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Citizen Media Practices at the Digital Startup Mvslim

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Abstract

Belgium-based Mvslim.com is a citizen media platform that aims to create a space for Muslims and non-Muslims to contribute content dedicated to challenging stereotypical portrayals of Muslims in legacy media. Launched in 2015, this non-profit digital media startup claims to reach over 10 million unique visitors per month worldwide and is one example of a successful grassroots citizen media initiative that attracts and appeals to a global community. Based on a combination of content analysis and in-depth interviews with the platform's editors and contributors, this paper examines the citizen media practices used by the editorial team at Mvslim to foster participatory engagement amongst contributors and connect Muslims and non-Muslims. Theoretically, the study takes the practice approach proposed by Stephansen, which enables us to understand "what citizen media do" not only as news-making practices, but also as "public-making practices". We argue that digitally native citizen media platforms like Mvslim are blurring the boundaries of journalism, as they can fulfil democratic functions once limited to legacy media.

KEYWORDS citizen media practices; citizen journalism; practice theory; digital news media; news startup; active citizenship

Recent years have seen the rise of digital-born media startups. Just like legacy media organisations, most of these newcomers struggle with finding viable business models for online news and information, and hence many of them fade away quickly and silently. Yet some of them seem to succeed in finding their place in the digital media landscape, oftentimes to the benefit of media pluralism (Nicholls, Shabbir, and Nielsen 2016; Pew Research Center 2013; Sirkkunen and Cook 2012). Rather than focusing on questions of commercial sustainability, this paper is interested in how the practices of these new players relate to the role of journalism. A crucial question, in this respect, is to what extent and how digital media startups are capable of filling gaps left by legacy media, and how do their content and practices relate to the democratic role traditionally ascribed to journalism? Empirically, we want to approach these questions by taking the case of the Belgium-based non-profit citizen media platform Mvslim. Theoretically, we follow the practice-oriented approach proposed by Stephansen (2016), which means that we consider "what citizen media do" not only as news-making practices, but also as "public-making practices". Before presenting the case of Mvslim, we briefly discuss how digital news startups and citizen media influence and challenge both the traditional boundaries of journalism and how we define journalism.

Digital Media as Innovators of Journalism

In academic and professional literature, digital-born media initiatives are often described—and welcomed—as contributing to the innovation of journalism in the digital age. The study of digital news startups invites us to (re-)imagine the future of news “beyond journalism” (Deuze and Witschge 2018; see also Wagemans, Witschge, and Deuze 2016). Given that news work and journalism as an institution are changing in the digital age, Deuze and Witschge (2018, 170) argue that scholars should open their “eyes to movement rather than stability, to what journalism becomes rather than what journalism is”. This seems to resonate with Barbie Zelizer’s invitation to journalism scholars to pay more attention to the question of “what journalism could be” rather than what it was, is or should be (2017).

One of the points Zelizer (2017) makes, is that, especially in the context of digital media, journalism is often thought of as an “opportunity for engagement”. She specifies that “(a)t the core of the engagement metaphor rests the activity of sharing” (23). In the digital media environment, people can increasingly influence the gatekeeping process through their sharing practices (Singer 2014). Moreover, they can also bypass or supplement the media by sharing user-generated content and information from various sources other than legacy journalism. Through media-related practices, such as blogging, tweeting, curating and sharing, people can participate and engage with news and current affairs. Still, the question arises where journalism ends and civic engagement begins. Indeed, thinking of journalism as engagement urges us not only to adopt a dynamic definition of journalism (cf. Deuze and Witschge 2018), but also to study journalism as “boundary work” by focusing on the old and new practices, values and roles that shape the boundaries of journalism (Carlson and Lewis 2015).

Of course, in order to do so, we need to have a notion of where these boundaries of journalism lie. In this respect, Nielsen (2017) raises the interesting question of how broad or narrow our conceptualisation of journalism needs to be. He does this through a critical reflection on Michael Schudson’s list of “six or seven things news can do for democracy”—i.e. to provide “fair and full” information to the public, to investigate, to provide analysis, to foster social empathy, to create a forum for dialogue, to advocate and mobilise people to act, and, as a seventh thing, to defend and advance democracy (Schudson 2008). According to Nielsen (2017), this ambitious list of functions might be too much to demand from journalists, and therefore he proposes to limit the role of journalism strictly to its informing function. He argues that for “every other function on the list, it is relatively easy to identify others who are equally or better positioned to play that role in most democracies” (1258), including universities, think-tanks, NGOs, social movements, community groups, etc. Future research may want to further evaluate to what extent other organisations and institutions, such as citizen-based media and community platforms, are indeed better positioned to serve (some of the) functions traditionally associated with the democratic role of journalism in the broad definition suggested by Schudson (2008).

Citizen Media as Practice

Blogging, citizen journalism and community media are often defined and understood in relation to traditional journalism and legacy mainstream media. This has resulted in a

predominantly journalism-centred understanding of citizen media practice: Instead of understanding citizen journalism from the inside out, the phenomenon is often examined as being situated in the “periphery” of the news ecosystem in which legacy “professional journalism” forms the centre. In order to avoid this “false core–periphery dichotomy” (Deuze and Witschge 2018, 168), this study takes a practice-oriented approach, which enables us to look at people’s media practices from their own perspective (see also Ahva 2017), and with a focus on what citizen journalism is (a set of practices) rather than on what it is not (professional journalism).

Studying citizen media as practice means that we aim to understand the role and value of citizen media in terms of what people are doing in relation to them. Practice theory implies that researchers shift the focus of attention away from content and structures of production towards the “sort of things people are regularly doing with media amid the proliferating complexity of the digital media era” (Couldry 2012, 57). Applied to the study of citizen media, this means “moving beyond a concern with the capacity of such media to make visible alternative perspectives and experiences” (Stephansen 2016, 29) to ask questions about what citizen media contributors do, say and think in relation to citizen media and how their media-related practices are anchored in other social practices. The practice framework helped Stephansen (2016, 36) to highlight that “citizen media practices can contribute not only to making public previously unreported issues and perspectives, but to the making of publics”, since people’s practices in relation to citizen media support the formation of communities “around” these platforms.

This conclusion is consistent with Rodríguez’ concept of “citizens’ media” as spaces for citizen empowerment and “conscientization” (Rodríguez 2000), as well as with conceptualisations of citizen journalism as “active citizenship” (Campbell 2015; Harcup 2011). Citizen media can indeed be regarded as media through which people practice their citizenship. The idea that citizen journalists are primarily driven by “public-making” and civic motivations is a recurring research finding. Ahva (2017), for instance, shows that “in-betweeners”—i.e. “citizens who are not professional journalists, yet (...) not the typical audiences, either” (142; italics in original)—participate in journalism outlets not only to contribute to the making of journalistic content, but also to give shape to their own personal lives, community engagement and democratic participation. Another example is the study of Robinson and DeShano (2011), who found that, along with and complementary to professional journalists, bloggers can act as an “interpretive community” that values principles such as “making someone care, establishing connection or providing a new perspective that [makes] people think” (970). The importance of connecting and sharing is also supported by the study of Kim and Lowrey (2015) who found that, aside from a person’s civic skills, the motivation of “connecting to gain new ideas and experiences” is a predictor of citizen journalism activities. Their study also shows how social media like Facebook and Twitter have become increasingly important for citizen journalists to share stories and connect with each other and their audiences.

The remainder of this paper focuses on how the mission and goals of Mvslim are translated into the daily activities and motivations of the editors and contributors of the platform. Rather than strictly investigating the content or organisational aspects of the platform, we are interested in the citizen journalists’ practices and how they can be evaluated from both journalistic, media-centred (contributions to news-making) and civic, society-centred (contributions to public-making and civic engagement) points of view.

The Case of Mvslim

Mvslim is a community media startup that began in 2015 in Antwerp, Belgium, by two young Belgian Muslims. Founded out of a perceived need for a platform where Muslims can share and discuss a wide variety of topics with other Muslims and non-Muslims, the platform managed to rapidly grow to 10 million unique visitors each month and a social reach of 35 million (De Standaard 2016; information confirmed during the interviews). The website is entirely in English and has a community of over 500 contributors who voluntarily dedicate time and effort to produce, edit and share content.

Mvslim is an entirely self-funded platform; the operating costs of the platform are funded entirely by a digital advertising agency also founded by the two co-founders. In an interview with one co-founder, it was noted that although they had received interest in outside financial investment, they were not interested at the time as they “want to stay independent”. This sentiment furthers the notion that Mvslim and its contributors are attempting to pull away or differentiate themselves from mainstream media. The success of the platform has resulted in a great deal of attention from mainstream media, including local press and international outlets such as BBC News (2015).

Method

The findings presented below are based on a combination of methods, including an examination of press articles about the website and content analyses of both the mission statement and a sample of 35 articles published on the website over the course of six weeks in June and July of 2017. The content analysis focused on the topics and type of articles, their tone and style, and their reach in terms of number of views and shares. While the focus of the article is on the contributor’s practices, the content analysis proved useful in understanding their contributions to the platform, and provided valuable insight during the development of the interview questions.

Following the content analysis, six in-depth interviews were conducted with regular contributors of the platform, including an interview with one of the co-founders. The goal of the interviews was to explore and understand the practices and perceptions of the contributors in relation to the platform. We conducted interviews over Skype with two contributors and the co-founder who were based in and around Mvslim’s office in Antwerp, Belgium. In addition, three interviews were also conducted over Skype with international contributors who were based in the United States, Canada and Jordan. Each of the five contributors was identified as regular contributors, who had either published or produced content regularly or who worked to develop the platform’s video capabilities. Additionally, each of the contributors interviewed noted that they had regular contact with other team members at Mvslim, either in person or through Facebook or Skype.

Findings: Citizen Media Practices at Mvslim

On its website, Mvslim describes its mission to “inspire, motivate and unite”. Notably, the website presents itself in terms of what they do or aim to do rather than what they are or try to be, which reinforces our belief that it is useful to think of citizen media as practice. Although the platform primarily targets “Muslim millennials” worldwide, it is emphasised

“how diverse this community (of Muslims) is”, which is exactly what they want to “show” to “the world” by “sharing stories and keeping an open mind”. Other ambitions explicated on the “Our Story” page include the creation of “a strong community of self-conscious people [as well as] a bridge between Muslims and non-Muslims”, the breaking of “already existing stereotypes that are very present in our society”, and the provision of “stories of ambitious and creative people”. Through a content analysis, we tried to gain a deeper understanding of how these goals and practices translate into the articles published on the platform.

Of the 35 articles that were published on the front-page in June and July 2017, 10 were featured in the History section, 9 in the Daily Life section, 7 in Culture and Art, and 6 in the Opinion section. The remaining articles were a mix of Entertainment (2) and Fashion (1). There were 21 unique contributors across the articles, though some sections, such as the History section, have a considerably smaller and more regular contributor base. Although the length of articles varied, almost half (16) were short length articles, many of which featured or relied heavily on visuals. It was these short articles that tended to receive much more attention than the longer articles, both in terms of views and shares on social media, which could suggest that shorter, visually appealing articles are much more appealing to Mvslim’s audience both on and off the platform. Though it was not mentioned by any of the contributors interviewed, the prevalence of short length of the articles could allow for the platform’s voluntary contributors to produce content much more regularly.

Furthermore, many articles take the form of listicles, where instead of discussing current events or issues, content takes the form of lists about fashion, food or art, similar to articles on BuzzFeed and other similar platforms. While topics vary widely, it is apparent that current events and issues are reflected in the content published on the front-page. For example, articles about Ramadan and Eid made up a very significant portion of the content between the 19th and 25th of June. Additionally, an opinion article on the murder of a Muslim teen in the United States was uploaded within a day of news breaking. While Mvslim does not consider itself as a “news medium”, the contributors do engage in “news-making practices” to an extent by providing content on relevant current events and reactions on issues related to the Muslim community. It is these types of articles that seem to situate Mvslim between news-making and community- or public-making; the platform still provides relevant content and commentary on current issues, while still maintaining a large variety of more “timeless” content. In this sense, “timeless” refers to articles that will always be relevant to the underlying mission of Mvslim. Topics that were unrelated to current events were also published much more frequently, and varied between art, culture, historical profiles, science, and migration. Articles and topics unrelated to current events also seemed to attempt to legitimise or situate Islam in Western culture. For example, articles about prominent Islamic scholars and philosophers, along with the educational and informative tone of these articles, suggest that contributors are attempting to highlight similarities between Islam and Western culture, contrary to the current portrayals of Islam in legacy media. This notion seems to fit closely with Mvslim’s “Unites” perspective, where articles focus on uniting individuals, groups, and cultures through the content produced.

Many of the articles with metadata showed a strong social media presence, with articles regularly exceeding 2000 views and shares. Some articles had metadata available

for only shares or views rather than both. It was also apparent that specific articles had been shared many more times than they had been viewed on the platform. For example, an article titled “This is What Getting Ready for Eid Looks Like Around the World” was shared over 31,000 times on social media, and only receiving just under 11,500 article views. Mvslim is maintained by a group of young digital natives, who have grown up immersed in social media and are clearly familiar with its capabilities. It seems that a great deal of effort is put into ensuring that Mvslim’s content is accessible on various social media platforms in order to reach their target audience in ways that are natural to them, consistent with Kim and Lowrey’s (2015) conclusions that social media is increasingly useful and important for citizen journalists.

The platform has a comment section, though only five articles received at least one comment. Mvslim’s strong presence on social media may explain the relatively low levels of interaction taking place on the website itself. This notion is supported by interviews with the contributors who noted that “people respond to pieces on Facebook posts” and that “readers will mostly leave comments on social media”. The fact that Mvslim is comprised of digital natives who seem to put effort into sharing Mvslim’s content through social media also lends credibility to this notion. Additionally, by sharing content across various social media platforms, it seems as though Mvslim attempts to foster debate with its content; rather than having discussions limited to the commenting features of the platform, it has allowed discussions to move outside of the platform and into the general public sphere. In this sense, Mvslim seems to use social media to engage in “public-making” practices. This can also be seen as a way of uniting individuals, especially those who may not necessarily visit or be aware of the platform.

It was often emphasised in the interviews that Mvslim strives for a positive narrative. For example, the co-founder discussed how Mvslim strives to “create a more positive atmosphere”. There is also a noticeable educational tone to many of the articles, where contributors create profiles about famous or historic Islamic figures, while discussing their contributions and what these contributions have meant for society at large. There are also articles that have a tone similar to content found on websites such as BuzzFeed in that the commentary serves as a background support for the visual media and the content itself has more fluff than substance (cf. Tandoc and Jenkins 2017).

During the interviews, contributors were asked to describe their role and work at Mvslim in their own words. Contributors described their work in a variety of ways, ranging from a “civic duty” to a “hobby”. The majority perceived themselves as “contributors” while one viewed themselves as an “activist”. Notably, none of the contributors considered themselves as a “journalist” or “citizen journalist”. While Contributor D described himself as an “activist” by noting that “we have a certain message that we want to portray, we want other people to know” and that “in that sense you could say that [I am an activist]”, the other contributors were more inclined to reference their voluntary contributions to the platform as “hobby” or highlighted aspects of citizenship by describing it as a “civic duty”. This is similar to how Ahva (2017) has described the contributions of “in-betweeners”. Contributors at Mvslim had a variety of motivations for contributing to the platform. For example, Contributor C described the “satisfaction of seeing something online that you have committed some time to” as their motivation, while Contributor B noted that “the idea that being in a skill-building exercise, connecting with good people and potential collaborations through that” as motivation for continuing to contribute as a volunteer.

When asked to describe how they view the platform, no contributors viewed or considered the platform as journalism, they viewed it as a “communal content hub”, an “alternative medium” and a platform that is “between news and community because it is news about my community, and we have a fairly global community”. Furthermore, the co-founder noted that they considered the platform as a “community platform” rather than a platform for news or journalism, arguing that they “don’t do daily news” but do discuss relevant stories. This supports information found in the content analysis that suggests Mvslim still engages in at least some “news-making” practices. There is clearly a difference not only in how contributors describe the platform, but also in the ways they describe themselves, their work and their perceived role.

While the contributors do not describe themselves as journalists and do not describe their work in terms of news-making, they often rely on the content of mainstream media as a source for their own content. Mainstream media is often used as a starting point when developing a story idea. Contributor A describes how “all the big news stories cover different issues...and Mvslim sort of provides a different perspective on it but it is based on the information provided by those outlets”, similar to the views expressed in the study of bloggers carried out by Robinson and DeShano (2011). It is also important to note that neither the co-founder nor the contributors made any reference to competing with mainstream media. Additionally, it seems that mainstream media serves as a source of inspiration that Mvslim’s content engages with. Contributor B describes how when they “write about Middle Eastern affairs there are sites like Al-Monitor [who] usually do a decent job on connecting you with the on the ground publications. I try to add diverse sources”. Not only do contributors engage with mainstream media; there is a pattern of engaging with a variety of mainstream media outlets when sourcing and creating their own content. There was a noticeable pattern amongst the contributors, as they tend to develop story ideas in similar ways, mainly by using mainstream media articles and publications as a starting point and develop a story or article from their point of view. While contributors turn to mainstream media for information when creating content, it is still clear that the goal of the contributors and the platform is to provide an alternative perspective that is different from mainstream media. Though the contributors do not consider anything related to their work or the platform as journalism, it is interesting that when structuring their work, the contributors describe how they rely on credible news sources for background information and engage in fact-checking practices similar to traditional journalism. Additionally, the presence of an editorial team, meetings in person or online, and both a physical and digital newsroom illustrate many similarities between Mvslim and the structures and practices of traditional journalism. Contributors noted they were in contact with editors and team members at least once a week, through a variety of mediums, including Facebook, email, and Skype. Contributor C noted that they “have Skype meetings almost every week”, further highlighting regular contact between contributors and editors. The similarities to traditional journalism are also evident in the code of practice outlined for current and future contributors. Although contributors describe the platform as communal or alternative rather than as journalism, it is still clear that there is at least some level of professionalism expected of contributors.

At the end of the interviews, the contributors were asked to reflect on the future and sustainability of Mvslim, and all interviewees were optimistic about the platform’s future. Contributor A stated that “as long as people believe in the principles, the guiding principles behind Mvslim, and they have the right motivation for contributing

to it, I think Mvslim has a very bright future and there's a lot of expansion that it will do within the coming years". Contributor E expressed the "hope that we can have workshops in the future and can do more offline events like the ones in Antwerp and Amsterdam, where we let inspirational people tell their story to inspire others", suggesting that contributors as Mvslim view the platform as capable of providing a public value or public good in various ways.

Conclusion

The study presented in this paper used a practice framework to show how a citizen media startup can be successful in filling gaps left by legacy media in their coverage of and commitment to minority groups in society. As a general conclusion, we argue that citizen media like Mvslim are capable of fulfilling democratic functions that were once the almost exclusive domain of professional journalism. If we relate the Mvslim contributors' citizen media practices to Schudson's list of the functions of journalism, we can conclude that their practices are concentrated around "fostering social empathy", "providing analysis" and context, inspiring both Muslims and non-Muslims to "mobilise", and "advancing democracy" by debunking stereotypes and illustrating the diversity of the Muslim community. To a lesser extent, Mvslim also tries to create a forum for public dialogue, although our analysis found that little interaction is taking place on the platform itself. Much of the content on Mvslim is shared through social media, which could mean that dialogue occurs more naturally when Mvslim's audience sees those in their circle sharing and reacting to the content, and it seems that avenues for dialogue and discussion are not confined to these two modes of communication. What is also evident in this study is that Mvslim does not invest in the first two functions that Schudson (2008) ascribes to journalism: providing information and investigation. Rather than making the news, contributors choose to engage with news provided by legacy media. Furthermore, instead of reporting current events with the aid of legacy media, contributors respond to current events and issues by adding perspective, opinion and relief, among others. This also explains why none of the contributors seem to view themselves as journalists and are more comfortable describing themselves and their work in other ways. Mvslim, both in its content and in the practices of its contributors, confirms the findings of Stephansen (2016) that suggest citizen media practice has at least as much to do with "public-making" and civic engagement as it does with "making issues public" and journalism. On a broader theoretical level, we hope our case study illustrates the usefulness of practice theory for studying how citizen media practitioners and other "in-betweeners" (Ahva 2017) are challenging and blurring the boundaries of journalism in today's digital participatory environment.

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