Journalistic Role Conceptions and Sourcing Practices
- A Study of U.S. Citizen Journalists -

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〈Abstract〉

A national online survey of U.S.-based citizen journalists is conducted to assess their journalistic role conceptions along with their sourcing practices. Findings reveal citizen journalists align their views moderately with five journalistic role conceptions identified in the literature—disseminator, interpreter, adversary and populist mobilizer—along with the civic function. Citizen journalists were found to most frequently rely on mainstream and online media reports. However, regression analyses reveal that mainstream and online media sources were negative predictors of the disseminator and civic roles while interpersonal connections and experiences emerged as positive predictors of these roles. Official sources were also found to function as a negative predictor of the adversary role. The importance of sourcing routines and patterns of citizen journalists are discussed in the context of developing citizen journalistic professionalism.

Key Words: citizen journalism, journalism role conceptions, sourcing patterns, participatory journalism, story generation routines

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The emergence of digital interactive tools has fostered a participatory environment in which ordinary news consumers are able to function as sources of information. With a diverse array of emerging media enabling engaged news consumptions experiences, citizens are able to easily participate in the journalistic activity of storytelling. This is a radical departure that citizens are undertaking as the information domain has been dominated and monopolized by trained professionals. News as a product has historically reflected the values, norms and routines of professionally trained journalists, generally from larger organizations (Tuchman, 1978). However, the present media environment, inundated with interactive and participatory tools, is being redefined through a flood of new information providers who blur the boundaries between senders and receivers of information. What was once considered the exclusive domain of professional journalists has given way to new storytellers.

The activity of ordinary citizens engaging in content production, dissemination and exchange through various platforms has been described as citizen journalism (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Nah, 2008). Presently, there exist numerous citizen journalism operations globally. For example, more than 1,000 citizen and community news sites exist in the U.S. and North America alone (see http://www.kcnn.org/citmedia_sites/full_list). Citizen networks and their activities are expanding and making a mark on current journalism practices and the public's conceptualization of journalistic culture. Newsrooms have made various efforts to address this shift in the informational domain and are attempting to
integrate citizen-created content in their presentation of news (Domingo et al. 2008; Hermida & Thurman 2008; Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa 2010; Paulussen et al. 2007; Robinson, 2011).

Yet despite the growing number of citizen sources and expanding scholarship on citizen journalism, little attention has been given to how they perceive their functions as media sources. As citizens are able to participate in journalistic activities more readily in the contemporary media environment, it is appropriate to assess how they view their roles as new-found information sources. Additionally, while traditional journalists cling to the objectivity principle, newer storytellers, who are generally untrained for a professional journalistic career, may not abide by such practices in generating and covering stories. For example, the sourcing patterns of ordinary citizens may differ from those of professionally trained journalists, resulting in a variety of story topics and a diversity of views.

The present study aims to address these gaps in the literature by surveying a U.S.-based national sample of community-oriented citizen journalists. As new informational sources increasingly participate in the production of news, it is important to assess their roles and sourcing patterns. Further, as specific journalistic roles have been found to be associated to journalistic practices, such as objectivity (see Skovsgaard, Albæk, Bro, & de Vreese, 2013), it is meaningful to identify the relationship, if any at all, existing between citizen journalists' roles and their sourcing and story generating patterns.
I. Citizen journalists and their practices

Media organizations have long functioned as the gatekeepers of information, deciding what qualifies as news for the public (Matheson, 2004; Singer, 2005; White, 1950). Due to this control of information imposed by the professional journalism community, critics have argued the mass media carry out a one-way discussion and work independently from the very news audiences they serve (Habermas, 1962; Schultz, 1999). Many media critics have described traditional journalistic practices as a strategic ritual in which routine procedures are followed to produce a tangentially relevant or meaningful end (Tuchman, 1972). Glasser (1984) has described traditional news practices as relying on the status quo (e.g., standard elite sources), biased against independent thinking and the very idea of responsibility.

However, newer emergent interactive tools, when appropriately incorporated into online news presentations, have brought about new-found enthusiasm for participatory journalism, inviting audiences to become engaged citizens by functioning as informational agents. Such practices may enable a dialogic journalism that is more inclusive in the production and dissemination of news. For example, during crisis situations in particular, citizen-produced material had at times been considered more newsworthy, quicker, and also generating a greater sense of community than professionally-produced mainstream stories (Douglas, 2006; Stelter & Cohen, 2008). A recent study found
mainstream news media (e.g., *The New York Times*) consider contributions by bloggers or citizen journalists as forms of alternative journalism (Kenix, 2009).

While studies suggest newsroom professionals are recognizing citizen journalists’ activities and are making efforts to include their contributions, generally, these reports point to the strained relationships between professionals and “amateur” citizen reporters. This is primarily due to the perception by professionals that ordinary citizens may lack the professional standards and commitment (e.g., objectivity, credibility and training) necessary to perform adequate and appropriate journalism. However, professionally train journalists and citizen journalists may benefit from each other’s practices. For example, while citizen journalists may lack professional training, they may offer fresh perspectives and increased opportunities for interactivity (e.g., Lasica, 2003).

II. Journalistic role conceptions

The discussion of journalists’ functions in society is a classic topic of debate (Dewey 1927; Lippman, 1925) as different conceptions of their roles are likely associated with different expectations on journalism and journalists (Skovsgaard, Albæk, Bro, & de Vreese, 2013). Various scholars have documented journalists’ views on their functions in American society. Cohen (1963) and Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman (1976) initially made a distinction between the neutral, or impartial informer, and participants, or
active agents of information communication. In the early stage of this line of research, evidence pointed to journalists’ preference for the neutral role, which is closely tied to the idea of objectivity (Janowitz, 1975; Johnstone et al., 1976; Schudson, 1978; Tuchman, 1978).

However, research documents evolving perceptions of journalists’ roles (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2007), which may also reflect the changing nature of journalism values, ethics and practices. New roles have emerged (e.g., populist mobilizer), and prominent roles have also shifted (e.g., disseminator). For example, in their most recent survey, Weaver and his colleagues (2007) found while the interpretive role was still considered the strongest, there was a steep decline in the perceived importance of the disseminator role and a marked increase in the populist mobilizer role. The adversarial function remained a minority attitude.

There is also research identifying differences in role conceptions based on evolving work venue and professional activities. Cassidy (2005) found print newspaper journalists to rate the interpretive/investigative functions as significantly more important than online journalists. Beam, Weaver and Brownlee (2009) found journalists who blogged were significantly more likely to find prominent the populist mobilizer function.

Questions regarding media functions have traditionally been asked exclusively to trained journalists although ordinary citizens’ views regarding journalists’ roles are also meaningful in identifying their expectations from the news media (Heider, McCombs, &
Poindexter, 2005). Recent research (Nah & Chung, 2009, 2012; Chung & Nah, 2012) has begun to examine the roles citizen journalists may potentially play and how their role conceptions compare to those of professional journalists. These studies found professional journalists and news audiences are becoming increasingly aware of citizen journalists’ media functions. Further, news editors and online community news audiences rated media functions more prominently for professional journalists than those of citizen journalists (Nah & Chung, 2009; Nah & Chung, 2012).

Ⅲ. Sourcing and story generation routines

We are particularly interested in citizen journalists’ sourcing practices and story generation routines because sources function as the basic building blocks of information in news stories and, further, have the power to actively shape the view on news (Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1973). Story generation routines and sources not only play an important part in a story’s construction but also in its orientation (Ross, 2007). Research shows journalists often rely on a concentrated group of empowered elite voices when gathering information (Berkowitz, 1987; Berkowitz & Beach, 1993) rather than invest time in approaching a diversity of documents and individuals (Fishman, 1980). Literature on media sources point to the dominance of elite and official sources in news publications and programs. Gans (2011, p.4), for example, accused journalists of acting as “stenographers for public officials.”
In general, media have a tendency to rely on governmental and institutional elite sources (Ross, 2007). Such friendly relationships may compromise certain journalistic roles (e.g., watchdog). There is also a strong presence of journalists functioning as sources in the news (Hallin, 1992; Smith, 1989). Furthermore, research assesses a significant percentage of information in traditional news media come from press releases or public relations officials (Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Lee & Solomon, 1990). However, in particular, there exist greatest concern regarding the lack of representation for ordinary citizens and minority groups (Poindexter, Smith, & Heider, 2003; Ross, 2007; Whitney, Fritzler, Jones, Mazzarella, & Rakow, 1977). Studies have found ordinary citizens are represented by a minute percentage.

Because objective reporting is considered the standard of traditional reporting (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Schudson, 2003; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), journalists steer clear from writing stories that appear to carry bias. Thus, these values embedded within journalism practice have limited journalists in their routine sourcing behaviors. Tight deadlines and the lack of creative reporting have also been deemed reasons for journalists’ mechanical dependency on particular, and accessible sources and story generation routines (Dennis & Rivers, 1974).

Overall, research on source reliance is less clear for the citizen journalist population although it appears they experience greater production freedom in story generation and source selection. Carpenter (2008) found while U.S. online daily newspaper journalists are more likely to stick to traditional journalistic
routines, citizen journalists used more opinion and unofficial sources. Reich also (2008) found Israeli community journalists to rely more frequently on non-routine sources (e.g., personal experience, personal contacts) in the news discovery and news gathering process. Research also suggests alternative journalists may not rely on traditional types of sources but on first-hand personal accounts, news media reports, and links to external content (Atton & Wickenden, 2005; Carpenter, 2008; Lowrey, 2006; Reich, 2008; Robinson, 2006; Singer, 2005).

### IV. Research Questions

As questions on journalism role conceptions have been seldom asked to community-oriented citizen journalists specifically, and based on the growing participatory environment in the current news culture with a lack of research examining the relationship between citizen journalists and their sourcing and story generation routines, the following research questions are proposed:

**RQ1**: What are the perceived journalistic roles of U.S.-based online community citizen journalists?

**RQ2**: To what extent do U.S.-based online community citizen journalists rely on specific (e.g., routine and non-routine) sources for story ideas and reporting?

**RQ3**: To what extent do specific story sources predict the perceived journalistic role conceptions of citizen journalists?
V. Method

1. Sampling

The data for this quantitative survey of U.S.-based community citizen journalists came from three sources. As there is no single complete list of citizen journalists in the U.S., we attempted to comprehensively catalogue active citizen journalists. In sampling, we used three sources. First, we referred to the Knight Community News Network (www.kcnn.org) that maintains one of the most comprehensive lists of community media sites. At the time of sampling, this list included 1047 sites. We excluded sites that were inactive within a three-month period, affiliated with traditional news media and university sites, aggregators, advertisements, online community forums, internationally-focused sites, multiple sites listing the same staff, and duplicate sites. Second, we accessed the citizen media list aggregated by Cyberjournalist.net, a site dedicated to examining technological influences on the news media. At the time of sampling, Cyberjournalist.net listed 81 U.S. citizen media initiatives. Finally, we also referred to SourceWatch.com (Carpenter, 2008; PEJ, 2010). SourceWatch, a list of 25 sites at the time, is a Web directory of people and organizations affecting the public agenda.

U.S.-based community oriented citizen journalists were recruited through online survey solicitations addressed to the editor/creator of each Website. Web surveys were deemed most suitable because
this sample was most likely accessible via the Internet (Dillman, 2007; Greenlaw & Brown-Wetly, 2009). Many sites failed to provide mail addresses, telephone numbers and even names of personnel, which limited our ability to conduct a mixed-mode paper and Web–based survey. The researchers attempted to retrieve the full name of one editor/creator for each site, including a personalized email address to increase the response rate (Dillman, 2007; Heerwegh, 2007; Joinson and Reips, 2007). As many sites did not post this information, we requested their contact information via comments, contact forms and social media channels.

2. Design

The Tailored Design Method Internet survey methodology (Dillman, 2007) was employed to conduct the survey using Qualtrics. Respondents received an electronic invitation to participate in the online questionnaire. Initially, a pre-notice email message was distributed. After three days, an online questionnaire was sent. A thank you email was sent a week later and requested that the survey be completed if it had not yet been submitted. On the second and the fifth weeks following the thank you message, further emails were sent to nonresponsive subjects. The online survey was active for about two months from July to September 2011. The survey was sent to a total of 322 individuals and resulted in a 34.2 percent response rate and 26.5 percent completion rate. The response rate reflects what is commonly achieved in Web surveys in the area of mass communication (Wimmer & Diminick,
Response rates of Web surveys targeting journalists have been found to range from 19.5 to 29.7 percent (Cassidy, 2007, 2008; Dailey, Demo, and Spillman, 2005; Lee, 2005; Reinardy, 2009; Smith, Tanner, & Duhe, 2007).

3. Questionnaire

The online survey contained an introduction informing the subjects of the purpose of the study and included an embedded link to the online questionnaire. The majority of the questions were based on a five-point Likert-type scale. A small number of short-answer, fill-in-the-blank questions were also included along with basic demographic questions toward the end of the survey.

Operational Measures

Role conceptions. Weaver et al.’s (2007) most recent survey battery of 19 questions was used to measure citizen journalists’ role conceptions and the civic role. The response scale ranged from “not at all important” (1) to “extremely important” (5). Items measuring the prevalent roles identified in the literature—disseminator, interpreter, adversary and populist mobilizer—along with the civic role, were conceptually grouped. The grouped items were summed and then averaged to create scales representing the five roles. The scores for the scales ranged from 1 to 5, with smaller values indicating lower ratings regarding the importance of media functions.
Story generation routines and sources. Items tapping into sourcing practices were created based on previous media routines literature. The response scale ranged from “never” (scored 1) to “always” (scored 5). Routine sources measured were public relations spokespeople, press conferences or press releases; city, county or state government officials; school officials; local business leaders; traditional news media; news wire and law enforcement. Non-routine sources included friends, family, activists, online sites (e.g., blogs, online-only publication), non-profit organizations, church leaders or members, personal experiences and reader contributions. These 16 items were then factor analyzed to identify specific source categories. Five factors emerged, and they were subsequently summed and then averaged to create scales representing distinct classifications of sourcing practices. The scores for the scales ranged from 1 to 5, with smaller values indicating lower levels of sourcing behavior.

Control Variables. We controlled for the following variables in our analysis—age, gender, education, and total household income.

Finally, in evaluating predictive relationships, we used hierarchical multiple regressions controlling after the demographic variables.
VI. Results

1. The sample

Sixty-three percent of the sample was male (n=51) with about 86 percent (n=71) representing white participants. The mean age of the respondents was 49 years old (sd = 13.81). Respondents were highly educated with about 83 percent (n=69) holding a bachelor’s degree, professional degree or other advanced degree. In terms of income level, 17.7 percent (n=14) of the respondents earned between $50,000 and $74,999, while another 17.7 percent (n=14) reported earning between $75,000 and $99,999. Further, another 26.6 percent (n=21) reported earning more than $100,000. Participants reported juggling multiple responsibilities on their sites, including positions as editor, writer, sales, and technical personnel. Only three participants reported performing one specific duty. On average, participants worked for their community publication for about four years (sd = 2.56), and a mean of about two individuals (sd = 4.09) was considered to be paid employees.

2. U.S.-based community citizen journalists’ role conceptions

In order to identify how citizen journalists perceive their journalistic role conceptions (RQ1), we created scales representing the five prevalent roles identified in the literature.

Disseminator. The disseminator role was measured by asking
respondents to rate the importance of four items: a) get information to the public quickly, b) provide entertainment and relaxation, c) stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified, and d) concentrate on news that is of interest to the widest possible audience. The disseminator scale was then created by summing and then averaging the four items ($M = 3.20$, $sd = .74$, Cronbach’s alpha = .42).

**Interpreter.** The interpreter role was measured by asking respondents to rate the importance of four items: a) provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems, b) investigate claims and statements made by the government, c) provide analysis and interpretation of international developments, and d) discuss national policy while it is still being developed. The interpreter scale was then created by summing and then averaging the four items ($M = 3.34$, $sd = .93$, Cronbach’s alpha = .72).

**Adversary.** The adversary role was measured by asking respondents to rate the importance of two items: a) be an adversary of businesses by being constantly skeptical of their actions, and b) be an adversary of public officials by being constantly skeptical of their actions. The adversary scale was then created by summing and then averaging the two items ($M = 3.55$, $sd = 1.16$, Inter–item correlation = .88).

**Populist mobilizer.** The populist mobilizer role was measured by asking respondents to rate the importance of five items: a) develop intellectual and cultural interests of the public, b) set the political agenda, c) give ordinary people a chance to express their views on public affairs, d) motivate ordinary people to get involved in public
discussions of important issues, and e) point people toward possible solutions to society’s problems. The populist mobilizer scale was then created by summing and then averaging the five items ($M = 3.87$, $sd = .77$, Cronbach’s alpha $= .74$).

**Civic role.** Four questions assessing perceptions of civic journalism values were also included (Weaver et al., 2007). The response scale was the same as that of the above four role conception questions. The civic role was measured by asking respondents to rate the importance of: a) conduct polls to learn citizens’ priorities on issues, b) convene meetings of citizens and community leaders to discuss public issues, c) make special efforts to motivate citizens to participate in decision making on public issues, and d) make special efforts to include ordinary citizens as sources in public affairs stories. Following the same procedures as the above variables, the civic scale was then created ($M = 3.51$, $sd = 1.05$, Cronbach’s alpha $= .80$). Table 1 illustrates the five role conceptions of citizen journalists.

Further, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to investigate whether respondents showed significantly different perceptions of citizen journalism roles. The analyses indicate respondents perceive significant differences ($Wilk’s \lambda = .48$, $F (4, 77) = 19.80$, $p < .00$) among the five roles. While all five roles generally were deemed to be moderately important, participants rated the populist mobilizer to be the most important and the disseminator role as least important among the five citizen journalistic roles.
### Table 1: Descriptives for Role Conceptions

| Roles               | Mean (sd)     |
|---------------------|---------------|
| **Disseminator**    | 3.20 (.74)    |
| Get information to the public quickly | 3.78 (1.17) |
| provide entertainment and relaxation, | 3.24 (1.20) |
| Stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified | 3.51 (1.38) |
| Concentrate on news that is of interest to the widest possible audience | 2.38 (1.12) |
| Cronbach’s Alpha    | .42           |
| **Interpreter**     | 3.34 (.93)    |
| Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems | 3.48 (1.24) |
| Investigate claims and statements made by the government | 3.07 (1.20) |
| Provide analysis and interpretation of international developments | 2.77 (1.27) |
| Discuss national policy while it is still being developed | 3.35 (1.33) |
| Cronbach’s Alpha    | .72           |
| **Adversary**       | 3.55 (1.16)   |
| Be an adversary of public officials by being constantly skeptical of their actions | 3.60 (1.21) |
| Be an adversary of business by being constantly skeptical of their actions | 3.48 (1.18) |
| Inter-item Correlation | .88         |
| **Mobilizer**       | 3.87 (.77)    |
| Develop intellectual and cultural interest of the public | 3.67 (1.11) |
| Set the political agenda | 2.87 (1.35) |
| Give ordinary people a chance to express their views on public affairs | 4.41 (9.40) |
| Motivate ordinary people to get involved in public discussions of important issues | 4.30 (1.05) |
| Point people toward possible solutions to society’s problems | 4.07 (1.02) |
| Cronbach’s Alpha    | .74           |
| **Civic**           | 3.51 (1.05)   |
| Conduct polls to learn citizen’s priorities on issues | 2.93 (1.51) |
| Convene meetings of citizen’s and community leaders to discuss public issues | 3.26 (1.38) |
| Make special efforts to motivate citizens to participate in decision making on public issues | 4.01 (1.15) |
| Make special efforts to include ordinary citizens as sources in public affairs stories | 3.83 (1.29) |
| Cronbach’s Alpha    | .80           |

Note: Original question wording: This section of the questionnaire asks you to rate how you feel about the importance of the role of citizen journalists in the following areas from “not really important” to “extremely important.”
3. U.S.-based community citizen journalists’ sourcing practices

To understand citizen journalists’ sourcing practices (RQ2), a principles components factor analysis was conducted using Varimax rotation. The analysis yielded five factors accounting for about 70 percent of the variance. The factors were then subsequently created as five source scales. The scales were labeled opinion leaders, officials, mainstream and alternative news, interpersonal connections, and PR and newswire.

**Opinion leaders.** This dimension includes activists, church leaders/members, non-profit organizations, local business leaders, and staff or volunteer publication contributors. This scale was created by summing and then averaging the five items \(M = 2.91, \text{sd} = .80, \text{Cronbach’s alpha} = .84\).

**Officials.** This dimension includes three items, including law enforcement, city/government officials/meetings, and school officials/meetings. This scale was then created by summing and averaging the three items \(M = 3.03, \text{sd} = .94, \text{Cronbach’s alpha} = .79\).

**Mainstream and online news.** Mainstream news media sources (e.g., newspaper and broadcast stations) and online sites (e.g., online-only publications) were included in this dimension. This scale was created by summing and then averaging these two items \(M = 3.19, \text{sd} = .67, \text{Inter-item correlation} = .52\).

**Interpersonal connections and experiences.** This dimension includes friends, family members, personal experiences and readers and their comments as sources. This scale was created by
<Table 2> Types of Sourcing Practices and Story Generation Routines

| Factors                                | Factor loadings |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------|
|                                        | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   |
| Opinion leaders                        |     |     |     |     |     |
| Staff/volunteer publication contributors| .81  | .14  | -.06 | .03 | -.04 |
| Non-profit organizations               | .75  | .11  | .13  | .17  | .22  |
| Church leaders/members                 | .71  | .22  | .06  | -.03 | .31  |
| Activists                              | .69  | .23  | .36  | .07  | -.07 |
| Local business leaders                 | .67  | .29  | -.08 | .08  | .27  |
| Officials                              |     |     |     |     |     |
| School officials/meetings              | 25   |     | .03  | .03  | .09  |
| City/government officials/meetings     | 28   | .87  | .08  | -.16 | .08  |
| Law enforcement                        | 29   | .60  | -.09 | .08  | .52  |
| Mainstream/alternative news            |     |     |     |     |     |
| Mainstream news (e.g., newspapers, television) | -.07 | .25  | .83  | .15  | .10  |
| Online sites (e.g., online-only publications, blogs) | 32   | -.21 | .80  | .13  | -.09 |
| Interpersonal connections/experiences  |     |     |     |     |     |
| Friends                                | 25   | -.21 | .16  | .75  | .08  |
| Readers and their comments             | 24   | .29  | -.16 | .71  | -.17 |
| Family members                         | -.63 | -.09 | .21  | .87  | .40  |
| Personal experiences                   | -.37 | -.03 | .43  | .87  | .06  |
| PR and newswire                        |     |     |     |     |     |
| Public relations spokespeople, press conferences and press releases | 16   | .23  | -.08 | .15  | .67  |
| Newswires                              | 18   | -.05 | .50  | -.05 | .63  |
| Eigenvalues                            | 4.72 | 2.57 | 1.44 | 1.41 | 1.02 |
| Variance Explained                     | 20.67| 14.28| 12.75| 12.35| 9.75 |
| Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha)/Inter-item correlation* | .84  | .79  | .52* | .64  | .37* |
| Mean (S.D.)                            | 2.91 (.80) | 3.03 (.94) | 3.19 (.67) | 2.93 (.60) | 2.72 (.86) |

Note: Original question wording: “How often do you rely on this material for story or post topics?”
summing and then averaging the four items \((M = 2.93, \text{sd} = .60, \text{Cronbach’s alpha} = .64)\).

**PR and newswire.** This dimension includes sources from public relations spokespeople, press conferences or press releases and the news wire. This scale was created by summing and then averaging these two items \((M = 2.72, \text{sd} = .86, \text{Inter-item correlation} = .37)\). Table 2 illustrates the five sourcing practices of citizen journalists.

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to investigate whether there exist significantly different sourcing practices. The analyses indicate there were meaningful differences in the way citizen journalists used sources \((\text{Wilk’s } \lambda = .66, F (4, 79) = 9.62, p < .00)\). While participants generally responded using all five types of sources “sometimes”, they most frequently resorted to using mainstream and online news sources. They were less likely to rely on press releases, public relations spokespeople and news wire services.

4. Relationship between story sources and role conceptions

We then examined whether specific sourcing practices predicted certain citizen journalistic roles (RQ3). Five separate independent hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted after controlling for demographic variables. As shown in Table 3, not all models performed well. However, predictors emerged for certain types of roles.

**Source predictors of the disseminator role.** The first regression did not yield any predictors. However, once the sourcing
variables were added to the regression equation, the model was significantly improved, \(R^2 = .033, R^2\) change = .27, \(p < .01\). Household income surfaced as a demographic predictor (\(b = .24, p < .001\)). The sourcing practices also significantly added to the regression model with interpersonal connections/experiences (\(b = .37, p < .01\)) and PR/news wires (\(b = .31, p < .05\)) both emerging as significant predictors of the disseminator role. However, mainstream and online news (\(b = -.38, p < .01\)) emerged as the strongest negative predictor.

**Source predictors of the interpretive role.** In the first regression, \(R^2 = .17, p < .05\), gender emerged as a positive predictor (\(\beta = .37, p < .01\)), and age approached significance (\(\beta = -.20, p = .098\)) as a negative predictor. However, the addition of the sourcing variables did not significantly improve the regression model.

**Source predictors of the adversary role.** The first regression did not yield significant predictors, but the addition of the sourcing variables improved the regression model, \(R^2 = .21, R^2\) change = .16, \(p = .052\), and the model was marginally significant. In this second regression, officials (\(\beta = -.32, p < .05\)) were the sole significant negative predictor. PR/news wire services also approached significance as a potential negative predictor (\(\beta = -.24, p = .097\)). Opinion leaders were marginally significant as a positive predictor (\(\beta = .30, p = .063\)) as were mainstream and online news, which also approached significance (\(\beta = .23, p = .09\)).

**Source predictors of the populist mobilizer role.** This model was not significant and failed to yield significant predictors. This is notable as the populist mobilizer role, however, was rated most
prominently among citizen journalists.

**Source predictors of the civic role.** In the first regression for this model, again, no predictors emerged. However, with the addition of the sourcing variables, the model was improved, $R^2 = .23$, $R^2$ change $= .17$, $p < .05$. Mainstream and online news was again a strong negative predictor, ($b = -29$, $p < .05$). Interpersonal connections/experiences emerged as the strongest positive predictor, ($b = .28$, $p < .05$), and opinion leaders again were marginally significant as another positive predictor ($\beta = .29$, $p = .073$).

<Table 3> Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses of Sourcing Practices Influencing Citizen Journalists’ Roles

|                              | Disseminator | Interpreter | Adversary | Mobilizer | Civic |
|------------------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| **Demographics**             |              |             |           |           |       |
| Age                          | -.07         | -.21#       | .30       | -.11      | -.05  |
| Gender                       | -.02         | .30*        | .17       | -.05      | -.14  |
| Education                    | .12          | .17         | .01       | -.15      | -.08  |
| Household income             | .24*         | -.03        | -.03      | .01       | -.07  |
| Incremental $R^2$            | .06          | .17*        | .05       | .05       | .06   |
| **Sources**                  |              |             |           |           |       |
| Opinion leaders              | .15          | -.24        | .30#      | .05       | .29#  |
| Officials                    | -.17         | .08         | -.32*     | -.23      | -.08  |
| Mainstream/online news       | -.38**       | .16         | .23#      | -.02      | -.29* |
| Interpersonal connections/experiences | .37**       | .06         | .06       | .16       | .28*  |
| PR/News wire services        | .31*         | .25#        | -.24#     | .12       | .06   |
| Incremental $R^2$            | .27**        | .11         | .16#      | .07       | .17*  |
| **Total $R^2$**              | .33          | .29         | .21       | .12       | .23   |
| **Adjusted $R^2$**           | .22          | .17         | .09       | -.02      | .11   |

Note: 1. Cell entries are standardized regression coefficients.  
2. # $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$
VII. Discussion

This study examined U.S.-based community citizen journalists and their perceptions regarding their growing roles as media sources. We also examined various types of story sources/generation routines that citizen journalists may rely and depend upon when covering stories. Finally, we identified predictive relations between story sources and role conceptions.

Findings reveal citizen journalists’ perceptions of their journalistic roles only partially modeled patterns identified by Weaver and his colleagues (2007) in their most recent survey on American professional journalists. While the interpretive function remains the strongest among the professional journalistic community, citizen journalists were more inclined to ascribe prominence to the populist mobilizer role. The adversary role was ranked next in importance by citizen journalists in this sample although it remains a minority attitude among contemporary professional journalists. However, citizen journalists rate the disseminator role similarly in that it was found to be least prominent among the roles. The repeated measures ANOVA also suggest citizen journalists view these journalistic functions distinctively.

We also asked questions about various story sourcing practices and idea generation routines to assess which types of sources were most sought out by citizen journalists. In an attempt to more accurately examine source type, we were able to group items that clustered together. One interesting observation is that online sites,
such as blogs and online-only publications, were viewed as mainstream sources. This may be due to the fact that many now use the Internet as their primary source of information. Mean scores show citizen journalists rely on mainstream/online news sources most frequently followed by official sources. These sourcing behaviors suggest citizen journalists, too, rely on routine sources of information. However, interpersonal connections and experiences was the next most frequently used category of sources, which is a considerable departure from professional journalists’ practices. The repeated measures ANOVA also suggest citizen journalists make specific distinctions in their use of story sources.

The regressions further helped identify source predictors for certain journalistic functions. While the populist mobilizer role was rated most prominently, no predictors emerged in that model. The disseminator role yielded the strongest model. Most notable was the positive predictor found in the interpersonal connections/experiences source and the negative predictor found in the mainstream/online news source for this particular role. It appears citizen journalists wish to propagate their personal stories and establish personal connectivity when functioning as a disseminator. However, they tend to shy away from mainstream news sources when participating in this role that aims for a wide audience and distribution of entertaining/relaxing stories.

Sourcing practices also yielded a strong model for the civic role. Here, too, the interpersonal connections/experiences source yielded the strongest positive predictor whereas the mainstream/online news source yielded that strongest negative predictor. This makes
intuitive sense in that the civic journalism role aims to engage the public to help facilitate a journalism of conversation. Likewise, mainstream/online news sources lack the interpersonal connectivity necessary to establish personal engagement.

For the adversary role, officials surfaced as a significant negative predictor. This, too, makes logical sense in that the adversary role aims to perform the watchdog function specifically over public officials and businesses. Additionally, all other sources, with the exception of the interpersonal connections/experiences source, were marginally significant. This exemplifies the diversity of sourcing practices that citizen journalists perform as they participate in storytelling activities.

These findings suggest sourcing practice is an important factor in helping citizen journalists cultivate distinct perceptions regarding their new-found media functions and professionalism as storytellers. While the mean scores for sources initially suggested citizen journalists perform similar sourcing behaviors as their professional counterparts, the regression analyses reveal a different picture, showing citizen journalists seek diverse story sources—both routine and non-routine. However, routine sources were generally found to be negative predictors of the various role conceptions.

This study finds that the journalistic belief system, or role conceptions, is affected by sourcing practices and idea generation routines for citizen contributors. As sources are critical in telling stories and also building credibility, future research should attempt to further investigate the relationship between sourcing behavior of
citizen journalists and their various other attitudes and activities. Because news and journalistic practices are rapidly changing, what is considered routine vs. non-routine is also evolving. Similar to the transforming perceptions on journalistic role conceptions, views regarding source appear to be expanding and becoming more inclusive. A wider array of sources is consulted and more personal perspectives integrated as citizen journalists contribute their stories. While traditional journalistic practices rarely included personal, subjective views, the new storytellers appear to be pushing the boundaries regarding what is acceptable and appropriate in the current climate of journalism. While the journalistic role conceptions appear to be in tact, citizen journalists’ assessment regarding these roles is unique from those of professional journalists. Specifically, it appears citizen journalists believe they can contribute something different but meaningful to journalism (e.g., tell personal stories to a wide audience—disseminator role).

While this paper connects an important gap in the literature regarding sourcing practices and role conceptions of citizen journalists, it is not without its shortcomings. First, the reliability scores for certain roles and source type are low (i.e., disseminator role). Further, the sample size, while making every attempt to conduct a comprehensive, nation-wide survey, is small. Future studies should aim to create a robust system of identifying citizen journalists although this is a constantly, challenging task. Because citizen journalists do not perform journalism on a regular basis on a salaried system, the drop off rate is naturally high. As the descriptive information of this sample shows, very few citizen
journalists were considered to be paid employees. Thus, a more comprehensive, creative and rigorous attempt should be made to identify active citizen journalists in our communities.
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