and (3) could not be connected to any professional news organization. These efforts produced a sample of 1036 currently active web sites, 238 inactive but accessible web sites, and 555 dead links. We believe we have captured nearly all existing citizen journalism web sites (a “near-population”), though this data is not without inherent complications. Like nearly all Internet research, we face the survivorship bias, in that it is impossible for us to know about a site that once existed if it was not listed or linked by any current databases or CJ web sites. As we explain below, we have made attempts to address the problem of “known unknowns” (identified sites with missing data), but there is always the potential for “unknown unknowns” (e.g., a set of sites systematically disconnected from other CJ sites and not retrievable by search engine in 2013). Given the extent of our searches and our systematic approach, we believe the number of “unknown unknown” sites is small and, if existing, they were probably relatively brief and minor presences in the population of CJ sites and in the journalistic field.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics.

Measure	Coding by source	N	Mean	Median	S.D.
Founding Year	MTurk: 1274 KNCC: 842 Researchers: 321	1569 sites	2006.4	2006	3.1
Mortality Year	MTurk: 1257 Commblog: 535 Researchers: 327	1274 sites	2012.5	2013	1.5
Annual Population Density	Calculated using 1236 full information cases	13 years	765.1	846.0	498.6
Annual Founding Rate	Calculated using 1236 full information cases	13 years	117.2	110.0	60.9
Annual Mortality Rate	Calculated using 1236 full information cases	13 years	18.3	9.0	26.9
Political Sites	MTurk: 1296 Researchers: 323	1296 sites	0.395	0.000	0.489
Community Sites	MTurk: 1281 Researchers: 327	1281 sites	0.332	0.000	0.471

MTurk: coders from Amazon's Mechanical Turk marketplace; KNCC: data drawn from Knight Community News Network; Researchers: coded by authors and research assistants; Full sample, n = 1829

3.2. Coding

The CJ sites were coded on four measures relevant to the current study: (1) founding date, (2) mortality date, (3) whether the site was political, and (4) whether the site was focused on a local community. The measures were coded in three ways. First, we used information from a database on CJ and “community news” sites collected by the Knight Community News Network (KNCC) (<http://kcn.org/citi-media-site/>). Next, we hired independent workers on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MT) to code several variables. As a reliability check, the researchers hand-coded 327 of the active sites. Due to a substantial number of dead links, even the most readily available piece of information, founding date, was available for only 1569 of the 1829 CJ sites. For each dead link, we visited the Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org>); none of the remaining dead link sites were available, which speaks to their lack of prominence during their lifespan.

This dataset is used in concurrent studies, including Lindner et al. (2015) and Lindner (2016). In an Appendix available online at <https://academics.skidmore.edu/blogs/alindner/research/>, we discuss each of these sources (KNCC, MT, and our hand-coding), the measures, coding processes, and reliability checks in detail. Table 1 presents all descriptive statistics. By combining data from the KNCC survey, MT, and the researchers' hand-coding and by engaging in multiple layers of data verification and reliability testing, we have a high degree of confidence that our data accurately represent the population of CJ sites fitting our sample profile.

In the charts presented below, we aggregate individual, site-level findings and mortality data into annual data and include range bands to indicate the possible range of population parameters (as a means of recognizing the data missing from dead link sites). Though the sites were coded in 2013, in order to use only full-year estimates, we analyze the period from 2000 through 2012.

3.3. Analytic strategy

We adopt a descriptive approach, charting the founding and mortality curves for our near-population and breaking them down by sub-sets (e.g., community or political sites). Each of our figures presents two curves: the solid line represents the *observed* findings, mortalities, and site density for each year, and the dashed line depicts the *maximum* amount of findings, mortalities, and density. The maximum lines are not observed directly, but are theoretical estimates generated using the missing data. To the extent that our “near-population” represents the population of all CJ sites that existed, we define our maximum curves as the observed number of events (e.g., mortalities) in each year, plus all of the CJ sites that could have had an organizational event or been part of the population in that year. For example, for a CJ site with no founding information, but with a mortality year of 2010, the maximum curve for findings allows for the possibility that it could have been founded in every year from 2000 through 2010. This procedure provides an estimate of the maximum possible population of CJ events in any given year, though the “true” values of findings, mortalities, and density per year within our sample of CJ sites are likely between the observed and the maximum. As compared to including only the *observed* counts, using both counts makes visible the range of possible growth trajectories and the degree of uncertainty in our results. Our data are insufficient to make strong causal claims, so we offer a socio-historical analysis of factors that seem more or less likely to have shaped the population of CJ sites over time, leading to the expansion or contraction of the journalistic field.

4. Findings

Figs. 1–3 present, respectively, the findings, mortalities, and overall density of citizen journalism sites from 2000 to 2012. Fig. 1, the plot of CJ findings from 2000 to 2012, shows a marked increase in CJ findings from 2001 to 2005. The highest number of CJ site findings was in 2005. After that point, site findings declined steadily through 2012, returning to founding levels comparable to the early 2000s (2000: 56 findings, 2012: 55 findings). The maximum curve closely tracks the observed pattern.

The mortality curves for CJ sites are depicted in Fig. 2. The number of mortalities each year stays relatively stable from 2000 to

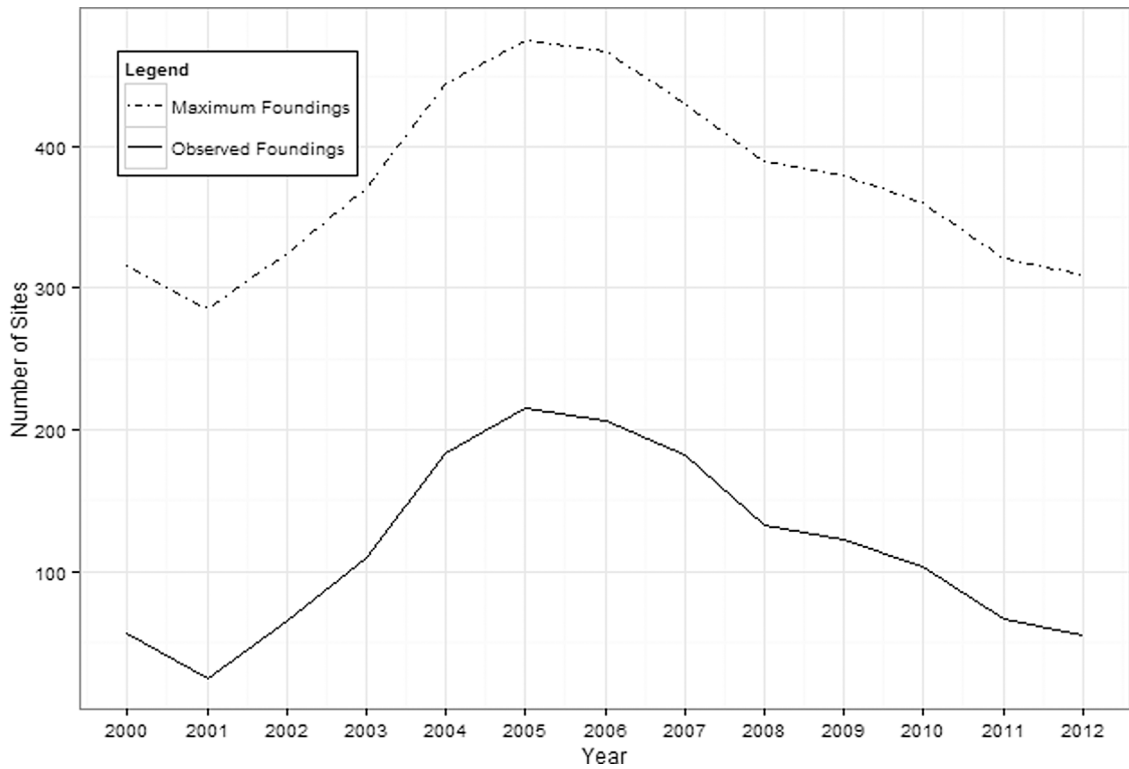


Fig. 1. Foundings of Citizen Journalism Sites, 2000–2012.

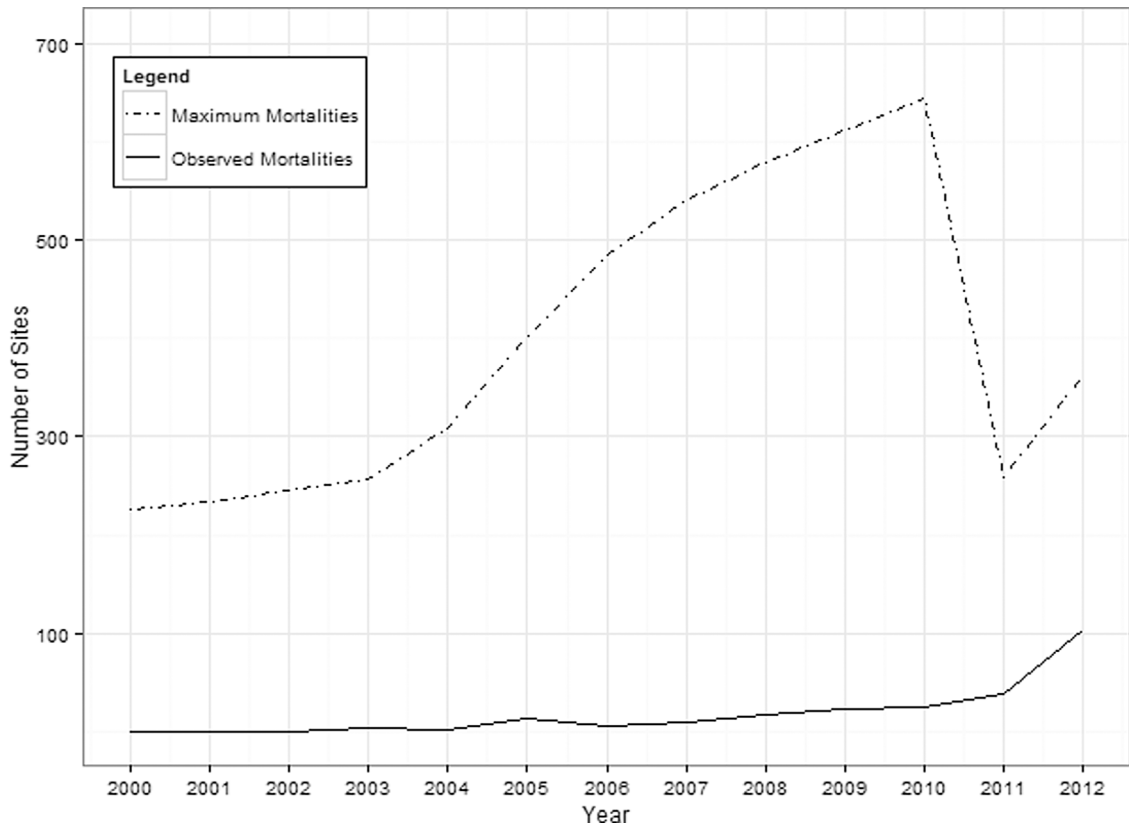


Fig. 2. Mortalities of Citizen Journalism Sites, 2000–2012.

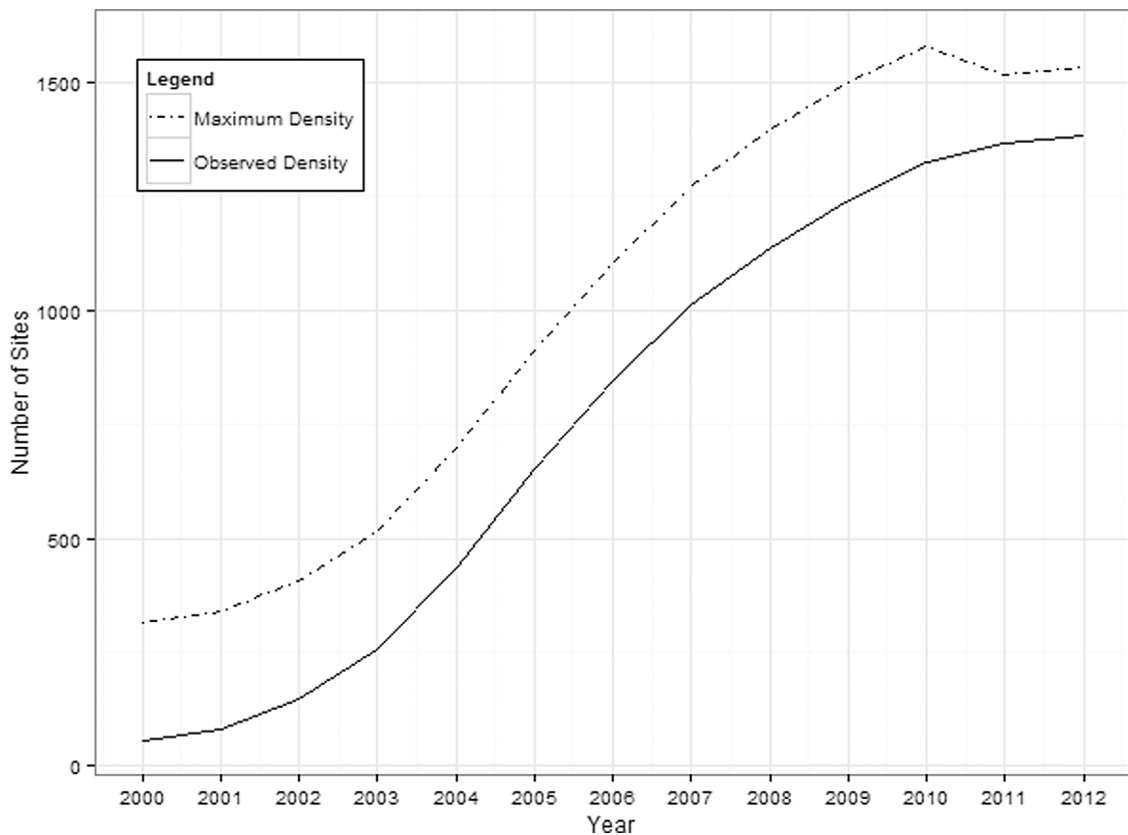


Fig. 3. Density of Citizen Journalism Sites, 2000–2012.

2006, with only 23 observed mortalities taking place during that period. After 2007, site mortalities modestly, albeit steadily, increased until 2011–2012. The year 2012 had the maximum observed mortalities in any year (103) and the greatest increase in mortalities from the previous year (68 more than 2011). The maximum mortality curve suggests the mortalities increased over the same period, as the max curve is adjusted for the founding data we have (i.e., sites that have founding but not mortality data). There is a large decrease in mortalities from 2010 to 2011, but this is an artifact of the KNCC database, as we knew the inaccessible sites in that data must have died before 2010 (when the KNCC data were last updated).

The yearly foundings and mortalities combine to form the CJ density curves in Fig. 3, which show both the observed and maximum estimate number of CJ sites active in any given year. Following the foundings boost from 2001 to 2005 (see Fig. 1), the density of CJ sites saw a healthy increase. Density was highest in 2012 (1385 sites). However, 2012 also marks the first time that the observed mortalities (103) surpassed yearly foundings (55). This finding suggests that the overall density of CJ sites may have been in decline when last measured in 2013. The foundings, mortalities, and density rates for the political and community subsets are presented in Figs. 4 and 5 respectively. We discuss their patterns in detail below.

5. Discussion

CJ sites experienced rapid growth in the mid-2000s, followed by a decline in the population as foundings waned and mortalities increased. Here, we return to the question of how the journalistic field expands and contracts by considering four potential contributors to changes in the population of CJ sites.

5.1. Potential forces: organizational population dynamics

Recall that we theorized that one important force for expanding and decreasing the size of the journalistic field would be the dynamics of organizational population change long observed in organizational population ecology literature. Organizational theorists hold that initial foundings in a population legitimate the population, leading to growth. As the population becomes saturated, intense competition leads to mass mortalities. As seen in Fig. 3, we observe the classic pattern of nonmonotonic density dependence in the population of CJ sites. The patterns of foundings (Fig. 1) – increasing from 2000 to 2005 and subsequently declining – match this account, as do the mortalities as the population matures (Fig. 2). This finding offers strong support for organizational population dynamics as a force driving the changing size of the journalistic field.

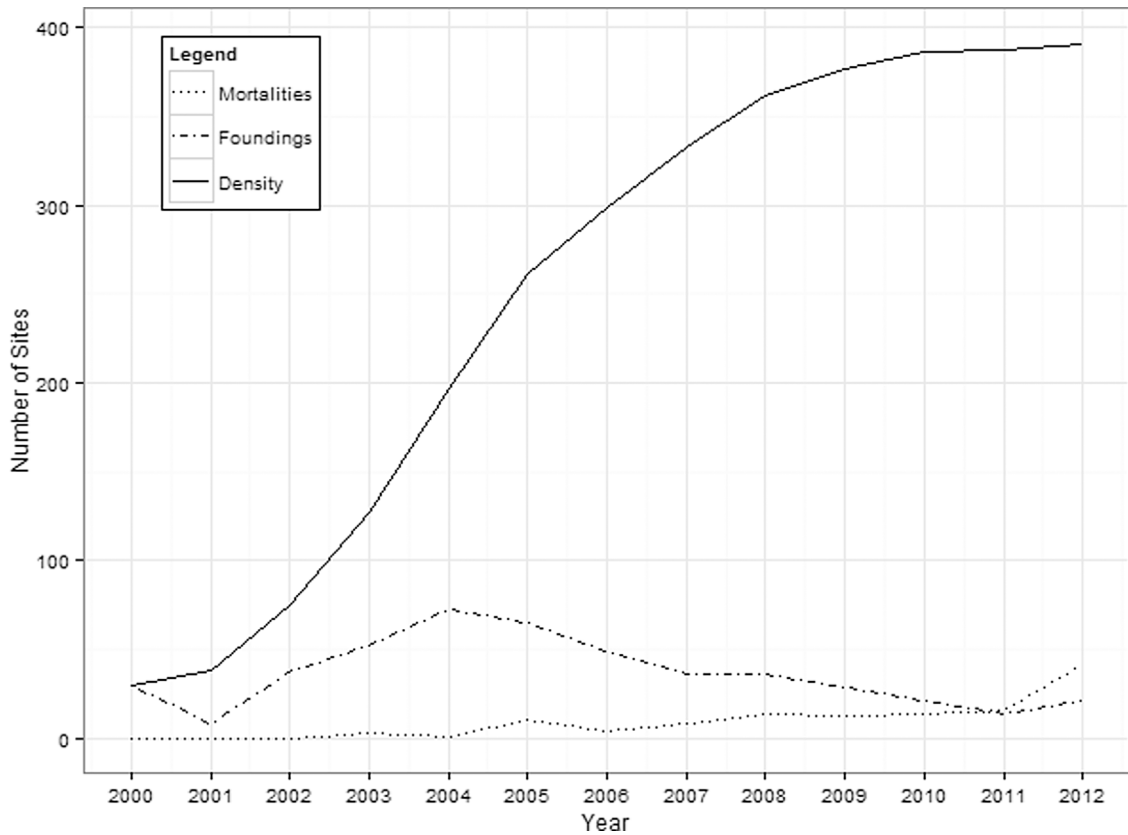


Fig. 4. Political Citizen Journalism Sites, 2000–2012.

While these patterns suggest that organizational population dynamics are a likely contributor to the size of the population of CJ sites (and, thus, the journalistic field as a whole), the density curve of any organizational population is always deeply entangled with other historical forces. Furthermore, it is not necessarily clear that the community CJ sites, which are located in different communities, are even in direct competition with each other in the manner organizational population ecology theorists envision. Thus, though the findings suggest organizational population dynamics at work, we must exercise caution in drawing causal conclusions.

The remaining organizational question regarding CJ sites is what happens next? [Barron et al. \(1994\)](#) documented the nearly complete die-off of New York City credit unions after a peak in the 1950s. [Carroll and Delacroix \(1982\)](#) found that Irish newspapers reached a carrying capacity after a larger number of organizational mortalities that cut the population in half. In the case of CJ, we wonder whether competition for readers will lead the population to decline further? Or might CJ achieve a carrying capacity, becoming a more “settled” field ([Fligstein & McAdam, 2012](#)) with relatively fewer foundings and mortalities? The future of the organizational population of CJ sites should be one of the most important topics for research in coming years.

5.2. Potential forces: changes in technological infrastructure

The observed period was one of immense technological change, with each shift holding the potential to affect the size of the journalistic field in a number of ways. The creation of new blogging engines starting in 2003 lowered the cost of entry for new sites, and the growth of social media in 2006–7 may have undermined the need for standalone sites. These key dates are reflected in the data: [Fig. 1](#) tends to suggest strong support for the notion that new blogging engines starting in 2003 paved the way for a dramatic wave of CJ foundings to their 2005 peak. Foundings of CJ sites had already peaked by the point of the social media invasion, but the decline in new foundings after 2006 is particularly rapid ([Fig. 1](#)). There is also an uptick in CJ site mortalities in the years after 2006, though mass mortalities do not occur until 2010 ([Fig. 2](#)). One possible interpretation is that CJ did not die off, but that citizen journalists traded site-based reporting for the ease of posting on Facebook or Twitter. With a growing literature on social media-based CJ, an important research task will be to examine whether those citizen journalists are “native” to social media or have migrated from site-based forms.

Due to the time-confounded nature of these data, it is not possible to separate a technology effect from a density dependence effect, but the timing of the growth and contraction of the population of CJ sites lines up neatly with key moments in technology development. The rise of the web undoubtedly expanded the journalistic field to news startups, blogs, and CJ sites, even as it took a toll on newspapers and other traditional news outlets. It may be that social media brought on the contraction we observe in the

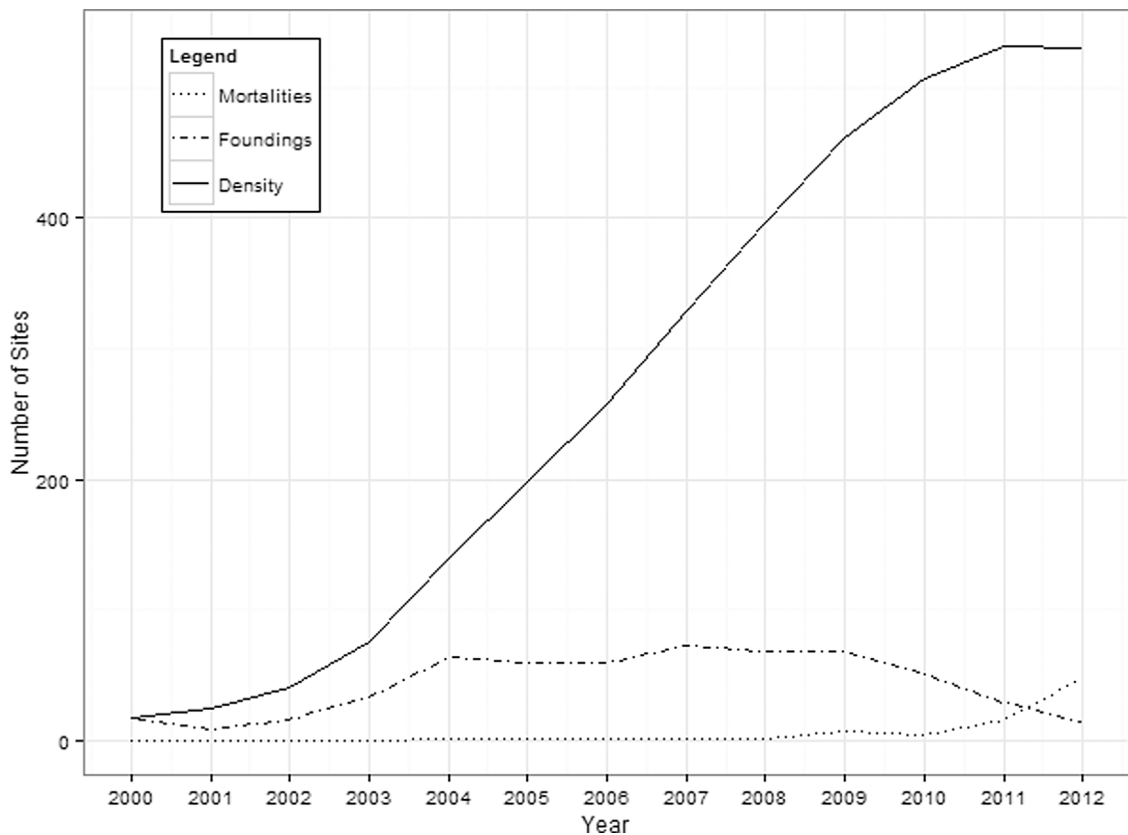


Fig. 5. Community-Based Citizen Journalism Sites, 2000–2012.

population of CJ sites even as it created new possibilities for democratic discourse on social media. If that is the case, it speaks to the power of technological innovation to affect both the size and shape of the journalistic field.

5.3. Potential forces: political and economic developments

We also theorized that Presidential elections and significant political events between 2000 and 2012 would be visible in the patterns of foundings and mortalities, especially when examining the political CJ sites. As seen in Fig. 4, political CJ sites have somewhat different patterns of foundings, mortalities, and density than does the larger population of CJ sites. Political sites' foundings appear to have peaked earlier than CJ sites as a whole, experiencing the greatest growth between 2003 and 2005, a period that included both the 2003 invasion of Iraq by U.S. military forces (Operation Iraqi Freedom) and the contentious 2004 presidential election.

One possibility is that political CJ sites are founded in waves that align with presidential election years as citizens seek to offer alternative perspectives to increased professional coverage (public attention to and media coverage of mid-term elections are notoriously low). In fact, we observe upticks in foundings in 2004 and 2012 and stable foundings in 2008, despite an overall trend of decline (Fig. 4). By contrast, there are no notable spikes associated with the events of Sept. 11th, 2001 or the Great Recession (2007–2009). It may be that political CJ sites are more animated by electoral politics than events of political significance more broadly.

However, we must exercise caution in claiming any type of election year effect, given other major co-occurring major historical events. The major growth in foundings in 2003–2005 may well have been a response to the policies of the Bush administration, for instance. Moreover, if there is an election year effect on foundings, it has a relatively limited magnitude; we do not see sharp spikes in those years.

Another usual feature of the political CJ sites as compared to CJ sites as a whole is their somewhat lower survival rate. Almost 25% of the political CJ sites ever founded were inactive by 2013, while only 15% of all CJ sites were inactive. Like the near-population as a whole, there was a rash of mortalities among political CJ sites in 2012. But political CJ sites constitute the vast majority of the mortalities before 2009. It is unclear what explains this pattern. It may be that sites founded in election years tend to lose readers or writer interest once the cycle ends. Alternatively, political sites may have made an earlier transition to social media or that some features of the staffing, revenue sources, or other resources of non-political CJ sites made them more resilient. Whatever the cause, as seen in the density curve in Fig. 4, the field of political CJ sites is declining more rapidly than CJ as a whole.

The evidence for an effect of exogenous political and economic events on the size of the journalistic field is less strong than for the organizational ecology or technological forces. The political CJ sites, where we would most expect to see an effect of campaign cycles, show only slight upticks in 2004, 2008, and 2012. This suggests that if an effect does exist, it is a modest one. For this reason, we find less support for the idea that the events of the outside political world exerts great influence on the size of the population of CJ and, therefore, the journalistic field.

5.4. Potential forces: transformations in journalism

In addition to the exogenous force of political and economic developments, we theorized that endogenous economic disruptions elsewhere in the journalistic field would support the expansion of CJ, as laid-off journalists founded or brought their talents to CJ sites and as readers in places where local reporting had been cut back looked for alternatives. Turning to community sites (Fig. 5), we observe the same substantial increase in foundings visible in political sites and the wider population. Unlike the subset of political sites, where foundings declined precipitously after 2004, new foundings of community CJ sites held constant until 2009. Community site mortalities increased dramatically beginning in 2011.

One intuitive reading of Fig. 5 might be that laid-off professional journalists assumed new identities as citizen journalists and founded CJ sites. But as Lindner et al. (2015) have shown, community CJ sites are somewhat less likely to have professional journalist contributors. Moreover, the rate of unemployed journalists does not correlate highly with the rate of unemployment among journalists. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012), there was a slow increase in unemployed journalists from 2000 to 2007, followed by rapid growth in unemployment in the midst of the Great Recession in 2008–2009. In other words, just as lay-offs were at their peak, new foundings of community CJ sites began to decline. Future research ought to explore where professional journalists laid off in the 2000s went, but it does not seem likely that they founded community CJ sites in droves.

In interpreting the mortalities, the most striking finding is that only about 14% of the community sites died off. Through most of the 2000s, the population was fairly robust, with a constant rate of foundings and few mortalities. One tempting hypothesis for the increase in mortalities after 2011 is that community sites – many of which offer local news updates and event announcements – turned to the less labor-intensive platforms of social media. But if that is the case, the staff of community sites were late adopters; Twitter and Facebook pages were available in 2007, while foundings do not decline until 2010 and mortalities do not increase until 2011.

The results do not offer much evidence that the losses in profits, closings of newspaper, and lay-offs of professional journalists had much of an impact on the growth of CJ sites even among community CJ sites where we would most expect an effect. This does not mean that disruptions elsewhere in the field *never* lead to growth or decline elsewhere in the field. However, the pattern of lost revenue and lay-offs do not fit the data as neatly in the case of CJ as other forces.

6. Conclusion

Previous research has examined forces of homogeneity, heterogeneity, and the effects of new agents within the journalistic field, but it has largely ignored the forces that make fields expand and contract. It is difficult to untangle the historical co-occurrence of emergent technological innovations, political and economic developments, burgeoning organizational populations, and disruptions within the larger journalistic field. Using the case of CJ, our findings point to organizational population dynamics and technological innovations as important forces in both the expansion and contraction of the journalistic field. By contrast, the exogenous political events of the 2000s—no matter how extraordinary—appear to have had only a limited, if any, impact on foundings and mortalities. Likewise, the upheaval in professional journalism does not appear to have lent CJ a hand either by providing unemployed professional journalists or underserved readers in large numbers. At least in the case of CJ, this suggests that the size of a subfield is affected more by its own internal dynamics and technological shifts than by what is happening elsewhere in the field. Future research ought to examine how these forces affect the size of the journalistic field using other subsets of the field and other historical time periods.

The potential of CJ is to create a more diverse, equitable, rational-critical space for democratic discourse by situating journalism within civil society, shifting the journalistic field toward its autonomous pole. But CJ can only fulfill this potential with “strength-in-numbers” and a shared set of new norms and practices that challenge cultural capital within the wider journalistic field. The results of this study suggest that English-language, U.S.-based CJ is neither a growing wave with the power to challenge professional journalism nor is it a short-lived fad. Like many organizational populations, it grew to a peak and has declined slightly, expanding the journalistic field along the way. Even more importantly for the contest over *doxa* in the journalistic field, CJ is made up of different subsets, rising and falling at different rates, with very different visions for what CJ ought to be. For now, CJ seems to have expanded the size of journalistic field without changing the fundamental dynamics of the conflicts within it.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2017.08.001>.

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