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BOOK REVIEW

Seungahn Nah and Deborah S. Chung. *Understanding Citizen Journalism as Civic*

Participation, New York: Routledge, 2020, 180 pp., ISBN: 978-1-138-28126-4 (hbk); ISBN: 978-1-315-27128-6 (ebk)

In seeking to investigate citizen journalism as civic participation, the authors strive to identify “who participates, why they participate, and what they benefit from participation” in order to better understand its potential to nurture “civic culture in the lifeworld” of local communities. The opening chapter, “Conceptualizing Citizen Journalism,” takes issue with related scholarship – that is, research into varied aspects of public, civic, participatory and citizen journalism – published over the past two decades, arguing for greater clarity and rigor in theorizing evolving complexities. Drawing on Habermas’s formulation of communicative action, the authors lay down what they hope will prove a firm foundation for theory-building, namely a recalibration of public sphere ideals to better discern the features of a “civic communication ecology.” The second chapter’s “meta-analysis” of recent scholarship explores the interfaces between professional and citizen journalism, underscoring the relative strengths and limitations of collaborative outcomes for news reporting. Recognizing this is well-trodden academic terrain, the authors call for an alternative approach in order to generate fresh insights. Chapter Three’s agenda is thus a bold one, promising to synthesize several communicative perspectives on civic participation into a new “integrated theoretical model.” It is to the authors’ credit that a range of worthy issues comes to the fore, even though the features of the proposed model are characterized in surprisingly abstract terms.

This lack of analytical specificity complicates the model’s conceptual elaboration – and empirical testing – over subsequent chapters. Chapter Four reviews research studies

concerned with media credibility, encompassing enquiries into audiences' perceptions as well as those of professionals on citizen-produced content. Building on this work, the authors commissioned two national opinion surveys over 2015 to 2016 in the United States to generate a new evidential basis. The study conducted by Nielsen indicated participants rated professional news media credibility almost identically to that of citizen-based news media, while Survey Sampling International's (SSI) findings suggested citizen news media's credibility was rated slightly higher than that of professional counterparts. Caveats about data collection notwithstanding, the authors rightly observe news organizations need to expend greater effort to enhance the credibility of their reporting. To assist in this regard, Chapter Five digs deeper to address the predictors of credibility, that is, the factors researchers consider to be affecting how journalistic credibility is evaluated from different vantage points. An emphasis is placed on media uses – in particular, reliance, preference, and context – shaped by personal activities, including investments of social capital in civic participation, influenced by demographic variables. Returning to the two commissioned surveys to round out the chapter, findings appear to be consistent with those in existent literatures.

Chapter Six illuminates research into the practices of citizen journalism, showing how scholars have appraised the relative merits of its status as an alternative conduit for individuals' views, not least those seldom represented in mainstream news sites. Nothing unexpected surfaces in this treatment either, but the chapter reveals further aspects of the Nielsen and SSI surveys worthy of contemplation. Specifically, respondents were asked how frequently they contributed to either mainstream or citizen-based news sites (e.g., making comments, submitting news stories, videos or photographs, etc.) on a 7-point scale, as well as questions about the attention they paid to various types of news, their interpersonal discussions about politics or current issues, and involvement in the local community. Once again, the results reaffirm what may have been anticipated, which is that participants were

more inclined to engage with professional news sites than citizen alternatives, with interpersonal discussion (e.g., with family, friends, neighbors or colleagues) the strongest predictor. Relatively few individuals contributed to citizen sites, but those who did so were more likely to be young people.

The outcomes of citizen journalism practices are explored in Chapter Seven, which is more innovative in its effort to delve beneath the surface of things to break new conceptual ground. Here I welcomed the attention given to previous studies' mapping of the lived affordances and constraints associated with these practices for varied demographic groups, the authors being concerned with the "differential effects" for local politics. That said, the authors' interpretation of the Neilson and SSI evidence presented to assess the extent to which citizens become more informed, and thereby better engaged, in their communities as a result is – yet again – hardly surprising. I trust few would dispute findings suggesting citizens involved in citizen journalism will be more motivated to take an interest in community issues than those who do not participate. How could this not be the case, the reader may be forgiven for wondering. In any case, I agree with the authors when they point out newspapers should do more to "promote community groups and their activities in their coverage of local residents and communities, which may in turn highlight local social actors and encourage citizen participation and the development of formal and informal social ties/networks" (p.156). Additional recommendations appear in the concluding chapter, where the authors encourage scholars to continue on this book's trajectory for rethinking citizen journalism's importance for civic participation, in general, and in ways that can directly inform efforts made by news organizations to improve engagement with their publics.

All in all, this is an ambitious attempt to interweave a diverse array of analytical perspectives into a strategic model, a project further refined on the basis of valuable survey data. While I would challenge some of the model's premises, I suspect any disagreements

may be largely due to differences of opinion over what constitutes citizen journalism. The absence of real-world examples in this book, beyond passing references from academic literatures, is a serious limitation. Even one or two detailed instances of citizen reportage would have cast the evaluative categories being operationalized via the modelling in a different light, I believe, not least by demonstrating how qualitative insights can often disrupt the purchase of quantitative measures. Similar tensions percolate beneath the broad assertions rendered about civic participation, where much more could be said about the power dynamics at stake. More positively, though, the authors succeed in pinpointing a number of issues warranting future investigation, while securing the tenets of a conceptual framework likely to facilitate new research to considerable advantage.

Reviewed by Stuart Allan

Cardiff University, UK

allans@cardiff.ac.uk