

***Reporter.co.za* defunct: A critical examination of institutionalised citizen journalism through the case study of South Africa's *reporter.co.za*.**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Journalism.

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**Abstract:**

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the Internet have allowed for the evolution of information collection, newsgathering and dissemination. These technological advancements provide an innovative platform and an ideal medium for a new form of journalism, namely citizen journalism. This research report focuses on *reporter.co.za*: an institutionalised form of citizen journalism that existed from early 2006 until late 2008. The research was conducted by means of qualitative research and explores the ideological conceptualisations of citizen journalism, namely its independent nature, as well as the contradictions around institutionalised forms of citizen journalism. The findings illustrate that *reporter.co.za* cannot truly be classified as citizen journalism as the concept was originally conceptualised, and that its institutionalised nature may have been one of the possible reasons for its closure.



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## **Acknowledgements**

Dedicated to my beloved grandmother Maria Ciaciura. Kocham Ciebie.

“Here is my secret. It is very simple: one sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.” – *Le Petit Prince* (1943) by Antoine de Saint Exupéry.

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## Table of Contents

Title page .....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Plagiarism declaration.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of contents .....	v
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Research problem.....	4
1.2 Research aims .....	4
1.3 Rationale .....	5
1.4 Background to the study .....	7
1.5 Conclusion .....	13
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	14
2.2 Citizen journalism .....	14
2.2.1 Citizen journalism defined .....	16
2.2.2 Critique of citizen journalism .....	26
2.2.3 Non-institutionalised versus institutionalised forms of citizen journalism .....	28
2.2.4 <i>Reporter.co.za</i> as citizen journalism .....	29
2.3 Public sphere .....	33
2.4 Conclusion .....	36
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology .....</b>	<b>38</b>
3.1 Qualitative research methods .....	38
3.2 Qualitative research methods criticism .....	40
3.3 Case study methodology .....	41
3.4 Case study methodology criticism.....	45
3.5 The interview method.....	46
3.6 Interview method criticism.....	50

3.7 Document analysis.....	51
3.8 Document analysis criticism.....	53
3.9 Conclusion .....	55
<b>Chapter 4: Discussion and Findings.....</b>	<b>56</b>
4.1 Introduction .....	56
4.2 <i>Reporter.co.za</i> staff interviews analysis.....	56
4.3 Contributors' interviews and questionnaires analysis .....	63
4.4 Document analysis .....	68
4.5 Findings.....	72
<b>Chapter 5: Conclusion .....</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Chapter 6: Appendices .....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Chapter 7: Reference List .....</b>	<b>106</b>

## Chapter 1: Introduction

As digital and electronic technologies advance, become more accessible and portable, and Internet usage becomes more pervasive and affordable, so new means of research, data collection and information dissemination emerge. If utilised appropriately these technological advancements may offer various opportunities for journalism. For decades, talk radio and letters to the editor have been outlets for citizen participation in journalism and social commentary through the provision of professional media channels. The digital age has eliminated the necessity for a professional media platform for citizens to break news stories and participate in the media debate. It has also increased the autonomy of citizens and has contributed to a new form of journalism, referred to as citizen journalism. This research report distinguishes between two main types of citizen journalism: non-institutional and institutional.

The digital age has led to an information revolution that has resulted in mass self-communication (Castells, 2000). The growth of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and their widespread use in online news production goes hand-in-hand with the increasing trend of citizen journalism, according to Nah and Chung (2009: 74). Citizen journalism can provide an eyewitness account of newsworthy events or occurrences, give voice to minorities and those rendered voiceless, and focus on news stories that may have been overlooked by the mainstream media. It can encourage active citizenship, has the ability to deepen democracy and often focuses on hyper-local<sup>1</sup> and community stories.

*Reporter.co.za* was an institutionalised form of online citizen journalism, which was established by Johnnic Communications (Johncom) in January 2006. As the first of its kind in South Africa, *reporter.co.za* was heralded as a platform that would transform the South African media landscape, encourage participatory journalism and allow democracy to flourish further. At the time

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<sup>1</sup> Hyper-local stories are specific to certain geographic areas and may be tailored to meet the interests of niche audiences, such as at local community level. Traditional commercial media do not find hyper-local stories as profitable, instead they tend to focus on stories of national interest to their greater audiences or readership (Lewis et al., 2010: 176).

media institutions worldwide were establishing online platforms for user-generated content (Lewis et al., 2010: 166).

Media institutions establish citizen journalism platforms or websites that allow readers to contribute breaking news stories and photographs that are newsworthy and in the public's best interest. This allows news consumers to have a say in what they consider to be meaningful news (Nah and Chung, 2009: 74), and it gives media institutions the opportunity to break news stories of which their competitors are unaware. Institutionalised forms of citizen journalism predominantly receive greater exposure than non-institutionalised citizen journalism platforms, due to the status of the media institutions with which they are affiliated, which have a loyal audience or readership, a variety of media brands and a widespread distribution network. Hauben (2007: 5) reiterates that it is not so much the subject matter or nature of the news that governs how much attention it will receive, but rather the power and authority of the media institution that carries the story.

By definition citizen journalists are not qualified or trained professionally as journalists, they act independently and of their own accord, and are not governed by traditional newsroom principles. "The onward march of technology is turning everyone into citizen reporters. Anyone with a cellphone camera is a potential citizen photographer and anyone with a blog or their own website is a potential citizen reporter or columnist," (Buckland, 2006). Citizen journalists use digital and mobile technology, alongside online media tools and social media platforms, to collect data and information, to crowd-source<sup>2</sup> information and search for sources, and to disseminate stories. These processes are comparable to the conventional newsgathering and production processes that professional journalists utilise. According to Berger (2011: 711): "The key enabler of citizen journalism is that these new platforms (especially blogging opportunities or cellphone cameras) are readily available to individuals." Weblogs, often referred to as blogs, have democratising

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<sup>2</sup> "Crowd-sourcing uses the capacity of online publics (generally amateur users) to perform tasks traditionally done by professionals (like journalists, astronomers, researchers)" (Mathurine, 2011: 111).



potential by allowing media consumers to become media producers (Papacharissi, 2009: 2).

*Reporter.co.za* had implied credibility and rapport with its readers because it was managed by a professional editorial and production team, under the supervision of Juliette Saunders. The citizen journalism platform had a guaranteed online readership, even at inception, due to its affiliation with Johncom. While *reporter.co.za* was heralded as a groundbreaking opportunity for South Africa that would encourage the freedom of expression in the young democracy, the initiative was dissolved in late 2008.

This research report utilises an intrinsic case study methodology and qualitative research – in the form of semi-structured interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and document analysis – to explore the nature of *reporter.co.za* as an institutionalised form of citizen journalism. It examines the distinction between institutionalised and non-institutionalised citizen journalism. It also considers how Johncom understood citizen journalism, how citizen journalism in its institutionalised form was appropriated by the media institution, as well as the potential that it offers media institutions and citizenry.

The case study presents a real-life example from which other media institutions that want to establish similar institutionalised citizen journalism platforms may learn about the successes and failures of *reporter.co.za*. It may also influence other media institutions' market research in terms of *reporter.co.za*'s theoretical conceptualisation, business model, audiences, accessibility, and the manner in which the project was established and run on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, the findings of this case study may inform decision making, policy makers and practice within other media institutions.

The case study considers how, through its institutionalisation, *reporter.co.za* subverted the ideological conceptualisation of citizen journalism as being independent from news principles that govern media institutions. This research report explores whether institutionalisation could have been a possible cause for *reporter.co.za*'s demise.

## 1.1 Research problem

This research report critically examines *reporter.co.za* – the first online South African institutionalised citizen journalism platform – that was modelled on the international citizen journalism platform *Ohmynews.com*<sup>3</sup>, which was established in February 2000. It does so in light of the South African media landscape prior to *reporter.co.za*'s establishment in early 2006. In this manner the research report aims to determine the ideological reasons as to why *reporter.co.za* closed in late 2008, despite the need for and potential of citizen journalism in South Africa. This research report attempts to answer the following questions:

- a) How did Johncom interpret the concept of citizen journalism in their conceptualisation of *reporter.co.za*?
- b) How did *reporter.co.za*, as an institutionalised citizen journalism platform, contradict the ideological notions of independent, non-institutionalised citizen journalism?
- c) Did the institutionalisation of *reporter.co.za* contribute to its demise?
- d) What are the shortcomings of institutionalised citizen journalism in the South African context, as seen through the case study of *reporter.co.za*?

## 1.2 Research aims

Johncom's establishment of an institutionalised citizen journalism platform in South Africa is explored through this research report. It does so through a qualitative research approach, by means of a case study of *reporter.co.za*. This study examines: the nature of citizen journalism and the distinction between institutionalised citizen journalism platforms and non-institutionalised citizen journalism, as it was originally hypothesised. It also considers how

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<sup>3</sup> Ohmynews: <http://english.ohmynews.com/index.asp>

Johncom understood citizen journalism; how citizen journalism was appropriated by Johncom; as well as the editorial process involved in *reporter.co.za*.

The case study also examines the research that was conducted by Johncom prior to *reporter.co.za*'s establishment, as well as the technological trends in South Africa at the time. It allows for an investigation into the nature of the South African online media landscape at the time of *reporter.co.za*'s launch.

A discussion around why the project was not sustainable will ensue. This research highlights the successes and shortcomings of the South African citizen journalism landscape. It also allows other media institutions in South Africa that are looking to establish a citizen journalism platform, to learn from the shortcomings of this endeavour.

It is not the aim of this research report to study the content of *reporter.co.za*, furthermore the entire content database is unavailable as the website was closed in late 2008 and is therefore inaccessible, even to those who previously worked on the project.

### **1.3 Rationale**

This study is important to the nascent online journalism landscape in South Africa for a number of reasons. "There is no doubt that key concepts such as 'new media', 'citizen journalism', 'community media', and hence 'alternative media' have ongoing and increased relevance to those living in South Africa. Yet, little academic literature exists about how they are understood and applied in the country, or the region, or the continent," (Hyde-Clark, 2010: 1). The majority of academic work on citizen journalism is written from a Western perspective – namely American and British, and even South Korean – which is seldom applicable or relative to the South African context. Little has been written within academia about institutionalised and non-institutionalised citizen journalism platforms in South Africa. This research report aims to provide valuable insight for future academics, researchers and media institutions.

There is no documented or academic research – as far as the researcher found – that focuses solely on *reporter.co.za* and the reasons for its failure. Therefore, this study provides a novel insight into South African citizen journalism. It will contribute to the existing literature on the subject and might encourage a new avenue of study on *reporter.co.za* or South African citizen journalism platforms in the future.

Firstly, the most important purpose of this research report is that it provides insight into the workings and functions of institutionalised citizen journalism within a South African context. This is possible by using *reporter.co.za* as a South African archetype, by means of a case study approach. This research report suggests that the institutionalisation of *reporter.co.za* was a possible reason for its closure.

The lessons to be learned from this institutionalised citizen journalism platform need to be captured now before more of the online archive, which is randomly documented on Google's Wayback Machine<sup>4</sup>, disappears. These lessons should be documented before too much time passes, as this will make it difficult for those who were involved with the venture to accurately recall the details.

Secondly, the findings may prove very useful for South African and international media institutions. This case study may influence the market research of South African media institutions that want to establish such a venture – in terms of *reporter.co.za*'s theoretical conceptualisation, business model, audiences, accessibility, as well as the manner in which the project was established and run on a day-to-day basis.

Lastly, this research report is worthwhile in terms of Johncom's experiences of *reporter.co.za*. The media institution used the lessons learned from *reporter.co.za* to reposition its participatory journalism platform. *iLive.com*, currently under the guidance of Reuben Goldberg and his editorial team, was

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<sup>4</sup> The Google Wayback Machine: [http://wayback.archive.org/web/\\*/google.com](http://wayback.archive.org/web/*/google.com)

launched in 2010 as a revised model of *reporter.co.za*, according to Saunders (2013). This study may provide research and findings that encourage other media institutions to do the same.

#### 1.4 Background to the study

At the time of *reporter.co.za*'s launch, South Africa had been a democracy for more than a decade and was the leading economy in Africa, according to the World Bank (2006). The state of a country's media institutions can be analysed through Reporters Without Borders'<sup>5</sup> (RWB) analysis. This non-profit organisation monitors the freedoms and restrictions of the global press, acts against laws that restrict the freedom of information, trains media personnel, and assists them in various ways. The Press Freedom Index<sup>6</sup>, compiled by RWB, indicates the state of media in each of the registered countries, by ranking them numerically. The higher a country is ranked, the more stable and autonomous the state of its media. In 2006 South Africa was ranked 44th of 168 countries. Numerous journalists and academics hailed *reporter.co.za* as a breakthrough for citizen journalism in South Africa, as the country was still transitioning into becoming a fully-fledged democracy. *Reporter.co.za* was described as an enabler of democracy that would promote grassroots and participatory journalism across the country.

*Reporter.co.za* was based on American and Scandinavian models of citizen journalism, but specifically on the Korean user-generated content website *Ohmynews.com.com*, according to Chris Deeks (C. Deeks [Johncom publisher] personal comms., 26 June 2013). The South Korean news service was widely known by its motto: "Every citizen is a reporter." Despite not being affiliated with an online newspaper or media institution, as in the case of *reporter.co.za*, after three years *Ohmynews.com* became the country's most influential online news website with about two million daily readers. Eighty per cent of *Ohmynews.com*'s content was produced by its 40,000-odd citizen journalist contributors. These submissions were edited by a professional

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<sup>5</sup> Reporters Without Borders: [www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org)

<sup>6</sup> The Press Freedom Index: <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2006.35.html>

editorial team, comprising of between 60-80 individuals, who also produced the remainder of the content (Rebelo, 2007: 27). In 2007, authors of lead stories published on *Ohmynews.com* were paid \$20 and other stories received a payment of \$10. Furthermore, contributors had to agree to the terms and conditions stating that they were personally and legally held responsible for the veracity of their contributions. *Ohmynews.com*'s success led to the establishment of a Japanese and international version of the citizen journalism platform (ibid).

Johncom – which was renamed Times Media Group (TMG) in 2012 – was at the time and remains to this day a leading South African media and entertainment company. It is one of the four largest publishing houses in the country. The media group owns nine newspapers, five community newspapers, 12 magazines, digital services and an entertainment company, which produces and distributes local and international music, films and books. Johncom Group Digital Media, the group's new media wing, maintained Johncom's digital websites, which included *reporter.co.za* at the time. The media institution had a secure financial standing, adequate infrastructure, a large, loyal and widespread national readership across its publications and a tried-and-tested distribution model. It could, therefore, utilise discretionary funds for new and experimental ventures, such as *reporter.co.za* (Deeks, 2013), without too much fear of failure or financial repercussions. According to Setumo Stone, who was a regular contributor to the citizen journalism platform: "For *reporter.co.za*, it operated in an institution that had a market already, it was not something that was started from scratch, the people who were running it were probably experts, so there was expertise immediately available to make you [the contributor] look good," (S. Stone [*reporter.co.za* contributor], personal comms., 3 December 2013).

In the decade between 1996 and 2006, Johncom spent more than R1 billion on its online strategy and to boost its e-commerce potential (Goko, 2006). *Reporter.co.za* was one of these initiatives, however, according to Deeks, it was a minor one. At the launch, Saunders stated that the venture would be an

investment before it began to deliver an audience, which would draw advertisers and sustain a business model.

In his book, *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving journalism in the Information Age* (2004), media commentator Philip Meyer echoed a reverberating opinion within the media industry – that print media was dying. Meyer predicted that the last printed newspaper in the developed world would be published in April 2040. South Africa’s declining newspaper circulation and readership figures at the time, reflected a global trend (Goko, 2006).

The decrease in Johncom’s daily and weekly newspaper circulations from January 2005 to June 2006, and over the last 15 years, was evident from the figures provided by the South African Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC)<sup>7</sup>. “[...] sales figures declined by three per cent for daily titles and 0.7 per cent for weeklies when compared with the same period last year,” (Goko, 2006: 3). Internet traffic, according to the South African Online Publishers’ Association (OPA), showed a 48 per cent increase in the number of visitors to its member websites in the second quarter of 2006, when compared to the same period the previous year. Online advertising revenue, during the same period, grew by 32 per cent to R183 million (Goko, 2006: 4). These figures were quite low in comparison to developed countries, as online advertising represented less than one per cent of South African advertising spend. However, these trends mirrored the international phenomenon and were one of the reasons why Johncom began to invest in online platforms.

Declining newspaper circulation and growing Internet accessibility around the world suggested that media institutions should invest in ‘going digital’. Johncom’s strategy to establish online platforms and digital editions of its publications was in line with international media trends, whereby the late 1990s saw the emergence of online newspapers. Numerous free and easy-to-use web-based tools emerged in 1999, which would aid the migration online (Nguyen, 2006: 3). Initially, as journalists were still learning to understand the

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 1 in Appendices.

capabilities and characteristics of this new medium for reportage, online newspapers were characterised by ‘shovelware’ (Boczkowski, 2004), which involved the recycling of traditional print content for online editions of newspapers, known as ‘e-papers’. These online newspapers, however, are only valuable when they contain unique information that is meant specifically for the Internet and is not available in the traditional print copy (Faure, 2001: 372). With time and experience, online newspapers began to generate original content instead of repurposing<sup>8</sup> content for the Internet. They began ‘windowing’ content – creating content that could be published through a variety of communication channels (Bardoel & Deuze, 2001: 4-5).

Print media institutions increasingly established online platforms in conjunction with their traditional media publications. One of the aims was to engage their audiences and readers through interactive features, which were not traditionally available offline. In the mid-2000s – with the ubiquity of relatively inexpensive recording devices and technologies, and the growing popularity of feature phones with built-in cameras, video and voice recorders – online newspapers began to establish participatory and user-generated content platforms. In this manner, they hoped to provide breaking news to remain ahead of their competitors, and incorporate hyper-local content into their news coverage. They understood that “no news organisation can be everywhere, all the time,” (Briggs, 2010: 87) and thus chose to co-opt readers’ submissions.

While *reporter.co.za* was launched on 06 January, 2006, the market research, planning, and analysis of the media landscape occurred in the months prior. Deeks (2013) says that in mid-2005 senior members of the management team including Mike Robertson, who was Johncom’s managing director at the time, insisted that Deeks establish a citizen journalism platform. Deeks (2013) believes that the reason for this was that user-generated content was gaining popularity internationally and was the “flavour of the month”.

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<sup>8</sup> Content is repurposed when original content is shortened, edited or readjusted, to place it on numerous online platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs. Content can also be repurposed into various formats, such as infographics, podcasts, and videos (Boyer et al., 2011).



*Reporter.co.za* gained traction in the beginning, in its second month of operation it had 3,845 citizen journalists publishing about 25 news stories per day on topics such as: crime, sport and tips, as well as features (Buckland, 2006). The true test for *reporter.co.za* would not be the number of citizen journalists it attracted, but rather the number of readers (ibid). The researcher deduces that Buckland is suggesting that the higher the readership, the greater the potential for an advertising business model. *Reporter.co.za* had about 6,000 contributors and 4,730 registered subscribers, alongside its online readership, by April 20, 2007<sup>9</sup>.

The institutionalised citizen journalism platform employed seasoned journalists Peter Malherbe, former editor at the *Sunday Times*, the late Manu Padayachee, from *Carte Blanche*, and an editorial team under the guidance of Saunders and management of Deeks. Besides Malherbe and Padayachee, who were employed specifically for the venture, the remainder of the editorial and management team were already employees of the media group. They would work on *reporter.co.za* on a part-time basis, alongside their regular duties and responsibilities at Johncom (Saunders, 2013).

After being inactive for a few months, *reporter.co.za* formally closed at the end of 2008, about three years after it was launched. “It is hard to judge how successful *reporter.co.za* was, as at the time of this writing [November 2008] the site had been inactive since April 2008, saying it was being temporarily closed in order to be ‘transformed to adapt to new technology,’” (Hyde-Clarke, 2010: 45). McAuliffe (2013) elaborates: “We were genuinely going to look at the technology, there were a few back-end issues and because people had to upload it themselves we had to make it more consumer-friendly.” While *reporter.co.za* was inactive there were murmurings that it would be reopened or reinvented in some way, however according to McAuliffe (2013):

They just removed it [but] I had to put pressure onto it to have it removed because people were contacting me all the time, saying,

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<sup>9</sup> According to the subscriber database (2007) provided by Tegan Bedser, the web producer for *reporter.co.za*.

‘What is happening?’ And I was fielding all of these calls and people were still reporting and so I said: ‘It’s not fair to keep the expectation going, you have to make a decision,’ and then it just withered away. There were so many new things happening at the company with *The Times* being the new baby and all the focus went towards that.

While there were various suppositions for its closure, the reason given by senior management was that the venture failed to garner the readership numbers it expected, this in turn did not attract online advertisers, which did not allow for a sustainable business model. Deeks (2013) says that *reporter.co.za* did not have a detailed business model initially. “I think they were hoping to get some advertising on the site, however that didn’t materialise. It wasn’t marketed enough and also social media, community journalism that sort of thing wasn’t recognised at the time, and the importance thereof,” says McAuliffe (2013). Bedser provided the researcher with a *reporter.co.za* advertising rate card<sup>10</sup> that was drawn up as part of its future business model. However, according to Saunders (2013), the rate card was not made public and potential clients were never approached, due to the fact that *reporter.co.za* never managed to attract or sustain a large enough, loyal readership.

After *reporter.co.za* closed, Johncom re-launched its institutionalised citizen journalism platform in the form of *iLive.com* in 2010. The media institution used the failure of *reporter.co.za* as a learning experience for the launch of this new interactive, online platform. *iLive.com* was modelled on how *reporter.co.za* was received and has resulted from an analysis of *reporter.co.za*’s shortcomings. *iLive.com* allows readers to submit comments and opinion pieces in response to articles that have appeared in the media institution’s mainstream publications or online website. Readers may also contribute current affairs articles and photographs. These submissions are not paid for and receive minimal editing, if any, however they do undergo a process of gatekeeping as they are filtered by Reuben Goldberg, editor of

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 2 in Appendices.

*iLive.com* and Times Media Online, or three other journalists who work on the project (R. Goldberg [*iLive.com* editor] personal comms., 28 June 2013).

According to Goldberg, many submissions are not of publishable quality for a number of reasons: they do not comply with the group's code of conduct and ethics or are of poor quality.

Furthermore, shortly after *reporter.co.za* closed, the media institution also launched a new commercial, hyper-local community-centred initiative called My 'Suburb'<sup>11</sup> that focussed on each suburb. "It is sort of an electronic Caxton," namely a community news portal that provided advertising space for local businesses and to which readers could also contribute (McAuliffe, 2013). "I think the whole concept of *reporter.co.za* created the sort of concept behind starting out those different websites," (ibid).

## 1.5 Conclusion

The ubiquity of cheaper and more advanced technologies as well as the growing popularity of the Internet were two of the reasons for the rise of online citizen journalism platforms around the world. South Africa was no exception. The country seemed ripe to cater to a virtual public sphere that would encourage discussion and debate, which would have the potential to further deepen democracy. *Reporter.co.za*, however, did so under the auspices and editorial framework of Johncom, which diluted the potential of citizen journalism as it was originally envisioned and diminished its power as a democratic tool.

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<sup>11</sup> Examples of the My 'Suburb' initiative included: [www.myhoneydew.co.za](http://www.myhoneydew.co.za) and [www.mynorthcliff.co.za](http://www.mynorthcliff.co.za).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Citizen journalism and online publishing tools have captured the interest and imagination of media practitioners and academics, in terms of their democratising potential and the changing online media landscape. Two key bodies of literature and theory are relevant to this research report, these include citizen journalism and the public sphere, and how they relate to one another.

The Internet and new media technologies have given rise to the information society: “a new mode of human existence in which the production, recording, processing, and retrieving of information in organised networks plays a central role,” in journalism and everyday life (Castells, 2000: 25). Communication in the digital age has been compressed over time and space as it can be shared simultaneously with multiple users over vast distances by means of horizontal networks. This two-way communication network has led to a more interactive global society that is characterised by numerous online platforms, which are utilised for discussion and debate. These technological advances have also had beneficial consequences for journalism and the media industry, namely niche media consumption, greater user choice, and more independent relations between journalists and their sources (Lister et al., 2003: 20).

The digitisation of data, information and archives means that there is a greater capability to store, disseminate and retrieve large corpuses of data, stored in digital formats, in a faster and cheaper way (Hamelink, 2000: 11). Such information can be easily and regularly updated as well. These new technologies have resulted in what Lawson-Borders (2003) calls “content convergence,” which allows for greater interactivity on online articles between media consumers as well as between media consumers and media producers. It also allows for closer integration between different forms of media such as text, photographs, videos and sound bites by means of interactive links, which add value and a greater depth of understanding. New

technologies and online tools enable citizens to actively engage in the news-production process, which was traditionally reserved for media producers and owners (Rebillard & Touboul, 2010).

Firstly, a discussion on citizen journalism – its characteristics and the different forms it assumes – is presented, according to key theorists on the subject namely: Deuze (2007), Gillmor (2004) and Rosen (2006) among others. Secondly, a critique of citizen journalism is explored through Howe (2006), Ingram (2008) and Glaser (2008).

Academics who have written about citizen journalism in the South African context and who will be discussed in this research report include: Knight (2008) and Banda (2010). *Reporter.co.za* is also mentioned briefly by Goko (2006) in his MBA thesis, which analyses Johncom's online presence and e-commerce potential. Critiques of *reporter.co.za* are discussed through: Maher (2010), who specialises in new media in South Africa and was involved with *reporter.co.za*; former journalism academic Berger (2011), who has experience with South African citizen journalism platforms, as well as through Buckland (2006, 2013), an entrepreneur and new media practitioner, who wrote on *reporter.co.za* and was interviewed via email by the researcher on the topic. Thirdly, the distinction between institutionalised and non-institutionalised citizen journalism, by means of the *reporter.co.za* case study, is explored.

In terms of the public sphere, the concept and its function is defined by Habermas (1973). Spivak (1988), Fraser (1992) and Warner (2002) suggest a revision of the Habermasian public sphere. These theorists make allowances for the expansion of the public sphere and the creation of new public spheres in the digital age. Lastly, the relationship between the public sphere and citizen journalism is discussed, as is the democratic capacity of user-generated platforms.

## 2.2 Citizen journalism

### 2.2.1 Citizen journalism defined

Citizen journalism is a form of user-generated content (Berger, 2011: 709) that is enabled through ICTs as well as ubiquitous publishing tools available via the Internet. These technologies and publishing tools enable readers and audience members to actively engage in the news production process.

According to Gillmor (2004: 60), these publishing tools also provide citizens “a communications toolkit that allows anyone to become a journalist at little cost and with global reach”. Rosen (2006), one of the founding theorists of citizen journalism defines it as: “when the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another”.

They use technology and publishing tools to engage with other citizens, politicians and journalists across multiple, online platforms. This new form of participatory journalism arose from the desire of “ordinary people who had something to say and show,” (Gillmor, 2004: 58). They offered what the mainstream media “couldn’t or wouldn’t provide” (ibid: 60). User-generated content is more personal in nature as it often provides an eyewitness account of events and “give[s] a voice to people who’ve felt voiceless,” by allowing them to actively participate in a conversation (ibid: 60-63). Papacharissi (2009: 9) summarises the potential of online publishing tools:

Thus, in addition to enabling access to information, online media make it possible for privately motivated individuals and groups to challenge the public agenda (e.g., Grossman, 1995; Rash, 1997), connect the government to citizens (Arterton, 1987), and allow for two-way communication, through interactive features (e.g., Abramson, Arterton, and Orren, 1988).

Just as citizens use these technologies and tools for their personal benefit because they are cost effective, convenient and fit in with the trend of social

networking (Malila, 2011: 6), so do media institutions, as in the case of Johncom with *reporter.co.za*. Many media institutions began to redeploy resources from print to online, which altered news production and opened the figurative 'gates' to user-generated content (Lewis et al., 2010: 163-4). This fusion between 'old' traditional media and 'new' online media – at production and consumption level – blurs the boundaries between citizen and professional journalism (Mythen, 2009: 48). Citizen journalism may act as “bridge media” that links traditional journalism with new media (ibid: 49).

Online citizen journalism, unlike the classical mode of mass communication, according to Lasswell (1948), is not unidirectional or linear in nature. Mass communication, according to McQuail (1987: 32), was “defined by a sense of impersonality due to the role of the public communicator requiring a high degree of neutrality and detachment”. On the other hand, online media platforms engage in a horizontal network that is egalitarian in nature (Breton, 2004), as opposed to the previously utilised vertical network. In this manner, online media platforms allow for “many-to-many rather than one-to-many communication” (Jenkins and Thorburn, 2004: 2). This is evident in the case of *reporter.co.za*, whereby about 6,000 citizen journalists from across South Africa and South African expatriates were able to communicate with readers worldwide through the platform.

Ross and Cormier (2010: 66) argue that citizen journalists fulfil the same role as professional journalists, as they: “gather, process, research, report, analyse and publish news and information”. Citizen journalism can be defined as “journalism done by persons whose status is not that of hired hands in a media enterprise, but who are outsiders that are nevertheless engaged in the sustained generation of journalism” (Berger, 2011: 714). Banda (2010: 57) insists that citizen journalists should be referred to as “citizen writers” instead, because they have no formal journalism qualification or training, and therefore do not merit the title of journalist. Citizen journalism is based on citizenship, which implies that citizen journalists not only have citizen rights, but citizen responsibilities as well (Berger, 2011: 710). They should aspire to be truthful, objective, independent from deliberate bias and should be accountable to

journalistic ethics (ibid: 714). In the case of *reporter.co.za*, contributing citizen journalists had to adhere to certain restrictions and regulations that were set in place by Johncom. They had to agree to a code of conduct and ethics as well as to Johncom's terms and conditions of publication upon registration to the platform.

Institutionalised forms of citizen journalism, such as *reporter.co.za*, have gatekeepers, namely media institution owners, shareholders and editors, who determine what is classified as news. Their role is to "highlight particular stories, promote trends, sort the journalistic wheat from the chaff, and, some would argue, restrict the flow of information" (Harper, 2004: 274).

Gatekeepers unconsciously hold inherent biases, while they fulfil the economic expectations of commercial media institutions. Cyberspace and citizen journalism have resulted in the decentralisation of communication. Independent, non-institutionalised citizen journalism is autonomous of state and economic interests (Dahlberg, 2007). It places power in the hands of the user by allowing them to challenge the news agenda of traditional and mainstream media publications and their function as gatekeepers (Harper, 2004: 272).

Independent, non-institutionalised citizen journalists position themselves at the centre of the practice. They often make use of a variety of social networks and online platforms to disseminate the information they have gathered and generated to as large an audience as possible. Independent citizen journalists do not answer to an authority and are not guided by editorial restrictions, they are self-regulated. They do, however, remain answerable to their readers and audiences. Furthermore, they are not constrained, as professional journalists would be, by conventional journalistic processes, such as editorial restrictions including: deadlines, allocated editorial space, and bowing to advertisers. Independent citizen journalists do not experience the pressures of subject matter, editorial angle, editorial length or the number of times they can post content, whereas this may be the case for institutionalised forms of citizen journalism. Often those citizen journalists, who are not affiliated with media institutions, are enabled to act in the public's interest, without being silenced



by gatekeepers or due to a media institution's economic restrictions, suggests Harper (2004). They have the freedom to run a breaking news story or investigative article of any nature, without worrying about exposing or offending current advertisers or frightening away potential advertisers. Independent citizen journalists are also less restricted or routinised (Mythen, 2009: 49) as "no editor comes between the author and the reader," (Lasica, 2003: 1).

Due to the fact that citizen journalism's conceptualisation is to function outside of the editorial and economic restrictions of mainstream media, it possesses the capacity to "ameliorat[e] the deficiencies in the media" (Berger, 2011: 708-9). It may shape and re-mould mainstream news coverage by covering those grey areas that mainstream media may ignore or omit (Allan, 2007: 14). This is how citizen journalism can provide an alternative reading of current affairs that steers away from the meta-narratives and deliberate news agendas of mainstream media, suggests Daniels (2011).

Citizen journalism needs to be an example of "consciousness of citizenship" on a voluntary basis, by people who are not journalists by profession and function outside of the mass media, even if those media institutions disseminate it (Berger, 2011: 713-714). Citizen journalists often reflect on the social, political, economic and environmental circumstances of their country or area of residence from their personal perspective. They often act as an "awareness systems" (Hermida, 2010: 300).

Ross and Cormier (2010: 26-66) identify three types of citizen journalists, namely accidental journalists, advocacy journalists and citizen journalists. Firstly, accidental journalists are those individuals who, unexpectedly, find themselves in the middle of a newsworthy event. They take photographs and record videos, which they upload, usually with commentary and interpretation, to social networking websites, such as Facebook, Twitter or news websites with citizen journalism portals (ibid: 58). New media technologies have created an expectation for real-time reporting as it happens, regardless of geographic constraints (Mathurine, 2011). Journalism is no longer the

exclusive domain of the professional; ordinary citizens at the right place, at the right time can “temporarily adopt the role of a journalist” (Allan, 2007: 18-9). This has resulted in the co-option of citizen journalism by mainstream media institutions (Mythen, 2009: 52), as in the case of *reporter.co.za*. It has also allowed for collaboration between professional journalists and citizen journalists (Berger, 2011: 714). An example of this was an eyewitness account of a helicopter crash in Cape Town that was submitted to *reporter.co.za* by Lauren Maker Kotoglu. The story was also published in the *Daily Dispatch*, a Johncom publication, on 18 January 2006<sup>12</sup>. In this case, Maker Kotoglu was paid a freelance rate and received an additional stipend from *reporter.co.za*.

The second type of citizen journalism is advocacy journalism. This genre of citizen journalism adopts a particular viewpoint to advocate on behalf of a social, political, economic, governmental or religious purpose. This type of citizen journalism is intentional and has a transparent bias (Ross and Cormier, 2010: 60). The *Weekend Post*, part of the Johncom stable, published an article written by Chris Nielsen, a real estate agent, on the changing real estate industry. The article was published on 01 April 2006 and was originally written for *reporter.co.za*<sup>13</sup>. Another example is that of an article originally submitted to *reporter.co.za* on the ‘Metro department’s advice on what to do in case of fire’. It was published in *The Herald* on 14 January 2008<sup>14</sup>. In all three cases, the authors had deliberate and intentional objectives for submitting the stories.

Lastly and most importantly for the purposes of this research report, citizen journalism occurs when ordinary citizens take initiative to report on newsworthy events or express their personal views about happenings within their immediate community that influence their lives. “It is news of the people, by the people and for the people,” (ibid: 66).

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<sup>12</sup> According to documentation provided by Michelle Leon, head archivist at Johncom/TMG.

<sup>13</sup> According to documentation provided by Michelle Leon, head archivist at Johncom/TMG.

<sup>14</sup> According to documentation provided by Michelle Leon, head archivist at Johncom/TMG.

This research report focuses on accidental journalists and citizen journalists, as defined by Ross and Cormier (2010), due to the fact they are the two types of citizen journalism that were most common on *reporter.co.za*. It is inevitable that there were cases of advocacy journalism on the citizen platform as well. However, Saunders (2013) says that these were kept to a minimum, *reporter.co.za* did not pay for submissions from events, as the venture was not meant for public relations purposes.

Citizen journalism remains contentious, especially when it comes to its definition and the manner and form in which it manifests or is adopted by audiences, readers and media institutions. Media practitioners and academics often struggle to find a consensus when it comes to how citizen journalism should be defined and what does and does not constitute citizen journalism. There are numerous terms that refer to readers' contributions to the media landscape, these vary from user-generated content to participatory journalism, from citizen journalism and open-source reporting to wiki-style journalism. This confusion and lack of definitive agreement is partially one of the reasons why this research report is so relevant to the South African online media landscape.

Outing discusses 11 models of user-generated content to distinguish between institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms of citizen journalism (Outing, 2011). These models vary from readers' interactions by means of the comments sections on websites, institutionalised forms of citizen journalism, such as co-opted readers' blogs, photoblogs and videoblogs that accompany media websites, as well as solicited eyewitness accounts, to independent and non-institutionalised forms of citizen journalism.

For the purposes of this study, citizen journalism does not designate non-journalistic, but interactive outputs, such as readers' comments on news websites, blogs or forums. While there are no self-proclaimed South African citizen journalists that the researcher is aware of, there are numerous online activists and bloggers, who write about politics, business, science and

technology as well as environmental issues<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, bloggers<sup>16</sup> and vloggers<sup>17</sup> are not considered to be citizen journalists (Ross and Cormier, 2010: 57).

This research report acknowledges that the only legitimate form of independent and non-institutionalised citizen journalism is Outing's model 7: the unedited, stand-alone citizen journalism site. This is a news-oriented, stand-alone citizen journalism website that is separate from the core news brand and comprises of citizen contributions. These can include contributions of local or national importance that range from observations of a council meeting to an opinion piece by a legislator. The website is not co-opted by a news organisation, but is completely independent of the influence of any media institution (Outing, 2011). Furthermore, while Outing does not discuss the business model, it is the researcher's perception that this form of citizen journalism, so as to be completely independent, should not rely on advertising in any form as this may compromise the reportage.

Outing suggests a variation of model 7 discussed above, where the citizen journalism portal is linked in some way to a media institution. Outing suggests that the content is uploaded directly by users, with spelling and grammatical errors, and that it is not fact-checked by an editorial team. However, this may result in legal issues for the media institution. He suggests that a site editor could ensure that inappropriate content – which incites hate speech, prejudice or violence and defies the terms of service – is deleted as soon as it is published. But this form of monitoring is time-consuming and impractical. Instead, he suggests a feature that allows readers to report misconduct, or for the site to be coded so that when a predetermined number of readers click on the 'report misconduct' button, the post in question is automatically deleted

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<sup>15</sup> The South African Blog Awards: <http://www.sablogawards.com/Home.aspx>

<sup>16</sup> A blogger is an individual who posts information or multimedia content on an Internet platform, usually provided by a free blogging platform, such as Wordpress.com or blogspot.com.

<sup>17</sup> A vlogger is an individual who posts videos online, usually through an online video channel such as YouTube or Vimeo. These videos may also be embedded within the vlogger's blog. They may also have their own video channel hosted by YouTube or Vimeo to which viewers may subscribe to be informed about new posts.

(Outing, 2011). However, readers might report misconduct, even in the case of no misconduct, purely because they do not like the content or angle of an article. In the view of the researcher this form of user-generated content cannot be classified as independent citizen journalism due to the fact that it is censored.

*Reporter.co.za* represents a merger between Outing's model 6 (the stand-alone, edited citizen journalism site) and model 9 (the hybrid model of professional and citizen journalism). Firstly, in terms of model 6, the website's editorial and production teams select and edit the submissions to maintain editorial integrity, as the content is affiliated with the publisher and media institution. The editorial team guides its contributors about what it considers to be a quality and newsworthy submission. The editorial team also performs a line-editing role to ensure that content is stylistically and grammatically correct and not libellous in any manner. Such a platform can cover issues that are not big enough to be covered by local media institutions or are deliberately avoided (Outing, 2011).

The other imperative with such sites [the stand-alone, edited citizen journalism site] is to create a homepage and section pages that highlight the best of citizen coverage. Since much of user-submitted content can be deadly dull to most of the audience, a page that simply lists everything people submitted by date – no matter how bad – can be about as exciting as reading a press-release wire. But if site editors are doing their job well in terms of recruiting and educating citizen journalists, there should be enough compelling content within the submissions pool to populate a homepage that will engage site visitors (ibid).

Secondly, model 9 involves submissions that are edited by professional reporters, who may also create content for the website, however the focus is on citizen's content. The *Ohmynews.com* editorial team did contribute a small percentage of content to the website, however this was not the case with *reporter.co.za*. Not all contributions are published online in model 9 and in

some cases contributors may be paid nominal fees, as was the case with *reporter.co.za*. This model has proven to be profitable in the past, as some pro-am (professional-amateur) citizen journalism websites support advertising (Outing, 2011). *Reporter.co.za* never reached the stage of supporting advertising, although there was consideration to do so.

Knight agrees that *reporter.co.za* was a hybrid citizen journalism model (Hyde-Clarke, 2010: 44):

The approach from [Johncom] seems to be something of a hybrid between the user-generated content model used by the BBC, a trainee or cadet programme (it is implied fairly strongly that contributing to *reporter.co.za* is one way into professional media, and it seems that a fair number of contributors were student journalists), and a true citizen or community media site.

Regular *reporter.co.za* contributor Stone (2013) also agrees: "It's a bit in the middle in that the requirements to contribute are not as stringent as in mainstream publications. Anybody can contribute, so in that sense it's citizen journalism, but in the sense that it was an organised newsdesks with editors, subs and was more formal and institutionalised. So, it's in the middle."

Buckland (2013) agrees that a hybrid citizen journalism model is most effective: "I think operations that use a combination of professionally-generated content (PFC) and their professionalised infrastructure with user generated content (UGC) work the best," (M. Buckland, email comms., 12 November 2013). He also suggests that in a hybrid citizen journalism model only those contributors who are invited by the media institution should be allowed to write opinion pieces.

Citizen journalism has the potential to strengthen the freedom of information and expression, allow for a plurality of voices, present an alternative perspective to that of mainstream media, and bypass media censorship. Citizen journalism allows minority groups and the marginalised to be heard, in their own words, whereby the news agenda is not set by mainstream media.

*Reporter.co.za* hoped to document stories of corruption, crime and natural disasters and breaking news that could be featured in Johncom's mainstream media publications.

Despite the immense potential that citizen journalism offers media institutions and citizenry, it also has limitations. Inevitably, due to its institutionalised nature, Johncom set the agenda through the selection of submissions that were deemed suitable to be published on the website. Due to the fact that citizen journalists are not educated and trained professionally as journalists, they may experience what Howe (2006) calls "limitations of the crowd": the content they produce seldom compares, in terms of quality, to the material produced by professionals. While there is an expectation that citizen journalists act for the greater good of the collective rather than in self-interest, this may not always be the case (Tilley & Cokley, 2008: 111).

Citizen journalists might not act according to journalistic ethics, which may call into question the authenticity or objectivity of content produced. They may present one side of an unfolding story due to subjectivity or the inability to interview the opposing side due to a lack of media accreditation or access. Professional journalists and media institutions – due to journalistic standards, gatekeeping and editing practises as set out by the South African Press Code<sup>18</sup> – are expected to act ethically and present balanced views of both sides of a story. However, these ethical journalistic standards are not always maintained, even by professional media institutions and their employees.

Both institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms of online citizen journalism seldom attract as large or devoted an audience as conventional, mainstream media. This is due to the fact that audiences, with limited time at their disposal, often prefer to access professional content, which they may hold in higher regard due to the belief that these media sources are more reliable because they are professional in nature and adhere to a press code.

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<sup>18</sup> The South African Press Code is compiled by the South African Press Council, an independent co-regulatory mechanism chaired by Judge Phillip Levisohn, that governs journalistic practice and ethics in South Africa ([www.presscouncil.org.za](http://www.presscouncil.org.za)).

From a commercial perspective, advertisers prefer mainstream media institutions because they are guaranteed a large, loyal and segmented target audience – whether this audience is online, through subscription or newsstand sales – to which they can direct their advertisements with maximum impact.

### **2.2.2 Critique of citizen journalism**

While one should consider the advantages and possibilities that citizen journalism provides, it is also vital to consider its critiques and shortcomings, especially in the context within which it functions. Citizen journalism may manifest itself in different forms and for varying reasons within each country, economic, social or political group (Mythen, 2009: 54). Therefore, it is vital to consider how the ideological conceptualisations of citizen journalism are adopted and adapted for a South African context.

Maher (2010) – who was director at New Media Lab at Rhodes University at the time – claims that “citizen journalism is dead” and that, in fact, it never lived. He cites the “three deadly Es for citizen journalism” namely: ethics, economics and epistemology.

“[...] Citizen journalism is potentially devoid of any form of ethical accountability other than the legislative environment in which the individual operates. So, on the level of routine practice, there is very little control, especially in terms of accuracy,” (Maher, 2010). The questions of accuracy and reliability are foremost in the readers’ minds when they consider the differences between independent citizen journalism and professional journalism. Readers may trust institutionalised citizen journalism more than independent citizen journalism, presumably due to the fact that: “In traditional media organisations [or institutionalised forms of citizen journalism], editors impose regulations on data collection, media professionals double check facts and lawyers are employed to check whether stories are libellous,” (Mythen, 2009: 51). There is no such guarantee with independent self-proclaimed citizen journalists.



According to Maher, an independent citizen journalist – one who blogs and makes use of contextual advertising such as Google Ad-sense – relies on the concentrated bottom-up economic influence. This means that they earn money according to the content they post, which may also raise ethical issues. “Some critics have argued that citizen journalism acts as a lightning rod for the development of a populist news agenda, which is more concerned with reporting drama and sensation than factual or political news,” (ibid: 52).

When it comes to epistemology, Maher (2010) says that journalists have “de jure authority” by legal right, whereas citizen journalists have “de facto authority” which may or may not be by legal right. Despite his pessimistic view of citizen journalism, Maher was a keynote speaker at a *reporter.co.za* event held by the editorial team for the contributors in May 2006 (Saunders, 2013).

Tilley and Cokley (2008: 109-110) explore the notion that information-processing behaviour may change when the reader is aware that the content they are reading is produced by citizens rather than professional journalists. The authors suggest that readers may want to test the veracity of the content they consume in a number of critical ways. This may have an effect on the way in which citizen journalism platforms are received by their intended audiences. In turn, it may cause readers to choose mainstream media institutions over citizen journalism platforms, especially if they have limited time for news consumption.

Quality and ethical soundness are not the only grievances against user-generated content. According to former South African journalism academic Berger (2011), citizen journalism is often interpreted too loosely. He quotes Educause (2007): “The notion of citizen journalism implies a difference... between simply offering one’s musings on a topic and developing a balanced story that will be genuinely useful to readers,” (Berger, 2011: 709). He postulates that when someone posts a photograph of a breaking news story online, they are merely a source and not a citizen journalist, because there is no critical reflection, analysis, interpretation or commentary. These potential citizen journalists need to contextualise the photograph, add background

information and develop a balanced story that is useful to readers – for it to be considered journalism. Berger suggests that citizen journalists aspire to act in the public's interest, as well as in a truthful, objective and independent manner. They need to be accountable for their actions, according to generally accepted journalistic ethics. Furthermore, citizen journalism should refer to active engagement and the consistent volunteering of journalistic content, rather than merely a once or thrice-off contribution (ibid: 710), as was the case with the majority of *reporter.co.za* contributors (Deeks, 2013).

### **2.2.3 Non-institutionalised versus institutionalised forms of citizen journalism**

Opinions on citizen journalism among professional journalists and editors vary. While there is little or no broad research about the opinions of South African editors on the co-option of citizen journalism, research has been conducted in the United States. While many American mainstream community newspaper editors acknowledge the importance of both professional and citizen journalists, they rated professional journalists' roles much higher and more significant than that of citizen journalists' roles (Nah and Chung, 2009: 78). Furthermore, Nah and Chung's research found that: "[...] those [community newspaper editors], who have less offline work experience are more likely to welcome [institutionalised] citizen journalists' roles and accept sharing the gatekeeping function of traditional journalists," (ibid: 80).

Lewis et al. (2010: 167) found that editors of community newspapers in the United States, who disapproved of institutionalised citizen journalism, did so on theoretical grounds – as a matter of journalistic principle – or on practical grounds. Those editors who rejected citizen journalism on theoretical grounds believed it to be "incompatible with the news production process" and believe journalism to be the business of trained professionals only (ibid: 169).

Those editors who disapprove of institutionalised citizen journalism on practical grounds appreciate editorial discretion and want to corroborate citizen journalism content first, which could be labour-intensive for already

understaffed publications. This illustrates the lack of trust regarding the credibility, authenticity and quality of user-generated content. They would not agree to publish anonymous submissions either. These editors were also concerned about the possible distortion of information due to the contributors' personal bias. However, one should keep in mind that this too is possible in professional journalism, despite adherence to the South African Press Code and journalism ethics.

Some editors expressed concern that opinion could be construed as fact. The publication would be responsible, according to media law, for any case of libel or defamation. Some editors who had experimented with citizen journalism before, stated they were "unwieldy and unsatisfying for a variety of reasons". Others mentioned that there were only a handful of regular participants, which defeated the purpose of citizen journalism (ibid: 170-1), as seemed to be the case with *reporter.co.za* (Deeks, 2013).

Those editors who approved of citizen journalism on theoretical grounds, would or already do exercise editorial discretion in the selection and editing of citizen journalism submissions, as in the case of *reporter.co.za*. While they do not leave submissions in their 'raw' form, they try to retain the writers' styles as much as possible. This selection and editing process undermines the ideological predictions of citizen journalism as being independent of media institutions and their editorial processes. It illustrates that the realisation of citizen journalism, in its practical application, is vastly different from the intended conceptualisation (Rebillard & Touboul, 2010: 2). Lastly, all the editors agreed that citizen journalism should supplement, but not replace mainstream media (Lewis et al., 2010: 172).

#### **2.2.4 Reporter.co.za as institutionalised citizen journalism**

In a 2005 speech, media mogul Rupert Murdoch noted that media consumption is being revolutionised by young audiences and that institutionalised citizen journalism is an opportunity for traditional media to expand its reach and attract new audiences (Buckland, 2006). While citizen

journalism is not a new concept, the Internet is the ideal medium to exploit it, especially because the Internet has popularised the personal blog (ibid). “[...] big media have been trying to work out how to jump in and grab their slice of the phenomenon,” (ibid).

Institutionalised citizen journalism platforms, such as *reporter.co.za*, have resulted in what Bruns (2010) refers to as a pro-am interaction, namely the interaction between professional journalists and amateur citizen journalists. Media consumers have become ‘pro-sumers’ and ‘prod-users’. These portmanteaus highlight the dual nature of being simultaneously an active media consumer or user and media producer. This fluid relationship between media consumption and production is referred to as ‘pro-sumption’ (Rebillard & Touboul, 2010: 325). In this manner, media audiences have become co-creators alongside professionals in the news production process (Deuze, 2007: 79).

*Reporter.co.za* was a collaborative effort between citizen journalists, who provided the content, and professional journalists, who provided the professional framework and credibility by means of the selection and editing process. This editorial process resembled that of a traditional newsdesk, whereby the editorial team remained the authority on what was appropriate according to their publication standards. That is how Johncom tried to avoid copyright and plagiarism infringements or legal matters. However, this symbiotic relationship illustrates that both parties at *reporter.co.za* were dependant on one another. Speaking from his personal experience Stone (2013) says: “They did very little editing, if there was editing it was tenses, it was polishing more than editing.”

Bruns also coined the term ‘preditors’ that refers to professional journalists, who ensure that articles submitted by citizen journalists are legally sound and meet the necessary ethical requirements that are expected of any media institution. Preditors also ensure that articles meet the quality standards and the style of the media institution with which the citizen journalist is affiliated (Bruns, 2010). The *reporter.co.za* editorial team consisted of preditors.

Citizen journalism articles, in the absence of professional journalists, have called into question the quality and authenticity of posts. Shortly after *reporter.co.za*'s launch, Buckland (2006) surmised: "But if *reporter.co.za* is to become a successful publishing site, attracting a big audience and selling advertising – it would (sic) really depend on the depth, breadth and quality of content they could get from their citizen reporters." The survival of citizen journalism platforms relies on the veracity and validity of submissions (Hermida and Thurman, 2009: 4). *Reporter.co.za*'s editorial team applied normative news values to submissions to determine if they were ethical and newsworthy. They used their journalistic prowess to ignore content that seemed suspicious, mundane or appeared to be unoriginal or plagiarised. This form of editorial influence, however, goes against the ideological notion that citizen journalism is independent.

Banda (2010) notes that in order to create social change, citizen journalism needs a platform, affiliated with a media institution that will authorise it and act as a channel of accessibility to the public. Banda conducted brief case studies on numerous African, institutional citizen journalism platforms, one of which was *reporter.co.za*. He notes (ibid: 54):

One [media] organisation revealed that any attempt to place quality control measures on content generated by consumers would amount to censorship and that such an act would equate citizen journalism to conventional media. The general view was that any work coming in from any contributor should be viewed as 'quality'. Here, quality was understood as fitness for purpose. Even so, many of the media organisations interviewed reserved the right of publication. For example, although readers are allowed to contribute news articles on the Internet, the media house will not publish any material they may deem inappropriate, suggesting that institutional citizen journalism operates within the general ambit of organisational constraints.

*Reporter.co.za* exercised such editorial gatekeeping and censorship. Firstly, stories were filed by registered contributors into the 'submitted' queue on the

*reporter.co.za* website. These were not automatically published on the website as only 16 articles and five photographs were selected to be published on *reporter.co.za* daily. Secondly, these submissions were filtered by Padayachee, he placed submissions of poor quality in a 'rejected' queue, similarly those submissions that were newsworthy were placed in the 'accepted' queue. Some submissions remained in the 'submitted' queue for further consideration and possible future publication. Malherbe worked remotely from Thailand during the night shift, from 1am until 8am South African time, as the content editor. Thirdly, the submissions that were approved by Malherbe for publication were fact-checked and edited by Padayachee the following day before being published (McAuliffe, 2013).

Each contributor had a personal profile on *reporter.co.za*'s virtual newsroom, which could be used to determine the status of their submissions, whether they had been accepted or rejected. If the stories had been accepted the original submitted version could be viewed side-by-side with the edited version that was to be published, as was the date of expected publication (Stone, 2013). "It wasn't that we didn't publish stuff that was controversial, but if it were to incite violence or something like that then they were not published. There was no hate speech, racial hatred that sort of thing," (McAuliffe, 2013).

This editing process was established to maintain the editorial integrity of Johncom, sustain a level of professionalism and to portray the contributors in a better light. "If, for example, we were looking for advertising, for us to be publishing articles where spelling, grammar etc. was incorrect, what kind of front would we present?" (McAuliffe, 2013). Banda (2010: 34) states that the institutional stamp on citizen journalism platforms, such as *reporter.co.za* make them an elitist medium, which is contrary to the ideological conceptualisation of the initiative.

Despite its large number of contributing amateur writers and photographers and fair number of subscribers and readers, given its status as a citizen journalism platform, *reporter.co.za* became defunct about three years later. There have been a few under-the-breath comments, in the South Africa media

industry, as to why it failed. These include the lack of engaging and newsworthy content, which did not attract and sustain a large enough readership to attract advertisers to make the venture profitable and thus sustainable. Another possible factor is the digital divide – the technological gap between those with access to computers and the Internet and those without. In 2006, only 3,523,000 of South Africa’s population of 48,051,581 had access to the Internet<sup>19</sup>. At the time the digital divide was, and to this day remains, a significant barrier to the uptake of digital medium in South Africa.

### **2.3 Public sphere**

Civic engagement is exercised within the public sphere, which was postulated by German political sociologist Habermas. The public sphere is best understood as a metaphor for “a sphere which mediates between society and state in which the public organises itself as the bearer of public opinion, accords with the principle of the public sphere – that principle of public information, which once had to be fought for against the arcane politics of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities,” (Habermas, 1973: 351).

According to Habermas, it was a public space with democratic objectives that allowed its participants – who were restricted to educated, eighteenth century bourgeois men – to engage in the production and circulation of rational, public discourse. Habermas envisioned this discourse around public affairs to be: an open exchange and critique of ideas that was autonomous from state and economic power, as well as reflective, sincere, inclusive and equal in nature (Dahlberg, 2007). This forum was often critical of the state, it aimed to influence government and hold it accountable through the creation, transformation and dissemination of public opinion.

Today, the Internet is a virtual public sphere, while it does not occupy a physical space per se, it provides online forums that may be accessed from

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<sup>19</sup> Statistics obtained from the Internet World Stats (<http://www.Internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#za>)

anywhere in the world. In this manner, it has the potential to widen the public sphere through the creation of multiple, online public spheres (Poster, 1997; Hacker and van Dijk, 2000; Jankowski and van Selm, 2000); and to facilitate the 'online conversation'<sup>20</sup>. The Internet is inclusive in nature, the only barriers to entry are owning an Internet-supported device, an Internet connection and literacy.

The discussion around the public sphere is relevant to this study due to the fact that user-generated content, in this case in the form of citizen journalism, has allowed for the emergence of new "participatory spaces" (Hassim, 2002: 351), which allow citizens to actively partake in what Anderson (1983) calls an imagined community. User-generated content has the potential to widen the public sphere through community building, raising of awareness, and the encouragement of interactivity between contributors themselves and between contributors and readers. "The wealth of information on the Internet has the potential to allow the public to become more informed about public affairs and more articulate in expressing their views via e-mail, online discussion lists or chat rooms," (Rule, 2006: 32). However, the Internet is not necessarily utilised or intended in such a manner (Hunter, 1998; Lax, 2000; Dahlberg, 2007).

Banda (2010: 27) argues that traditional journalism is seen as being undemocratic and elitist in nature because its sources are predominantly official, namely politicians, businesspeople, NGOs and institutions, all of which have access to institutions of mass communication. These sources and institutions make certain value judgments, which determine the newsworthiness of an event and whether it will be classified as news. Citizens may argue that these official sources do not adequately represent them and may result in their "marginalisation from the news agendas of many mainstream media," (Banda, 2010: 27). Citizen journalism relies on user-generated content that is produced by ordinary individuals, who become news

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<sup>20</sup> Global Internet users can communicate and interact with one another through interactive websites, blogs, forums and online chat sites. The 'online conversation' is not limited by spatial or temporal restraints, as it would be in the conventional sense.



and information sources, especially if they were an eyewitness to crime or natural disasters, and the Internet assists them in doing so. This user-generated content is often shared in the virtual public sphere through various platforms, in the spirit of the public sphere and openness. In most cases, but not all, is made available online free of charge.

In the case of *reporter.co.za* there were no demographic restrictions established by Johncom as to who could be a citizen journalist. In fact, citizen journalist contributors were characterised as being ordinary South African citizens or expatriates. In this manner, *reporter.co.za* aimed to get insight into what was happening on the ground, and into the everyday experiences of South Africans – their public, social, political and economic concerns, as well as their successes and tribulations.

However, there is a myth that the advent of online citizen journalism results in a more representative media landscape that is open to everyone's voices. The "perfect plurality myth" states that certain limitations remain, such as the predominant use of English on South African online platforms, as well as the lack of access to a computer or an Internet-supported device and Internet connection as well as insufficient computer and technology literacy (Tilley & Cokley, 2008: 109-110).

Yet, user-generated content, in the form of citizen journalism, challenges the conventional role of mainstream media. It has the ability to resuscitate stories that the mainstream media might have let die or completely ignored. While the mass media has a crucial role in the shaping of public opinion, online citizen journalism platforms such as *reporter.co.za* alongside other digital public spheres may steer away from mainstream news angles and agendas to provide an alternative, hyper-localised or community reading of current affairs. "We wanted to open up the media to allow public voices to join the news debate and to contribute to the news, so that it wouldn't be a closed forum. We actually want to hear from the public and we want to know what is happening in specific communities and down to street corners," (J. Saunders, [*reporter.co.za* editor], personal comms., 28 June 2013).

In the Internet age, journalism has been transformed from a twentieth-century mass-media structure into a medium that is more grassroots and democratic (Gillmor, 2004: 60). Online citizen journalism has the potential to drive change, facilitate discussion and debate, and spread ideas. It also acts as a tool of empowerment and invigorates democracy, which cannot exist without the participation of the citizens (Hauben, 2007: 2). “The cybersphere is supposed to afford almost unbounded, non-geographic, non-ethnic, non-nationalistic, access to citizens,” (Banda, 2010: 26).

Citizen journalism also demystifies the journalistic process, it builds a sense of community around interests and grievances, and encourages participation in civic life (Kelly, 2009). Online civic engagement results in a plurality of voices and a greater diversity of opinions, it expands public discourse and increases public knowledge.

Fraser (1992) and Warner (2002) suggest a revision of Habermas’ initial postulation of the public sphere due to its exclusivist and elitist nature. Among other critics, they suggest that multiple, alternative public spheres and counter-publics exist and that their inclusion can make the public sphere more egalitarian in nature. These counter-publics cater for women, non-propertied classes, the uneducated, the subaltern<sup>21</sup> and minority groups that were previously excluded from the original Habermasian public sphere. These multiple, alternative public spheres and counter-publics – which are widely present in South Africa’s diverse population – are more representative of economic class, gender, age, social, geographic, cultural and religious interest groups and the disadvantaged, and are thus more illustrative of what comprises a democracy, such as South Africa (ibid).

## **2.4 Conclusion**

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<sup>21</sup> The subaltern, in postcolonial literature, is defined as ‘the other’, who always finds him/herself outside of the hegemonic power structure be it due to social and economic class, gender, race, religion, political standing or geography (Spivak, 1988).

The public sphere facilitates uninhibited discussions about public affairs, thus typifying democratic traditions (Papacharissi, 2009: 5). In essence, the public sphere should epitomise “the spirit of the [South African] freedom charter” (Hassim: 2002: 352). Citizen journalism provides minority and subaltern groups a platform for the freedom of expression (Daniels, 2011: 49). These individuals, who may have previously lacked such an opportunity, can make themselves and their issues heard through channels that are usually not available to them through the mainstream media. In this way, citizen journalism is participatory in nature and is an enabler of democracy. Independent, online citizen journalism platforms bypass gatekeepers, this ensures that information is not censored or selected in any manner. It is a reflection of the “citizens’ desire to intervene in a certain political event or to participate in the decision-making process,” (Hauben, 2007: 2).

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Qualitative research methods**

The methodological approach used in any given academic study is dependent on the questions the researcher wants answered, according to Tuchman (1991: 79). Therefore, the choice of research methodology, whether quantitative or qualitative, should be driven by the topic of research and not by a strict allegiance to either paradigm. Both research methodologies have their strengths and weaknesses, and each one may present an alternative to the other, however they are not mutually exclusive methodologies. Each methodology is naturally more inclined towards certain subject matter and research areas.

“Quantitative and qualitative methods are both concerned with collecting empirical data – the differences lie in how those data are collected, analysed, and interpreted and in standards of rigor,” (Padgett, 2003: 5). While quantitative research methods are equated with positivist and empiricist epistemologies, qualitative methods are synonymous with interpretive and postmodern epistemologies (ibid: 4). The central tenants of qualitative research are those of naturalism – naturally occurring phenomena that are not predetermined or manipulated by the researcher. Qualitative research complements conventional scientific inquiry that is predominantly associated with the quantitative research approach.

Due to the fact that this form of research method is “people-oriented” (Patton, 1990: 32) in nature, it is predominantly useful to the humanities faculties. Qualitative research is “much easier to apply to the nuances of human relationships and dynamic situations,” (Padgett, 2003: 4) as is the case in this research report. According to Patton (1990: 13), this research method allows the researcher to study the given subject matter in great depth, detail, openness, and without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis.

This research report critically analyses whether the institutionalisation of *reporter.co.za* could be a possible reason for its closure. The study is conducted by means of qualitative research methods in the form of the case study methodology, which is further supported by semi-structured interviews with *reporter.co.za*'s editorial and management teams, contributors and subscribers, as well as through document analysis. “[The case study methodology is] the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context,” (Yin, 1984: 1). The case study methodology also allows the researcher to consider how the social, political or organisational phenomena being studied are influenced by the status quo (Baxter & Jack, 2008: 556).

The content analysis approach – the meticulous study of the structure, content, components and material of a particular project – was to form part of the research methodology. However, it became evident that access to a very limited sample of content from the project's nearly three-year lifespan, may bias the outcome of the research. *Reporter.co.za* was taken offline shortly after it closed in late 2008. Google's Wayback Machine<sup>22</sup> sporadically documented the homepage of the website on random days. Very few articles may be accessed in this way, as many of the weblinks from the documented homepages are no longer accessible. Were the entire website still accessible it could have allowed for a more involved representative analysis of the website's content or the nature of published stories. However, there is no access to all submissions – those that were uploaded onto the website and those that were not – so as to analyse the nature of the selection and editing process conducted by the editorial team. Neither is there access to pre-edited content, to analyse the edits that were made prior to publication. It was found that Johncom did not digitally archive the website or any of its content, according to Johncom's head archivist Michelle Leon. None of the members of the editorial team, as far as the researcher inquired, have digital backups of the content either. McAuliffe made daily print-outs of the website's content for

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<sup>22</sup> The Google Wayback Machine: [http://wayback.archive.org/web/\\*/google.com](http://wayback.archive.org/web/*/google.com)

administrative and payment purposes, which were stored in boxes at Johncom's offices. Unfortunately, these were disposed of in 2012.

### **3.2 Qualitative research methods criticism**

No research methodology is immune to bias or criticism. Researchers and investigators impose, even if it is unconsciously, their prejudices, biases and predispositions onto their study. "The validity and reliability of qualitative data depend to a great extent on the methodological skill, sensitivity, and integrity of the researcher," (Patton, 1990: 11). However, the merit of any study or research methodology, whether it be quantitative or qualitative, lies in the researcher's competence and ability to acknowledge his or her biases and shortcomings that may impact the outcome of the study; the researcher, therefore, should attempt to safeguard the study against such biases.

Qualitative research is often described as being "technophobic" (Padgett, 2003: 3) in nature, as it does not utilise any mathematical or scientific algorithms and methods or equipment. It merely uses the knowledge, research and insight of the researcher and participants. Qualitative research provides descriptive or analytic insight into how events, people, phenomena or human affairs came to be the way they are and considers real-life context (Stake, 2000: 19). This methodological approach focuses on how people may experience reality differently. In this manner, it may focus on the personal interpretation and description of participants. Qualitative research makes use of people's personal accounts, which cannot be expressed numerically, and does not rely on the manipulation of variables. Furthermore, the conclusion of any study is predominantly hinged on the researcher's interpretation of the findings. As a result, it can be hypothesised that different researchers evaluating the same or similar subject matter may reach varying conclusions, based on their skills, abilities, angle and approach to the study, execution of the research and interpretation of the findings. It is for this reason that qualitative research is also considered to be subjective in nature (Sukamolson, n.d.: 5).

The quality of qualitative research attracts much attention because it may be subjective and relies on the varying experiences of individuals due to numerous factors. This raises the question: “Should the traditional criteria of validity, reliability and objectivity be applied to qualitative research as well, and how?” Flick (2002: 18) suggests that new, method-appropriate criteria need to be developed to make qualitative research more reliable.

### **3.3 Case study methodology**

The methodological approach for this research report was qualitative through the use of the case study method. “The case study has been regarded as a design, a methodology, a particular data collection procedure, and as a research strategy,” (Brown, 2008: 9). For this study it is considered a qualitative methodology. Initially, the case study methodology was developed within the social sciences (Johansson, 2003: 2), however, today it is used in a variety of faculties. It allows for the exploration of the complexities, particularities and uniqueness of a single case study (Simmons, 2009: 3). It also illustrates the manner in which the case being studied operates within a real situation, the case study need not be purely hypothetical.

A case may be an object, process, phenomenon or it may be theoretical, empirical or even both (Johansson, 2003: 5). However, by definition the boundary of the case study needs to be clearly delineated to determine what will and will not be considered in the data collection process and analysis. Essentially, case studies focus on “particularisation more than generalisation” (Flick, 2002: 8).

Robert Yin and Robert Stake, two of the foremost case study researchers, consider case studies from different perspectives. “Yin categorises case studies as explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive [...] Stake identifies case studies as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective,” (Baxter & Jack, 2008: 4). Yin is methodical and logical in his interpretation, he is a methodologist. Stake is more concerned with creating meaning from the research results, as he is an interpreter (Brown, 2008: 8).

Firstly, Stake (2000: 437-8) identifies three types of case studies: the intrinsic, instrumental and collective. The intrinsic case study approach should be considered when “the case is of interest [...] in all its particularity and ordinariness” to the researcher, who wants to better understand it. This type of case study is not representative of other case studies, nor does it represent a particular characteristic or problem. In the intrinsic case study, no attempt is made to generalise beyond the single case or to build theories. The instrumental case study can provide insight to an issue, revise a generalisation or refine a theory around the subject matter. It explores various aspects of the case study to relate them to the postulated theory. Although the case selected is studied in depth, the main focus is on something else, such as an external interest. This type of case study may or may not be typical of other cases. Finally, the collective case study occurs when a number of cases that are similar in nature or description are studied in order to investigate a general or overlapping phenomenon. Numerous case studies may also be analysed to illustrate temporal changes. However, Gerring (2007: 20) argues that the fewer cases there are within a case study, the more intensively they are studied, which in turn will result in a more focused study that “merits the appellation ‘case study’”. Therefore, it is recommended that the research should examine a single case study.

This research report made use of the intrinsic case study methodology, which investigates the characteristics of a single phenomenon (ibid: 17), namely *reporter.co.za*. This citizen journalism platform was deliberately selected because it was the first institutionalised citizen journalism platform in South Africa – as noted through the researcher’s investigation and by Buckland (2006) – and is unique, information-rich and revelatory in nature. The intrinsic case study methodology was the most appropriate form of research because it presents a real-life context from which other media institutions – that want to establish similar citizen journalism platforms – may learn about the successes and failures of *reporter.co.za* due to its institutionalised nature.

According to Flick (2002: 69): “The aim of case studies is precise description or reconstructions of cases,” in order to capture the experience of that activity.



This case study is intended to “shed light on a large class of cases,” (ibid) namely other citizen journalism projects in South Africa. Furthermore, the results of this case study methodology may inform “decision making, policy and practice,” (Simmons, 2009: 5) within other media institutions, through a detailed presentation of a posteriori evidence. Perhaps it is for this reason that Simmons (ibid) refers to it as an “educative process”.

Secondly, according to Yin (1993), a case study can be classified according to its purpose. According to this perspective, a case study may be: exploratory, descriptive or explanatory in nature. Exploratory cases “explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes,” (Baxter & Jack, 2008: 548). The exploratory case study takes the form of pilot research as data collection is undertaken before the concrete study questions and hypotheses are outlined. As its name suggests, its aim is to explore and create a framework for the data to be studied. While researchers may view this research methodology as being inchoate in nature, according to Yin (2003: 6): “The goal may justifiably be, to discover theory by directly observing a social phenomenon in its raw form.” Yin (2003: 7) notes that exploratory research should not be mistaken for research; it is merely an investigation that outlines the hypothesis, data collection and analytic methods that future research should undertake.

In the descriptive case study, the researcher makes observations and describes a real-life process or phenomenon, which enlightens the reader on the outcome (Noor, 2008: 1603). While selective description is the main objective of this case study and its focus is to encapsulate the scope and depth of the case being studied, it also makes use of theory and data collection (Yin, 2003: 23).

This particular case study is explanatory in nature as it “presents data bearing the cause-effect relationships – explaining which causes produced which effects,” (Yin, 1993: 5). It aims to explore why and how certain events happened, and in this manner also studies processes.

To study a case one must observe the activities and the manner in which that case study functions. “Qualitative understanding of cases requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs in its context and in its particular situation,” (Stake, 2006: 2). While this is impossible because *reporter.co.za* closed in late 2008, one may also learn from the observations of others. “The researcher needs to ask someone who was there, and to find records kept of what happened and artefacts that suggest it,” (ibid: 4). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the editorial and management teams, as well as with prominent contributors and subscribers. This is an acceptable indirect research method when the researcher is unable to observe the cases study on a day-to-day basis, due to geographic, temporal or other constraints.

This research report combines the case study methodology, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. In this manner, it makes use of triangulation – the combination of a variety of data collection methods, data sets, techniques, strategies or theories. “[Triangulation] makes it possible to go beyond the limitations of a single method by combining several methods and giving them equal relevance,” (Flick, 2002: 16). The use of more than one methodological approach allows the weaknesses and biases of either research methodology to be minimised (Seale, 1999: 472-3).

Triangulation ensures the validity of the data quality and that the case study is viewed from multiple perspectives (Johansson, 2003: 8). Convergence is a pragmatic way in which to add strength and academic rigour to findings, as the numerous data sets are integrated to encourage a greater understanding of the overall case (Baxter & Jack, 2008: 554). While looking to numerous sources for data and evidence is advantageous, it may result in an exhaustive database or data sets. Therefore, the boundaries and limits of such an extensive study needs to be clearly outlined at the beginning, carefully managed and later organised into meaningful results.

Each case study is a complex entity that is located in its own situation (Flick, 2002: 12). “A case study is therefore a systematic and in-depth investigation

of a particular instance in its context in order to generate knowledge,” (Rule & John, 2011: 4). The researcher must always be aware of the greater contexts – economic, political, historical, social, ethical, cultural, physical – to which the case study subscribes, for these contexts influence the case study. In this particular instance, the context is the greater body of research around user-generated content, specifically citizen journalism and its role in South Africa.

### **3.4 Case study methodology criticism**

The case study methodology, as a form of qualitative research, has been criticised for its insufficient precision and lack of objectivity due to its subjective nature (Yin, 1984: 10). It lacks scientific rigour and reliability (Noor, 2008: 1603). Researchers who employ the case study methodology have been criticised due to their inability to follow systematic procedures and their lack of precision. This often leads to “biased views [that] influence the direction of the findings and conclusions,” (Yin, 2009: 14). In contrast, other methods are not as susceptible to such biases, possibly due to numerous methodological texts that provide researchers with specific procedures that are to be followed during the research process (ibid).

Case studies are often purported to take too long to compile and complete, and often result in “massive, unreadable documents” (ibid). However, without labour-intensive and time-consuming input the findings of qualitative studies may be shallow and obvious (Padgett, 2003: 10). Researchers need to settle on a realistic median that will yield satisfactory results. Critics note that there is no way to screen the ability of researchers to conduct effective case studies, possibly due to the fact the necessary skills to conduct an effective case study have not been clearly defined and formally outlined (ibid: 16).

Furthermore, the case study methodology does not deal with scientific generalisability because it deals with a wealth of detail concerning a small number of cases. Researchers should not generalise from limited cases in the first place. “Case studies, like experiments, are generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case

study, like the experiment, does not represent a sample,” (ibid: 15).

Randomised trials aim to establish causal relationships, yet case studies – and similar non-experimental research methods – cannot directly address this issue. Therefore, case studies have been downgraded in terms of their validity (ibid: 14-15).

### **3.5 The interview method**

The researcher conducted qualitative research through semi-structured, face-to-face, open-ended interviews and electronic open-ended questionnaires – which is a form of document analysis to be discussed later – with the *reporter.co.za* editorial and management team, as well as with contributors. According to Jensen (2002: 140): “The best way to find out what the people think about something is to ask them.” An interview is a conversation between an interviewer, who asks questions and seeks responses, and an interviewee, who answers them (Gillham, 2000). Interviews provide the “viewpoint of the subject,” (Flick 2002: 9) and provide data on the experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge of the interviewees (Patton, 1990: 10). Furthermore, various data – in the form of the observation of human behaviour, actions, activities, and interpersonal interactions – all of which are part of the “observable human experience,” (ibid) can be collected during the interview process. As a result, the researcher must not only be a skilled interviewer, but also a detail-oriented observer, who can read non-verbal messages and is “attuned to the nuances of the interviewer-interviewee interaction and relationship,” (ibid: 32).

The nature of the face-to-face interview allows the interviewer to ask open-ended questions and follow-up questions to the answers that were received. The semi-structured interview is designed to allow for more flexibility than a structured interview. Furthermore, its accommodating approach ensures that each respondent may be addressed differently, so as to suit their relationship with the subject matter being examined, their level of understanding and contribution to the research, while simultaneously “covering the same areas of data collection,” (Noor, 2008: 1603).

The interviewer can direct the conversation by enquiring about certain subject matters; they have control over the theme, structure and length of an interview through the questions they ask. "If the interviewee has difficulty answering a question or provides only a brief response, the interviewer can use cues or prompts to encourage the interviewee to consider the question further [...] or to follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee," (Hancock et al., 2007: 16).

The researcher received an email database of *reporter.co.za*'s subscribers and contributors that was captured on seven occasions, spanning from 12 May 2006 until 08 June 2007. The researcher used the details that were captured on 20 April 2007, as it contained the largest number of details, namely 4,786. Of those 56 were Johncom employees, which leaves 4,730 independent subscribers. The researcher emailed these *reporter.co.za* subscribers asking them to participate in the study, through a face-to-face interview or by completing a relevant questionnaire that was designed either for contributors or subscribers. Numerous individuals, mostly South African journalists such as Ryan Peter, replied to the researcher's emails saying that they had never heard of *reporter.co.za* nor subscribed to it.

Only a handful responded positively to the researcher's emails by answering the questionnaires. A few others initially agreed to be interviewed or answer a questionnaire, but despite numerous pursuits by the researcher nothing materialised. Those that responded to a written questionnaire were presented with follow-up questions where necessary.

More than five years down the line, the vast majority of contributors and subscribers had changed their email addresses. Upon observation of the database, the researcher noted that some email addresses were the university email addresses of students, which are deactivated once students graduate. Secondly, not all those who received the email request to complete the questionnaire did so, despite having sufficient time in which to do so (several months) and having reminder emails sent to them. Lastly, besides using the database, the researcher also attempted to use LinkedIn, Twitter

and Facebook to solicit qualifying participants from her personal contacts and from her contacts in the print, broadcasting, and film industry.

There were 14 participants in this study, all of whom were involved in *reporter.co.za* in some way. Three participants were part of *reporter.co.za*'s editorial team – namely Juliette Saunders, Louise McAuliffe and Tegan Bedser – and Chris Deeks was part of the management team. All four were interviewed in person. The former two continue to work for Times Media Group. Yet another participant, Reuben Goldberg, who was also interviewed in person, joined Times Media Group after *reporter.co.za* closed and is currently in charge of *iLive.co.za*, which according to Saunders was established to replace *reporter.co.za*. Michelle Leon, the head archivist at what is now the TMG library, assisted the researcher in finding articles that were initially published in *reporter.co.za* as well as in Johncom's mainstream publications.

Seven participants were *reporter.co.za* contributors, of those three are presently working as journalists – Wilhelmina Maboja, Setumo Stone and Louise McAuliffe, who is a special case to be discussed in detail later. Maboja answered the questionnaire, while Stone, who is employed by Times Media Group, was interviewed in person. Tendayi Sithole, a university lecturer and PhD candidate at UNISA, was also interviewed in person. Yet another participant, Brett Chatz, is an author who provides web content and social media services. Simon Tatt is involved in the film industry. The final participant, who works in advertising, asked to remain anonymous. The latter three participants answered the questionnaire as it was impossible to arrange face-to-face interviews.

Matthew Buckland, a journalist by training, is the managing director of a digital and social media solutions company; he also writes for *memburn.com* of which he is the publisher. While Buckland was not directly involved in *reporter.co.za*, he wrote about the platform when it was established. Ryan Peter – who was on the database, but claims not to have subscribed – is a journalist and editor of an online publication. Nonetheless, he agreed to

participate based on his experience, in his role as editor, with an institutionalised form of South African citizen journalism. No other subscribers replied to the researcher's emails.

Furthermore, despite regular phone calls and emails to Mike Robertson, who is the current CEO of Times Media Group, and his secretary, to request an interview, it was never granted. At the time of *reporter.co.za*'s conceptualisation, Robertson found himself in a managerial position overlooking the initiative and was recommended as a knowledgeable interviewee on the subject matter by Deeks. Also, numerous noteworthy individuals who have personal insight into this area of research and may have provided knowledgeable commentary on the matter – whether it be in the form of their academic research in the field of citizen journalism or their involvement with the platform – did not reply to numerous requests to participate or declined to do so. Sadly, Padayachee passed away a few years earlier and one of *reporter.co.za*'s contributors, with whom the researcher briefly worked and hoped to interview, also passed away in early 2013, prior to the interview process.

From this researcher's judgment, the views of the interviewees were truthful and honest, regardless of the fact that they may have erred in fact or in judgment of the situation. The face-to-face interviews were recorded with a tape recorder and truthfully transcribed to ensure an accurate account. The transcribed extracts of the interviews were used in the research report and were referred back to during the writing process. As far as the researcher is aware the interviews were not deliberately taken out of context, neither was their meaning manipulated.

The transcription focused on a literal reading of the content and what was actually said, rather than what may have been implied or suggested by the interviewees. The use of direct quotations taken from the interview helps the researcher present an accurate depiction of the events that transpired. The interviews were analysed at the 'manifest level of analysis' namely, "This is what was actually said, documented or observed with nothing read into it and

nothing assumed about it,” (Hancock et al, 2007: 24). Non-lexical conversation sounds and interjections, such as ‘umm,’ were ignored for the sake of consistency and flow. The interviewees were not paid for their participation in this study. However, in the cases where it applied, which was not always, the researcher did offer to settle the bill, after the completion of the interview, had she met with an interviewee face-to-face. This only happened on two occasions.

There are differences between face-to-face interviews and the questionnaires emailed, in terms of personal engagement and follow-up questions. Face-to-face interviews are more ‘organic’ than emailed questionnaires, in terms of the engagement between the interviewer and the interviewee. During a personal exchange, it is much easier for the interviewer to guide the topic of conversation and to ask for a more detailed explanation; whereas it is impossible to extend and probe the answers to certain questions, without making contact once again, in a questionnaire.

### **3.6 Interview method criticism**

The semi-structured interviews provided a first-hand account of the interviewees’ experiences with *reporter.co.za*. The researcher kept in mind that interviews are a subjective form of research. This is due to the fact that individuals, in this case the interviewees, are naturally and at times unintentionally biased: facts are forgotten and memories are flawed, especially after a few years, or memories are reconstructed in a manner that suits the agenda of the interviewee for whatever purpose. Certain facts may be falsified or omitted altogether, while others may be exaggerated or understated. Three of the interviewees, who were interviewed face-to-face, continue to work for Johncom (now Times Media Group). The researcher cannot ignore the fact that they could have construed their answers in such a manner so as to make the media institution and the citizen journalism platform appear in a favourable light and may have omitted any information that could have been potentially unfavourable to their employer.



The interviewer or researcher may fail to ask the correct questions or appropriate follow-up questions. They may misunderstand a given answer, take it out of context or interpret it in a manner that was unintended. Furthermore, researchers may unintentionally place their own biases on the interview and manipulate the findings to suit their hypothesis by including certain aspects and omitting others in their findings. Therefore, “no matter how skilled or sensitive, interviewing alone lacks the density and texture that comes from incorporating observational data and/or use of documents,” (Padgett, 2003: 10). It is for this reason that interviews should not be the sole form of investigation in any case study or research initiative. This is a further justification for the use of triangulation in the research process. “[...] weaving in other sources of information to create a synthesis, or whole, that is greater than the sum of its parts,” is a more desirable and vigorous form of research (ibid).

Patton (1990: 19-23) explains how respondents’ true attitudes towards the subject matter can be captured more faithfully by means of a face-to-face interview rather than a questionnaire. Furthermore, his findings illustrate that researchers are also more attentive to the findings of face-to-face interview than questionnaires.

### **3.7 Document analysis**

Another form of qualitative data collection that was used in this research report was that of document analysis. It involves the collation and analysis of “excerpts, quotations, or entire passages from organisational, clinical, or program records, memoranda and correspondence, official publications and reports, personal diaries, and open-ended written responses to questionnaires and surveys,” (Patton, 1990: 10).

This research methodology also analyses, categorises, investigates, interprets and identifies the limitations of physical sources, such as written documents and artefacts, be they private, personal or public (Mogalakwe,

2006: 221-2). Relevant documents were selected and their information was interpreted and analysed by the researcher accordingly.

The documents used informed and assisted the researcher in the formulation of the semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Furthermore, “Document evidence acts as a method to cross-validate information gathered from interview and observation given that sometimes what people say may be different from what people do,” (Noor, 2008: 1604). The researcher endeavoured that this corroboration of multiple qualitative research methods, may enhance the validity and reliability of the findings (ibid).

A researcher must keep in mind the purpose, context, origin, and the intended audience of studied documents. They may be attained from various sources, such as: an organisation’s resource centre or website, from the Internet, university or public libraries, company reports, company newsletters and printed materials such as newspapers, magazines, journals, text books, conference reports, pamphlets, articles and training materials, or they may be individual file records (ibid: 1603-4).

Document analysis makes use of primary and secondary documents or artefacts. There are three types of primary documents used for research purposes. Firstly, public records are the official documents or records of a government or organisation. They are often freely available to the public and are usually published on the organisation’s website, available in printed format or through the organisation’s resource centre. If not, they may be received upon request. Secondly, personal documents are an individual’s first-person accounts such as emails, agendas, administrative documents and Internet posts. Lastly, physical evidence comprises of the physical objects or artefacts that can be found or collected within the study environment. Secondary sources are usually written in the third person by someone else, instead of the individual who underwent the experiences firsthand.

This researcher made use of *reporter.co.za*’s public records that were once available on its website at [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za). These were: the citizen

reporter code of conduct, legal terms and conditions, copyright agreement, style guide and story guidelines, as well as a breakdown and description of *reporter.co.za*'s sections. These studied documents were available to anyone with an Internet connection, who was proficient in English. The documents were accessed from Bedser in 2013, due to the fact that *reporter.co.za* closed in 2008 and the documents were not captured entirely by Google's Wayback Machine. As far as the researcher is aware these are the authentic documents that were housed on *reporter.co.za*, and none of the documents were produced or altered for the researcher's benefit.

As briefly mentioned earlier, the researcher emailed questionnaires to numerous individuals – who were directly involved with *reporter.co.za*, wrote about it in the South African press, or from an academic perspective – but who, due to geographic or temporal restrictions, could not be interviewed face to face. These included *reporter.co.za*'s content editor Peter Malherbe, who resides in Thailand; Mike Robertson, current CEO of Times Media Group, who was in a managerial position at Johncom at the time; Matthew Buckland and Vincent Maher, both of whom wrote on the issue and are currently located in Cape Town. Questionnaires were also emailed to 4,786 *reporter.co.za* contributors and subscribers that were on the database received from Bedser.

### **3.8 Document analysis criticism**

The document analysis research method is a marginalised and under-utilised approach. It is seldom the predominant research method used. Instead, it often supplements other research methodologies (Mogalakwe, 2006: 221).

A researcher has to consider various quality control criteria when analysing document sources, namely: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and whether the documents provide appropriate meaning.

Authenticity refers to whether the evidence is genuine, reliable in nature, has integrity and is from dependable and impeccable sources. Documents may be

forged or falsified, the researcher needs to verify that they are in fact what they purport to be. During the analysis process, the researcher must ensure that there are no obvious errors and inconsistencies in the language, style, structure and content. The researcher must be wary if there are numerous versions of the same document and should be cautious if the document is received from a suspicious or unreliable secondary source, who may have an interest in a particular interpretation of the document. Furthermore, the author's identity should also be verified (ibid: 225).

According to Mogalakwe (2006: 226), for a document to be credible it must be typical of its kind, free from distortion and error, it should present a sincere perspective and reading, not be manipulated or altered to serve a particular purpose. A researcher should always question the credibility of a document and whether or not it was specifically compiled or altered for the benefit of the research or researcher. Facts should receive precedent over opinion, unless the opinion is rationally substantiated and proven.

Representativeness refers to whether the consulted documents represent the theme and subject matter of relevant documents in their entirety. The researcher should ensure that documents are not outdated. In most cases, unless the research requires otherwise, the most recently updated version should be consulted. Lastly, "Meaning refers to whether the evidence is clear and comprehensible," (ibid: 227). Researchers should bear in mind that documents may have a literal meaning as well as an interpretative meaning, such as the political, economic, social contexts, namely the status quo, under which the documents were produced, which may need to be considered during analysis.

Lastly, with regards to the questionnaires, "The [email interview] will generate qualitatively different types of responses from [interview] participants partly because they are able to delay responding until they have thought about what to say," (ibid). This may result in email responses to questionnaires being more coherent, structured and logical, when compared to impromptu interview responses. The researcher, if needs be for clarification purposes, may

conduct follow-up questions at a later stage, rather than immediately as in during an interview.

Generally, there may be limitations associated with the writing skills of questionnaire respondents. However, the database consisted of email contacts for those individuals who were either contributors or subscribers to *reporter.co.za*, therefore it can be assumed that all were English literate. There is also the question of the effort required on the part of the respondent to answer the questionnaire, which may be a discouraging factor and may dissuade some from responding, as was possibly the case in some instances of this research report.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

Research of this nature – in the field of journalism, in the humanities faculty, which is more inclined to observe and analyse social aspects of society, such as human nature and public interaction – predominantly although not exclusively, lends itself to the use of qualitative research methods. The prevailing sentiment within the academic community leans towards quantitative research methods because they are considered to be a more reliable form of research.

The three data collection methods outlined above were chosen for their appropriateness in relation to the study. Method triangulation enhances the reliability and the validity of the research by overcoming the weakness or deficiencies of using one research method. The use of more than one data collection method ensured that the results were corroborated and that the weaknesses of one were counterbalanced by another.

This case study relied upon largely the semi-structured interviews, then the questionnaire responses and lastly the documents.

## **Chapter 4 Discussion and findings**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the reasons as to why Johncom established *reporter.co.za* by analysing the findings of the semi-structured interviews conducted with *reporter.co.za*'s editorial and management teams and contributors. Furthermore, document analysis is used to consider Johncom's expected outcomes from this user-generated content platform. Lastly, this discussion chapter extrapolates the strengths and weaknesses of *reporter.co.za* as an institutionalised form of citizen journalism as it was experienced by the contributors to the platform.

First and foremost, it should be noted that despite persistent efforts that spanned several months, the researcher did not attain as large a sample group of participants as had been anticipated at the start. The researcher acknowledges that the larger the sample group, the more diverse and illustrative the findings, and the greater the insight into the citizen journalism platform from a perspective other than that of Johncom.

### **4.2 Reporter.co.za staff interviews analysis**

Johncom's senior level management – acting on the recommendations of managing director, Mike Robertson – expressed the need for the media institution to establish a platform that spoke to citizen journalism and user-generated content. He instructed Johncom's publisher, Deeks, to oversee the project through the establishment of an editorial team under the editorship of Saunders. *Reporter.co.za*'s tagline was: 'You can write the news'.

*Reporter.co.za* was aimed at South African middle-class suburbia and all those with Internet access. It was to focus on community and hyper-local news stories. The *reporter.co.za* editorial team received contributions from the youth – their youngest contributor was an 11-year-old boy – students, writers,

bloggers, activists and regular citizens, who were frustrated with South Africa's status quo and what was happening in their communities and country.

Johncom expected tip-offs about crime and corruption, but submissions of that nature were few and far between (Deeks, 2013). Johncom did not receive the reception it had anticipated after *reporter.co.za*'s launch, based on the citizen journalism platforms on which it was modelled, specifically the Korean *Ohmynews.com* portal. According to Deeks (2013): "It didn't turn out this way, but we really thought [it would], naively, because some of the other models, those that were really making it work, were the guys who were already operating hyper-local. And they were talking about the crime that happened on their corner or this broken traffic light that had been out for two months, that sort of mundane stuff. So, we thought we'd get that kind of community dimension out of it. The reality is that we didn't."

Deeks surmises that the South African online community at the time was limited, mostly to those who had the financial means that allowed them Internet access. One of the possible contributing factors for South Africa's limited Internet access may be the digital divide. Internet access was especially limited when compared to South Korea, which was Johncom's case study, and which in recent years has been one of the world's most digitally connected countries<sup>23</sup>. Deeks claims that the small South African online community at the time was, and remains, passive in nature and does not engage in online civic engagement and activism to the extent that South Koreans do. Those who signed up as *reporter.co.za* contributors, were most likely already socially active individuals within their communities. The interviews and questionnaires proved this – all but one of the seven contributors who responded confirmed that they were already active citizens in terms of publishing articles, blogging, posting their opinions on Facebook, MySpace, News24 and other Internet and social media platforms. Some respondents had a presence on up to three online platforms.

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<sup>23</sup> The researcher lived in Seoul, South Korea from early 2010 until late 2012 and noted these differences between the two countries in terms of online connectivity, online communities and digital engagement, and online activism.

Secondly, Johncom hoped to discover and train emerging talent through *reporter.co.za*. “The second kind of tier of it was that we were also hoping to encourage young future journalists, who were not being catered for through formal structures such as university, colleges or internship programmes because this could have actually identified some young talent and I think that it did to a certain extent,” (Saunders, 2013). Three media-related bursaries, to be completed at Intec College, were awarded to the most promising *reporter.co.za* contributors.

Saunders (2013) states that Johncom’s and the editorial team’s role was one of mentorship, guidance and encouragement. Contributors could consult the editorial team over the telephone, through email and face to face during the specially organised events for those involved in the venture. Padayachee and Malherbe gave guidance and advice to regular contributors or those who showed potential and interest. The editorial team shared the changes they had made using Microsoft Word’s track changes, in order to make these contributors aware of the areas where they needed to focus more attention for future contributions.

A weekly newsletter was sent out to *reporter.co.za*’s contributors and registered subscribers. It contained the Editor’s Choice Award – for the best hard news submission of the week, which included additional payment for the contributor – as well as a selection of the best submissions, as chosen by Saunders. In this manner, this newsletter also acted as a guideline to contributors on the type of submissions *reporter.co.za* wanted.

McAuliffe, who started out as *reporter.co.za*’s administrator and payroll manager, later also became a *reporter.co.za* contributor. Initially she submitted stories under a pseudonym, so as not to receive preferential treatment from the editorial team, but to be published on merit. Soon enough she was discovered and openly began contributing to *reporter.co.za*. She showed immense potential, according to Saunders (2013), and despite no formal journalistic training she up-skilled herself over the years and became a



full-time, in-house, multimedia journalist for Times Media Group, where she remains at the time of writing.

Similarly, in the year following *reporter.co.za*'s closure, Stone – who had no formal training as a writer or journalist, but had managed to build up an impressive portfolio of published works through the venture – won a bursary through a 'story of the month' competition run by Johncom. It allowed him to study towards a journalism certificate and he remains with Times Media Group to this day. Therefore, *reporter.co.za* was successful in its aim to nurture promising future writers, especially through the offer of mentors to contributors and the opportunity to compile a portfolio of published work.

Johncom financed the venture by means of discretionary funds. It cost around R40,000 - R50,000 per month, according to Deeks (2013), who claims: "It wasn't a huge expensive exercise, but it didn't really get traction. We didn't really unearth this major kind of scene of pure gold in terms of content of great undiscovered writers that we could engage with, it really didn't deliver any of those things. It wasn't giving us any of the things we thought it might." While *reporter.co.za* never reached critical mass or a large enough online readership in order to attract advertisers, the venture was very successful as a public relations exercise for Johncom, according to Deeks. "Through the *Sunday Times* and in *The Sowetan* publications we also, in hardcopy, invited people to come join *reporter.co.za*. We had flyers and pencils and they made up packs to go to schools, universities, education facilities," (McAuliffe, 2013).

Both Saunders and Deeks claim that the purpose of *reporter.co.za* was not primarily to make profit, but rather to provide an online digital sphere for participatory journalism, in a young democratic South Africa. This was Maboja's (2014) experience: "[...] I learnt more about what interested people and what compelled them the most. From what I remember, much of the work I had come across was public opinion about the state of South Africa, from a social everyday level such as non-operating traffic lights, to the incompetence of government," (W. Maboja, [*reporter.co.za* contributor], email comms., 12 February 2014).

However, while Saunders and Deeks claim that *reporter.co.za* was not established to make a profit, the researcher received an advertising rate card as part of the documents provided by Bedser. According to Deeks, Saunders and Bedser the rate card was not circulated to potential clients.

Peter (2014) – who claims not to have subscribed to *reporter.co.za*, but found himself on the *reporter.co.za* database – suggested that perhaps he had been placed on the weekly mailing list that consisted of that week’s best reads, because he was a journalist. As editor of *www.telkomdogaming.co.za*, Peter found himself in the same position as the managerial team at Johncom. He believes that: “Institutionalised ‘citizen journalism’ is a great cash cow for media companies, [by] getting people to do all the work for them while the media company sells advertising and doesn't pay the journalists.” The reasons as to why the *reporter.co.za* rate card was supposedly not distributed can be debated, however the researcher assumes that it is was due to the fact that the platform did not accumulate a large enough and loyal audience to approach potential advertisers. Telkom Do Gaming “tried to open its own 'citizen journalism' blog for the exact same reasons that I despise – 'user generated content' is supposedly an easy way to get traffic. This is exactly what the investors told us,” (R. Peter, email comms., 5 January 2014.) Today, Peter notes that their user-generated blog is a “ghost town” with few submissions.

Peter also makes a valid point in the quotation above about the nature of user-generated content by placing the words citizen journalism in single inverted commas. In this manner, he raises questions about the ideological notions of citizen journalism – which is one premise of this research report – and the independence of institutionalised forms of user-generated content. The co-option of citizen journalism by Johncom is in contravention of citizen journalism’s intrinsic intention, that is to be independent and free of any gatekeeping and editorial restrictions.

The editorial process involved in *reporter.co.za* does not reflect that of independent citizen journalism. The *reporter.co.za* editorial team sifted

through articles and features, photos, audio clips, video footage and poetry, which was submitted by its 6,000-odd registered citizen reporters, on a daily basis. Only a select few became regular contributors of publishable quality, Stone being one of them. “A lot of them did sign up but never contributed, they maybe had the notion but they never did. What I found more than anything is we had the same people contributing all the time,” (McAuliffe, 2013). Peter’s personal experience in establishing a citizen journalism platform (2014) also illustrates this:

If the media company can offer any kind of incentive, for example: repertoire as a writer in some way, then it might work. Otherwise, most 'citizen journalists,' like most bloggers, are all excited to get going – then they write one piece and then realise it's a heck of a lot of work with little to no real return. You've got to build this thing up slowly and they have better things to do. Bylines are not exactly a big deal in the public eye either.

In terms of its budget, *reporter.co.za* paid a stipend to registered members of the citizen journalism platform for their submissions that were uploaded onto the *reporter.co.za* website. The uploaded material was graded into gold, silver and bronze categories, which carried a nominal payment of R35, R20 and R15 respectively. Tax and UIF deductions had already been made on these amounts. Material published on the homepage was rated gold. Items published at the top of each section page, such as the ‘News’ or ‘Reviews’ sections, were rated silver. All other contributions were rated bronze. McAuliffe (2013) notes that there were a handful of contributors, such as Stone – who were published almost on a daily basis and sometimes had more than one submission published on a day – who received hundreds, even thousands, of rands each month. “We did have people who had [the money from] their contributions sent to a charity as well. It wasn’t that they were writing for personal gain,” (McAuliffe, 2013).

While Peter notes from his personal experience as an editor of a user-generated platform, that most contributors may have felt there was not

enough monetary return or incentive to contribute to a citizen journalism platform, so as to sustain it in the long term and provide a diverse voice; the point above illustrates that there are those contributors who do not expect anything in return for their submissions. This indicates that while there are individuals who could drive citizen journalism platforms, these are few and far between and not nearly enough to keep it functioning as it was intended.

Furthermore, the citizen journalism platform had incentives in the form of giveaways and competitions for digital video cameras, movie tickets and books among other prizes, to encourage its contributors. Saunders (2013) described *reporter.co.za* as resembling a corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative, rather than a profit-making venture.

The aim of *reporter.co.za* was to solicit breaking, exclusive or newsworthy features that could be published in Johncom's mainstream publications. This would also be a form of advertising for *reporter.co.za*, to help it gain a greater readership and contributors. The intention was that contributors could receive more pay (R350 per submission) if their breaking news story, well-researched article or photograph was featured in Johncom's mainstream publications, namely the *Sunday Times*, *Sowetan*, *Sunday World* and *Daily Dispatch*. "Sometimes the photos made it into the dailies depending on what they were and the sort of the subject matter," (McAuliffe, 2013). In its media kit, however, Johncom admitted that this would not be the case for the vast majority of their contributors. According to Saunders (2006): "but we cannot deny that for most people, this would not apply. Rather, they would be contributing to *reporter.co.za*: for the fun of it, or to have their voices heard on a public stage, or to describe a news event they have witnessed, or to raise issues or topics that would otherwise not make it into mainstream media."

According to Deeks (2013), *reporter.co.za* became defunct due to the poor quality of content that was submitted. He says that by offering monetary incentives, *reporter.co.za* attracted the wrong type of contributors. These were individuals who relied on the minimal payment as a way to supplement their income. "We got the wrong people, giving us the wrong stuff, for the wrong

reasons. As opposed to the right people, giving us the right stuff, for the right reason, which is: look how clever I am, look how active I am in the community, look how well I can write, all of that stuff was really what we should have gotten,” (Deeks, 2013).

The editor’s (Saunders) final note, namely ‘An era ends as Reporter closes,’ in late 2008 read: “It’s true that we ended up with far too many pictures of Table Mountain and pets, but there were some excellent photographs as well [...] One of the less successful aspects of our coverage was the tendency to comment on the news of the day rather than break hard news stories,” (Hyde-Clarke, 2010: 45).

While Chatz was a contributor, his view echoes Saunders’ closing editor’s note, that *reporter.co.za* was: “[...] akin to a community forum for regular contributors trying to outdo one another with the number of publications on site. There was very little news reporting going on. It was a lot of poetry, short stories, jokes, re-writing of news and so forth [...],” (B. Chatz. [*reporter.co.za* contributor], email comms., 2 December 2013).

#### **4.3 Contributors’ interviews and questionnaires analysis**

Setumo Stone was a regular *reporter.co.za* contributor and a political activist. At the time of *reporter.co.za*’s establishment, he owned an events management company, did marketing for a community radio station and was a music club DJ. He wrote for *reporter.co.za*, *politicsweb* as well as *Mail and Guardian*’s *sports leader*, although he was not paid for his contributions to the former two ventures. Stone also blogged and posted his analyses, musings and the majority of his *reporter.co.za* contributions on his Facebook profile. He submitted up to four stories of a political nature per day and was published on a daily basis, or at least every second day. He notes that around 10% of his submissions were rejected. Stone believes that political stories being covered by the mainstream media lacked balance.

For me it [*reporter.co.za*] was more about the platform, about debate and to get a portfolio of published works. I was very critical of the mainstream media as well [...] The whole debate was not broad enough, there was a lot of academic chauvinism, there was a lot of middle-class chauvinism, there was a lot of prejudice. So, for me it was about challenging that convention, I was very provocative (Stone, 2013).

Stone claims that institutionalised journalism platforms have numerous benefits to the journalist and the quality of their published content, namely a team of fellow writers and editorial team members assist the writer in the writing process, and help them to be more critical of the angle he or she chooses to tackle.

Johncom also facilitated an internal online platform whereby contributors could respond to and discuss other contributors' submissions among each other (Stone, 2013). This virtual newsroom allowed contributors to learn from the editorial team at *reporter.co.za*, about the news process, the tricks of the trade and about the ethics of journalism, in order to promote the credibility and quality of submitted stories. The editorial team also briefed the contributors with regards to journalistic etiquette when attending an event, press conference or conducting an interview for *reporter.co.za*.

Stone claims that his experience as a citizen journalist for *reporter.co.za* assisted him, years later, in winning a bursary through Johncom to complete a journalism certificate at Intec College. Today, he is a reporter with the *Business Day*, which is owned by Times Media Group (formerly Johncom). While his affiliation with the media institution may allow for bias, it also provides significant insight into the study.

Simon Tatt – who worked as a remote head technician in the film industry in Cape Town and was a *reporter.co.za* contributor – reaffirms Saunders' comment in his questionnaire: "*Reporter.co.za* would allocate a journalist to mentor you in your writing if you submitted regular articles," (S. Tatt,

[*reporter.co.za* contributor], email comms., 06 January 2014).

However, some contributors such as Maboja, who was a high school learner at the time, had their articles published without any direct input on the writing or editing process from the editorial team (W. Maboja, [*reporter.co.za* contributor] email comms., 12 February 2014).

On the other hand, continues Stone (2013): “Not being in an institutionalised platform allows you to take risks, you can write whatever you like. And sometimes you raise a debate and sometimes you rub people wrong, sometimes people just ignore you, but it allows you to take risks and the good thing is that I have never heard of a blogger being sued.” While bloggers are not considered to be citizen journalists in light of the theory presented above (Berger, 2011; Ross and Cormier, 2010), and Stone acknowledges this debate, bloggers may feel similarly to citizen journalists in the sense that it is unusual for them to be sued. This is possibly because the plaintiff believes that bloggers do not have a large enough following or social influence to cause much damage to their brand. Furthermore, as an independent writer you retain the copyright to all your works, which was not the case with articles submitted to *reporter.co.za* and other citizen journalism platforms.

Stone contributed until the very end and wrote the final article titled: ‘Reporter exemplified what media should be’ (2008). In it he eulogised:

That is precisely what media should be about: the story of the citizen; not the story of the journalists, editors, commentators, analysts; unless they first recognise themselves as citizen and nothing else ‘above’ that. [...] Open up a space for citizens to pretend to be journalists. And then you will realise the true value of what media should be; diverse and unpretending opinions. It is not about sucking up to corporate moguls for an invite to the next elite function, or sucking up to politicians for possibilities of a future job in government. That is what Reporter was not about (Hyde-Clarke, 2010: 44).

Stone says that it was a very sentimental article that was written as a thank you to Johncom for the opportunity to contribute on the platform. When interviewed, Stone (2013) commented on the article: “The last one was very optimistic, I wrote about when *reporter.co.za* comes back, this and that, but we sort of knew that it was not coming back. Why close it in the first place?”

He believes that the reason for its closure was that the business model did not work. “[...] I figured they were expecting to make money from adverts, in news you sell your readers. *Reporter.co.za* was not like *Business Day* limited to business stories, *Financial Mail* limited, *Sunday World* limited, it was everything in one hat and I don’t think advertisers liked that. It’s diverse but it’s not focussed and you’d want to have a target market,” (Stone, 2013).

While Buckland was not a contributor to *reporter.co.za*, as a journalist he wrote about *reporter.co.za* and provided much insight into the venture from his experience as a publisher. His supposition is that there are many possible reasons for the closure of the citizen journalism platform. He notes that the lack of investment, commitment and knowledge from Johncom could have contributed to the closure of *reporter.co.za*. Buckland states that *reporter.co.za*’s model was flawed and that it made no real impact on the media landscape. “I think if the organisation had been truly committed to it, it would have evolved the model and driven it as a business. I think it was outside Times Media’s [Johncom’s] core business model and therefore was not a priority.”

Unlike numerous critics of institutionalised citizen journalism that have been discussed above, Buckland (2013) claims that institutionalised citizen journalism platforms provide the “best of both worlds”: the readers write the content and the institution provides an audience, the technology, digital hosting, and professional resources to ensure that the copy is accurate and well-written. But even in the current online landscape, Buckland (2013) claims that it is difficult to monetise online publications because “Online advertising revenue models are still in a great degree of flux and digital budgets are being disintermediated by the likes of Google and Facebook.”



Maboja (2014) echoes a point made earlier: “Non-institutionalised citizen journalism, on the other hand, I believe, is the essence of journalism. The word ‘institution’ and ‘citizen journalism’ should not, in fact, exist side by side because it’s a direct contradiction of the aims and reasons why citizen journalism was born in the first place.” This form of institutionalised citizen journalism creates tension around what Johncom’s intentions were in the establishment of *reporter.co.za*.

According to Chatz (2013): “Institutionalised media is a biased media. Non-institutionalised media runs the risk of poor quality.” Similarly, Anonymous (2014) noted that:

Independent [non-institutionalised citizen journalism] can be more honest and relate to the person on the street, however it can also be unprofessional or used for people’s private agendas as much as institutionalised media could be. I’m not involved in the media industry as much. From the advertising and corporate worlds, the voice on the street – when honest – can be refreshing, when shared without an agenda (Anonymous [*reporter.co.za* contributor], email comms., 8 January 2014).

Chatz believes that independent bloggers are a notable model for citizen journalism. Were published submissions not incentivised through the payment he says that he would not submit articles. “It was a compensated system of submissions. Articles take time to write and there is no physical copy of your work – as in newspapers,” (Chatz, 2013). Similarly, while at the time Maboja was willing to contribute without payment, as she wanted to build up a portfolio of published works, now that she is a professional journalist she would not contribute work without payment. This illustrates Deeks’ earlier point that professional writers and journalists would rather contribute as freelancers and that therefore the platform did not attract enough of the right kind of contributors. Like Stone, Chatz continued to contribute to *reporter.co.za* until the end. In Chatz’s view (2013): “It [*reporter.co.za*] wasn’t working. Too much spam and junk, and not enough news.”

The contributors noted numerous reasons on their questionnaires as to why they chose to be a part of the citizen journalism platform. For most, it was to promote transparency, hold public officials to account, and to promote thoughtful debate and action among citizens, as well as to build up a portfolio of published work. *Reporter.co.za* needed such active citizens in order to survive, according to Deeks (2013). Perhaps, it was precisely those active citizens, who were ideal citizen journalism contributors, that replied to the researcher's questionnaires. Tatt (2014) believes that *reporter.co.za* allowed for freedom of expression and was transparent: "I tended to believe that what was posted to *reporter.co.za* was from the horse's mouth so to speak." The platform allowed "the true state of the nation to really become apparent to me".

While unsure as to why *reporter.co.za* closed, Anonymous believes that *reporter.co.za* "didn't get a wide enough readership to convince the sponsors [to continue funding it] because media has become a platform in the hands of the public, freely available, and other channels are more popular and viable". Maboja (2014) agrees that "the lack of support for the website, as well as funds to actually pay the journalists" may have been a possible reason for *reporter.co.za*'s closure. She notes that were the platform to receive more promotion and support, it would have fared better and may have still existed today. Tatt (2014) has a politicised view as to why *reporter.co.za* closed, that is in contrast to the other responses: "I fully believe that since so many issues were being raised about the state of affairs within SA that were not mentioned in the mainstream media, that it had to have closed through pressure from the government."

#### **4.4 Document Analysis**

The documents that were analysed assisted the researcher in understanding how Johncom interpreted citizen journalism in their conceptualisation of *reporter.co.za*. Before *reporter.co.za*'s establishment, three articles were

published in two of Johncom's mainstream publications, namely the *Sunday Times* and the *Business Day*<sup>24</sup>.

The platform's goals were outlined as follows (*reporter.co.za*: 2006):

*Reporter.co.za* strives to make its website a comfortable and engaging place, and hope that you will visit often. We welcome your participation in the website. Our goal in offering this website is to encourage the reporting, discussion and debate on a variety of topics, and we wish them to be as open and unfettered as possible.

Each contributor could read the 'Frequently Asked Questions' Press Kit<sup>25</sup> prior to registration, in order to understand the dynamics of how *reporter.co.za* would function. Contributors had to be South African citizens in possession of a national identity document (ID) and needed to register with the website by providing their personal and banking details, so that they could be paid if their submissions were published online and in Johncom's affiliate publications. Contributors were allowed to use a pen name or pseudonym in place of their real name once it was verified with the editorial team, so as to ensure that they were accountable. Upon registration contributors received the platform's code of conduct, legal terms and conditions of use, a copyright agreement, as well as guidelines on how to write stories and the platform's various sections<sup>26</sup>.

The *reporter.co.za* code of conduct strongly resembled a journalistic code of conduct. Its main premises were that a contributor may not: make up anything that is not true, plagiarise or claim work is their own if it is not, use the forum with malicious intent, break the law, misrepresent themselves as a professional reporter or attempt to abuse the position in any way. Furthermore, the code of conduct explained how to attribute information to a

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<sup>24</sup> Articles retrieved from Times Media Group archive on 28 June 2013.

<sup>25</sup> See Appendix 3 in Appendices.

<sup>26</sup> See chronologically numbered appendices for the following documents: code of conduct, legal terms and conditions of use, copyright agreement, guidelines on how to write stories and *reporter.co.za*'s sections.

source and how to reference an idea. The terms also stated that: “Any abuse of this code of conduct will be published on this website, together with the name of the perpetrator. In extreme cases the perpetrator will be named in the columns of the *Sunday Times*, *Sowetan* and other newspapers belonging to the Johncom group,” (*reporter.co.za*: 2006). *Reporter.co.za* also had a corrections policy, similar to that of a media institution, in that uploaded stories and even the archived stories could be corrected after they had been published. “Simple errors can simply be corrected. However, severe errors of fact may require a full, public acknowledgement, an apology and a retraction of that report. In order to ensure the credibility of this website, *reporter.co.za* will publish corrections where required, if and when they arise, on a case-by-case basis,” (*reporter.co.za*: 2006).

Johncom claimed copyright of all the content published on the *reporter.co.za* website, but would not be held liable for any violation of the copyright agreement or plagiarism committed by its contributors, as well as any legal cases arising from the matter. It was not liable for “any loss, damage, injury or expense however caused, arising from the use of, or reliance upon, in any manner, the information or advice provided through this service and does not warrant the truth, accuracy or completeness of the information provided,” (*reporter.co.za*: 2006). While the content was edited and fact checked by the editorial team, so as to ensure that it was truthful and not plagiarised, *reporter.co.za* (2006) stated: “We do not make any representations, nor do we endorse the accuracy, completeness, timeliness or reliability of any advice, opinion, statement or other material or database displayed, uploaded or distributed in this service or available through links in this service. We reserve the right to correct any errors or omissions in this service.” It also held the right to use any of the content for promotional and marketing purposes.

According to the platform’s legal terms and conditions, *reporter.co.za* would not publish anything that was “libellous, defamatory, obscene, pornographic or abusive, or that otherwise violates any law” or incites hate speech, prejudice or violence (*reporter.co.za*: 2006). *Reporter.co.za* reserved the right to delete, move, or edit messages that were inappropriate or unacceptable or found to

be plagiarised. It is, however, inevitable that making use of independent, amateur contributors makes the verification of a story more difficult. While each contributor had to agree to a code of conduct and ethics, there were cases of plagiarism, according to McAuliffe (2013):

We did have a couple of cases of plagiarism, which is something we really had to keep an eye on. There were a couple of reporters for example from Port Elizabeth or East London that were studying journalism and they did plagiarise. They were very unhappy because once we caught them out that first time we then went back through everything and we found that the bulk of that person's contributions were plagiarised. We banned them from the site and we did have a couple of instances where they tried to join again but their information was similar and we picked them up. There were a handful and we became a lot more diligent, we really did.

An article featured in the *Weekend Post*, a Johncom publication, the year following *reporter.co.za*'s closure, quoted Nic Haralambous, general manager of video-sharing site [www.zoopy.com](http://www.zoopy.com), saying the reason for *reporter.co.za*'s closure was that the majority of its content was not factual, which illustrated the need for more stringent gatekeeping<sup>27</sup>.

The citizen journalism platform followed a general newsroom style guide. The editorial team also published daily Newsdesk Reports, which offered useful advice about writing, story length, structure and style, reporting and general tips on how to improve the quality of submissions. These were filed under the Newsdesk archive on *reporter.co.za*, and a selection of these daily reports was also in reverse-chronological order archived under the 'Tips for reporters' section (*reporter.co.za*, 2007). Additionally, the story guidelines also explained how to attribute quotes and facts, provided advice on how to maintain accuracy and the need for more than one independent source.

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<sup>27</sup> According to documentation provided by Michelle Leon, head archivist at Johncom/TMG.

Similarly to a traditional newspaper, *reporter.co.za* had a variety of sections, so as to cater to contributors and readers of different ages and with varied interests. Contributors were provided with a description of each of the sections to guide them as to the angles they could use and the content they could provide for each. *Reporter.co.za* (2006) had four main umbrella sections with numerous sub-sections: News Zone (Eyewitness report, Watchdog role, Holiday news, Youth zone, News from abroad, and Consumer watch); Reviews (Creative art reviews and Technology reviews); Fun Zone (Citizen's arrest and Bad poetry); Community Zone (Events from your life, Sports zone, School report, Do your civic duty, Serving South Africa, and Positively good). The Youth zone encouraged aspiring writers, younger than 18, to share their experiences, whether they were about bullying in the digital age, the use of drugs and alcohol among minors, peer pressure, or a report on an academic trip.

#### **4.5 Findings**

The predominant focus of this research report is the institutionalised nature of *reporter.co.za* and its shortcomings. This is one of many possible reasons for the closure of the citizen journalism platform. The other suggested reasons, and there are many, include: the digital divide; the lack of a business model; not enough subscribers to support advertising; the lack of commitment on Johncom's part in terms of support, financing and allocated workforce; poor marketing and public relations; the poor quality of submissions; and the predominant use of English online in South Africa at the time. These suppositions do not fall into the scope of this research report and have not been investigated as a result. However, other researchers may want to explore these aspects.

There is some evidence, from the semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires, to support the hypothesis that it was the institutionalised nature of *reporter.co.za* that led to its closure. Firstly, contributors may have stopped submitting content or gradually lost interest in *reporter.co.za* due to the fact that their submissions were not guaranteed to be published, only two

or three articles could be featured at a certain time on a particular topic despite numerous submissions, and remuneration and incentives were low in comparison to the required time and effort. Anonymous and Maboja only contributed to *reporter.co.za* twice. McAuliffe (2013) and Deeks (2013) confirmed, based on Berger's (2011) hypothesis, that only a handful of individuals participate in citizen journalism platforms over an extended period of time. Of the 6,000 registered contributors, there were only a few regular, dedicated contributors, such as: Stone, Sithole and Tatt, who contributed throughout the platform's lifespan. The majority contributed a mere few times, while others, despite having registered, never contributed.

Secondly, only selected submissions were published online. Most submissions, according to Saunders (2013) and her editorial team, were not newsworthy or deemed to be of publishable quality and many were 'underwritten' in terms of length and factual details. As a result many submissions were placed into the rejected queue by Padayachee during the selection process. On 07 September 2006, *reporter.co.za* posted a Newsdesk Report titled: "A call on photographers to send in fresh images" (*reporter.co.za*, 2007). *Reporter.co.za* stated that dwindling submissions could have been as a result of the fact that many contributors felt discouraged because their submissions had been rejected based on poor quality:

Where have all the photographers gone? That's the question we've been asking at Reporter in recent weeks as a result of the declining number of photographs received. There has always been a scarcity of hard news photographs, the images that ensure immediate publication because of newsworthiness or quality. On the other hand, we have had an oversupply of images showing the countryside, sunsets and animals. However, probably due to the fact that we have had to reject so many of these photographs, even the number of sunset and pet pictures have declined, (*reporter.co.za*, 2007).

The contributors whose submissions were repeatedly rejected may have turned to other online platforms, such as personal blogs, Facebook, or

YouTube and Vimeo, where there were no quality barriers to entry, where publication was guaranteed and submissions were not selected or edited in any manner. The above excerpt illustrates that contributors' interpretations and expectations of *reporter.co.za* differed from Johncom's conceptualisation of the project. Contributors appeared to be under the impression – despite being directed towards *reporter.co.za*'s Frequently Asked Question Press Kit – that they had relatively free reign in terms of submissions. With time most contributors may have come to the realisation that *reporter.co.za* contradicted the ideological notions of independent, non-institutionalised citizen journalism and that it was harder to be published than expected, thus many may have stopped contributing as a result.

According to the Times Media Group archive, and with the help of Leon (2013), the researcher found that only four articles that were originally submitted to *reporter.co.za* were published in Johncom's mainstream publications during the venture's lifespan. This illustrates that the user-generated content platform did not attract as many high quality hard news and breaking news stories, as it had expected. Perhaps this is because such submissions from eloquent contributors may have been directed to well-established national media institutions first and foremost, where they could receive greater exposure, rather than to the start-up initiative, which did not have a very large or wide readership.

Thirdly, according to Deeks (2013) and Buckland (2006), contributors who were erudite and had a good chance of being published, such as Stone – who also wrote for several similar initiatives at the time – would venture into freelancing or become professional journalists, whereby they would receive standard industry rates as opposed to the nominal pay offered by *reporter.co.za*. These are a few possible reasons as to why *reporter.co.za* did not seem to attract newsworthy and engaging content, which did not produce a large enough readership to attract advertisers and sustain a profitable business model.



Furthermore, a citizen journalism platform differs from traditional media in that the media group does not commission or solicit specific submissions on certain topics, but receives submissions. “There is very little co-ordination between readers, so you may get 50 articles on Bafana one day and a piss poor (sic) piece on politics the next,” (Buckland, 2006). This point is reiterated in a Newsdesk Report published on 22 August 2006: “[...] many articles that end up in the rejected queue are perfectly good reports. This is especially the case when there is a big running story i.e. the Zuma trial. We could end up with more than a dozen reports on this one issue. We obviously can’t use them all. For the site to be interesting to all readers, we would only be able to use two or three articles on any one issue at most.”

*Reporter.co.za* admitted that the selection and editing process was biased: “This decision is subjective and mostly depends on supply and demand. One day we may have a number of excellent articles about similar topics, but only one or two can be chosen,” (*reporter.co.za*, 2007). The selection process may have discouraged contributors as well. In fact the *reporter.co.za* editorial team received numerous questions about the selection and editing process, which is why the above mentioned Newsdesk Report was published.

Due to the fact that *reporter.co.za* did not commission or solicit particular stories, it could not guarantee the subject matter or quality of published material to potential advertisers. Some advertisers prefer targeted content that attracts a certain demographic of readers, so that they can direct their advertisements accordingly.

The shortcomings of an institutionalised citizen journalism platform that is co-opted by a media institution such as Johncom, means that *reporter.co.za* was at times sidelined as the focus remained on the bigger, lucrative ventures in the company that had a clearly defined business model. According to McAuliffe (2013): “At the time we had so many online websites that it [*reporter.co.za*] went into the queue and other things were more important. *The Sunday Times* site needed an overhaul, *reporter.co.za* sorry you’re going to have to wait and then *Business Day* needed an overhaul. And all of the

publications took priority, they basically keep the building going.” It appears that within Johncom, *reporter.co.za* was perceived to be a side project that received minimal attention, funding and manpower.

*Reporter.co.za* did not have a dedicated, full-time editorial, online and marketing team whose sole focus was the venture. “There were a couple of people who went out to schools, universities trying to encourage more people to come on board and to join citizen journalism. I would say that a lot of people who were there from the start up, we slowly lost them. So, we lost the team as such, those who were going out and then those people weren’t replaced, so that also had something to do with it,” (McAuliffe, 2013). The above quote illustrates that Johncom did not attribute enough funding or manpower to prioritise the project and treat it with the same importance that it treated its profitable ventures. Buckland (2013) also noted this point earlier. As a result, it was difficult to expect the same level of quality and output of *reporter.co.za* as of Johncom’s other mainstream, online ventures.

Just as the majority of personal blogs do not have as big and loyal an audience as online mainstream media publications, the same is evident for institutionalised citizen journalism platforms. There may be numerous reasons for this. One of them is the quality of posts, due to the fact that the contributors are not qualified or trained professionally as writers or journalists and as a result their writing skills may have been lacking. If this is the case it may discourage potential readers who have limited time and would rather utilise that time reading news from media institutions that are professional, trusted, verified, and have built up rapport with their readers. Secondly, the frequency of posts by a single contributor may be limited as well, due to the fact that they are not professional, full-time writers and have professions and other responsibilities. However, the frequency of posts in general may be counteracted as such platforms have multiple contributors.

Furthermore, the lack of financial resources and media accreditation means that citizen journalists can seldom pursue a story or an investigation for weeks or months, as a professional journalist could. In most cases, they are

employed elsewhere or engaged otherwise, for example studying or working. As a result citizen journalism predominantly revolves around crisis reporting (Allan, 2007: 17), whereby the individual is at the right place at the right time or is an eyewitness to a newsworthy event or natural disaster, but does not go out actively searching for stories.

According to McAuliffe (2013), the digital divide and computer literacy were major deterrents for the average South African who wanted to contribute to the platform. Wi-Fi hotspots were limited, 3G had not yet been launched in South Africa and a dial-up Internet connection was rather expensive. All submissions had to be submitted electronically and photographs had to be submitted in a certain format, which was another deterrent she claims. "There were times when I had to go through the process with them and advise them on free software they could obtain, so that they could convert their photos. People weren't as tech savvy and a lot has changed," (L. McAuliffe, personal comms., 02 December 2013).

This research report has indicated that both institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms of citizen journalism have their advantages and disadvantages for contributors and readers; and in the former case for the media institutions that have co-opted them. It is difficult to suggest which form of citizen journalism is the most appropriate or effective. Rebelo (2008: 33) states that: "[...] there is no such thing as a perfect model of citizen journalism, but there is also no supreme value that we should take in consideration when talking about independent reporting, no matter if it comes from a citizen reporter or a professional reporter working in a newsdesk."

McAuliffe (2013) suggests that media institutions need to consider what they want to get out of establishing a citizen journalism platform in the first place, whether it be editorial independence, an alternative reading of the status quo or a source of potential leads for mainstream media institutions. They also need to consider the amount of finances and resources, manpower, and attention they are willing to attribute to it, and the platform should be established and aligned accordingly.

Perhaps citizen journalism's greatest target audience are those individuals who want alternative sources of information that are located outside of the mainstream media and present an alternative perspective. However, should audiences want alternative media they may also avoid institutionalised citizen journalism platforms because they are aware that the media institution is involved in the agenda setting, selection and editing processes. The seemingly independent institutionalised citizen journalism platform therefore indirectly adopts the ideology and perspective of the media institution that governs it, even if this is not the intention. This target audience would therefore look elsewhere.

Banda (2010) notes that the African media space was not ready to engage with a citizen journalism project at the time of *reporter.co.za*'s establishment. There were Internet accessibility issues that remain to this day that made it impossible or very difficult for the majority of South Africans to access and contribute to this citizen journalism platform. In addition, people were, and some remain, not ready for such alternative platforms. It will take time to ease them into adopting these concepts (Banda, 2010). McAuliffe (2013) agrees: "The idea at the time was fabulous, but I think that it was ahead of its time. With the lack of technology [...] also prospective advertisers [were] looking at, not the world, but South Africa that actually had access to even see their paid for advertising on that portal." This illustrates that the business model was not viable at the time.

Lastly, there were direct links from *The Sowetan* and *The Sunday World* websites, two Johncom publications, to *reporter.co.za* and vice versa, so as to gather a larger readership (McAuliffe, 2013). "[The fact that *reporter.co.za* was owned by Johncom] was not immediately transparent on the *reporter.co.za* site, although it was not hidden either," (Hyde-Clarke, 2010: 44). However, through its affiliation with and support from a major media institution, *reporter.co.za* contravened the core ideological principles of citizen journalism.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This research report considered how mainstream media institutions conceptualise institutionalised citizen journalism platforms that they co-opt as part of their brand. This study analysed how Johncom went about co-opting *reporter.co.za*. It highlighted that the ideological conceptualisations of an independent citizen journalism platform are vastly different from the practical implementation of the institutionalised form, due to the fact that it is not independent, which is the predominant premises on which citizen journalism is based.

The research report also provided critical analysis of *reporter.co.za*'s strengths and weaknesses as a result of its union with a mainstream media institution. The study considered why the venture failed through a case study analysis that included document analysis, semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires with *reporter.co.za*'s editorial and management teams as well as with its contributors. The findings illustrate that the institutionalised nature of the platform may have been one of the reasons that led to *reporter.co.za*'s closure. Inevitably, there are numerous other possible reasons that may have led to its closure, but these were not within the scope of this research report. However, numerous participants in the study believe that the lack of a structured business model and dedicated resources from Johncom – both in terms of finances and manpower – may be another predominant reason for the platform's closure.

Contributors may have lost interest in *reporter.co.za* as all submissions were not guaranteed publication as is the case with other independent citizen journalism platforms. Instead, those that were selected for publication were edited and the payment received was nominal. Many participants of this research report, some of whom also established co-opted citizen journalism platforms, believe that the minimal pay and few incentives may have been another deterrent to loyal and sustained involvement in the initiative. Due to the above mentioned reasons, potential contributors may have chosen to contribute to other online platforms where publication was guaranteed, such

as personal blogs or video platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo, where submissions are not selected or edited.

Furthermore, those contributors who decided to blog instead had the opportunity to make more money from placing advertisements on their blog, if their content was particularly interesting and they had a big enough readership. Erudite contributors were most likely attracted to freelancing because they could receive standard industry rates, a greater readership and thus more exposure.

As was noted in the editor's final post, *reporter.co.za*'s readers and the public used it more as a forum for commentary on the daily news stories that were reported by mainstream media institutions rather than as a platform for breaking news, hard news stories and newsworthy content.

All of the editors quoted within the research report agree that citizen journalism platforms are highly regarded as an added-value component to mainstream media, and that it should not replace any part of the mainstream media, but rather supplement it. One can argue whether or not *reporter.co.za* fulfilled its mandate, however, it did not amass enough loyal subscribers to attract advertisers and drive a business model, and as a result it closed down.

## Chapter 6: Appendices

### Appendix 1: South African Newspaper Circulation Figures

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Average circulation January–June 2005</b>	<b>Average circulation January–June 2006</b>	<b>Percentage Variance</b>
<i>Saturday Star</i>	141,754	135,936	– 4.1
<i>Soccer Laduma</i>	157,016	197,316	– 25.7
<i>Sowetan</i>	192,006	203,352	– 5.9
<i>Sunday World</i>	43,873	65,391	– 49.0
<i>The Star</i>	168,013	163,746	– 2.5
<i>Sun Independent</i>	42,653	40,875	– 4.2
<i>Sunday Times</i>	504,845	506,474	+ 0.3
<i>Sunday Tribune</i>	112,440	108,339	– 3.6
<i>Volksblad</i>	33,948	32,788	– 3.4

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) audited circulation figures: January 2005 – June 2006 (Goko, 2006: 98).

## Appendix 2: Reporter.co.za Rate Card



### Rates and creative sizes

Creative	Position	Dimensions (pixels)	Max. size	Rates (cent/impression)	
				Homepage	Site page
Leaderboard	Top of site position above reporter.co.za banner	750 X 60	15k	0.25	0.20
Box	Positioned on home page and section pages	120 X 120	10k	0.22	0.19
Island	Inserted in various positions dependent on the page	180 X 150	12k	0.25	0.20
Skyscraper	Right hand side of page	120 X 400 or 120 X 600	15k	0.25	0.20
Rich Media	Dependent on rich media requested	180 X 150 or 120 X 120	15k	0.40	0.35

Source: Tegan Bedser, former web producer for *reporter.co.za*.



### **Appendix 3: *Reporter.co.za* Frequently Asked Questions Press Kit**

**Q: I'm interested, but what do I need to know before I start?**

**A:** For help on becoming a published reporter, a good place to start would be to read the tips and advice we give in the Reporter Resources zone.

You can view all of the advice once you have registered and logged in to the website. Look for the reporter resources zone on the black bar at the top of the page.

For more guidance, please read the daily Newsdesk Reports we are writing.

**Q: What kind of news do you want?**

**A:** We would like this to be a news website, so that's your starting point.

Think about what would be interesting to read, as well as to write.

This is why news stories, well-researched features and humorous writing will get more attention.

Having said that, don't be scared to try. Perhaps some contributors feel that they have to expose a national scandal or find corruption before they send in a contribution? That's not the case. We do hope to break national stories and uncover scandals, but we are also very interested in what is happening in your town or city. What seems like a mundane story can become an interesting tale once you get out there speaking to people.

If something interests you, it's likely to be of interest to many other people.

One of the most important things we will achieve with [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za) is to give you, the public, the right to determine what you regard as "news".

Now is the time to start making your views felt.

We would like to see more articles from you on topics which you would never find in the usual printed or online newspaper. It will take us time to find out what our readers and contributors deem to be important. At the moment we all really only have other newspapers to base expectations on - but we need to break the mould. The opportunity to make changes is endless.

Come on reporters, CHANGE THE WAY WE SEE NEWS!

**Q: How do I find out if my story will be published?**

**A:** By visiting the website regularly!

**Q: Are you in print and on the Internet?**

**A:** Reporter.co.za is an Internet product.

People register online, send in stories or photos online and then we publish the items that we have selected onto the website.

**Q: What are the incentives for people to join up?**

**A:** - Giveaways for registered members - Mainstream exposure to the masses - Publish your works for a global - Small tip-off payment for published material - If it is a hot breaking news alert, we have the capacity to negotiate publication of the story or picture in our Group print publications, with commensurate payment. - Registered reporters will have access to a Virtual Newsroom where they will learn about the news process and valuable tricks of the trade. This is a brilliant opportunity for people to publish their work with the guidance of experienced journalists.

**Q: How do I register?**

**1)** Open up an Internet Web browser page and type in the address  
www.reporter.co.za

Once you are seeing this website, look for a box at the top right corner (in the black bar) and click on either the JOIN or REGISTER buttons. This will take you to a registration page, where you can fill in your details.

Remember the email address and password you have entered.

**2)** Now go to the email account that you typed in, and open up your Inbox.

Once you are there you will see an email from reporter admin. Open the email and in the text field, it will ask you to click on a link.

Once you click on it, it will validate your registration.

You will then get this message:

Thank you, you have been successfully added to the system. You can now log in. We look forward to receiving content from you.

**3)** You then go BACK TO the top of the reporter WEBSITE. You will need to enter in your log-on email address and a password - the one you chose for the reporter website.

Now you click on the LOG IN button (not the register button this time), and you are ready to send a story or photo. Just look for the big buttons that say Submit Article or Submit Picture etc.

Happy reporting! We are looking forward to seeing what you send in.

**Q: I'm registered, but how do I send a story?**

**A:** To submit material, please open a web page to [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za), where you will need to enter in your log-on email address and a password.

Now you click on the LOG IN button (not the register button this time), and you are ready to send a story or photo. Just look for the red buttons that say Submit Article or Submit Picture etc.

**Q: Why don't we pay more?**

**A:** The thinking behind this business model is that we should pay everyone something, rather than bigger sums to a select few.

While it is a token sum, it does add up if you contribute multiple items that are published each week, as some people are doing. And, while it's not much for the individual, it adds up a lot for us as a company over the course of a month, quarter and a year. The overall budget is not small.

The sums get bigger if people send us stories that our print partners are interested in publishing, such as breaking news events or well-researched feature articles.

But we cannot deny that for most people, this would not apply. Rather, they would be contributing to [reporter.co.za](http://reporter.co.za):

- for the fun of it, or - to have their voices heard on a public stage, or - to describe a news event they have witnessed, or - to raise issues or topics that would otherwise not make it into mainstream media.

If you do not want to be paid, you can tell us to donate the money to a charity.

**Q: Do you have a job for me? Why aren't you hiring professional reporters for this website?**

**A:** Reporter.co.za is a news website written entirely by its readers.

We publish articles, images, audio and video from ordinary members of the public.

Internationally, this is called citizen journalism, or grassroots journalism.

If someone with journalistic aspirations is interested in submitting work to reporter.co.za, it would not be for the money. Rather, it would be a vehicle for them to build up a portfolio of published work.

**Q: Would you accept cartoons/caricatures?**

**A:** Yes.

Firstly, it needs to be your own original work.

Secondly, the work should be sent through in either a jpg or gif format, and the width of the piece should be at least 1000 pixels wide so that it can be sized down to fit into the framework of the website.

You would upload it as a multi-media image via the reporter zone, once you're registered and logged in. It would have to be less than 4 meg (which is the maximum, you should be fine if you are scanning it in at 1-1/2 megs)

**Q: How do I submit an article?**

**A:** Once you are logged in, you would click on the "submit article" button.

Once in the article page, select a category from the dropdown list that best fits your article (news, fun, columnists and community).

Fill out the fields (a headline, a short summary and then the text of your story),

making sure to be aware of the character count.

If you want to submit your story without a multimedia element (meaning a photograph, audio clip or video file), go ahead and click submit (please note that once you click submit, the story is in the subbing queue and cannot be changed by you).

If you do want to attach a picture to your article, click on the "add multimedia button" at the bottom of the page. When in the add multimedia page, specify which type of file it is from the dropdown menu.

Type a caption for it, making sure to describe what the photograph is about and where it was taken, and verifying who the photographer is. If it's a people picture, identify them please.

What you do now is click on the browse button, and in the file window that opens, locate your file and click "open". (The picture will need to be on your computer already).

Then click "upload". This will take you back to your story. If you are happy with your content, click submit to send it to the subs. (Please note that once you click submit, the story is in the subbing queue and cannot be changed by you).

**Q: Can I send a photo/multi-media item just by itself, not with a story?**

**A:** Yes.

To add a standalone multimedia file (pictures, audio, video and info graphics), click on the "add multimedia picture/audio/video" button, or use the top navigation under the "my multimedia" tab.

Once in the multimedia page, select a category from the dropdown list that best fits your article.

Then specify which type of file it is from the dropdown menu, and include a caption for it.

Then click on the browse button, and in the file window that opens, locate your file and click "open".

Then click "upload". (Please note that once you click submit, your multimedia item is in the subbing queue and cannot be edited).

**Q: Why can't I just email you my story?**

**A:** Stories and multi-media items have to be submitted via the website in order to be published. This is because we need to know the item comes from a registered reporter, in order to have some credibility, and because the item needs to be recorded on the database. Plus we can't pay anyone if the articles aren't on the system, because the computer generates the payment data.

**Q: Why is the website on a big desktop size, so you have to scroll sideways?**

**A:** Recent research shows that a majority of Internet users are using 1024 x 768 or greater screen resolution. The same research showed that only 30% of users use 800 x 600, down sharply from previous years, where 800 x 600 was the norm.

Using this research, we at [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za), decided to use 1024 x 768 to cater for the majority of Internet users, but also to take advantage of the crisper, cleaner design that the format offered.

**Q: Does it cost anything?**

**A:** No. The website is free.

#### **Appendix 4: Reporter.co.za Code of Conduct**

I understand that I may not:

- **Make up anything that is not true.** Everything you write must be based on fact or actual events, for which you must be prepared to stand up and account for in the event of that report being questioned on the grounds of accuracy or fairness, or on ethical grounds.

- **Claim the work is my own, if it is not.** For instance, it is not your own work if it is based on something you have heard it from someone else or read it somewhere else, whatever the medium, whether you've overheard it, or was on radio or television, on the Internet, in a book, from an essay etc. If you want to refer to something sourced from someone else, clearly state what the source is immediately alongside the information.

- **Use this forum with malicious intent.** This site is not for you to use against someone you have a grudge with, for instance.

- **Break the law.** In the process of gathering information or taking a photograph, do not break the law yourself. There is a distinction between laws and rules, however. If you witness a newsworthy event, for example a cop soliciting a bribe, or you want to illustrate how over-crowded a hospital is, you may photograph that and send it in. But you may not break into a shop and then send in a photograph of the break-in! Every person is subject to the laws of the country they live in.

- **Misrepresent myself as a professional reporter.** Professional journalists have to be employed in a professional capacity by a recognizable corporate entity, and be registered with the Press Council of SA. Both of these entities compel adherence to a code of conduct and ethical as well as journalistic standards that professional journalists bind themselves to.

- **Attempt to abuse the position in any way.**

You may not attempt to use this forum to gain access to people or institutions



you have a complaint with, to threaten or attempt to intimidate anyone, or solicit free tickets to an event of any kind, or accept gifts of any kind from anyone in return for you writing about them. There are no exceptions to these rules of behaviour.

Any abuse of this Code of Conduct will be published on this website, together with the name of the perpetrator. In extreme cases the perpetrator will be named in the columns of the Sunday Times, Sowetan and other newspapers belonging to the Johncom group.

I agree to abide by this Code of Conduct.

### **Corrections Policy for reporter.co.za**

Start off by asking yourself: Do I know this to be a fact?

If you have any doubts at all, do not write it or submit it for public consumption, whether it's one sentence in your report, or you are unable to identify a particular sound on your audio clip or a particular image on your video footage. Be especially careful with details like names, titles, dates, times etc

If, however, an error or mistake should occur in your report, acknowledge it immediately.

The sooner it is corrected, the better. By speedily correcting a mistake, you can limit the number of readers who would otherwise gain a false impression of an issue or an event.

Even if you realize some time after the event that a mistake has crept in, acknowledge it and correct it. This is so that you do not let the error stand as if it were correct and true. The records can be corrected for archival purposes too.

The policy towards corrections will vary depending on the severity of the error.

Simple errors can simply be corrected. However, severe errors of fact may require a full, public acknowledgement, an apology and a retraction of that report. In order to ensure the credibility of this website, [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za) will publish corrections where required, if and when they arise, on a case-by-case basis.

Please also read our [Legal Terms and Conditions](#) for additional information and guidance on this issue.

## **Appendix 5: Reporter.co.za Legal Terms and Conditions**

### **LEGAL TERMS AND CONDITIONS FOR REPORTER.CO.ZA**

Welcome to [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za). Please read the following Terms of Use Agreement and our policies on Privacy and Posting of material. By continuing to use [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za) you agree to abide by the terms of these documents.

[www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za) strives to make its website a comfortable and engaging place, and hope that you will visit often. We welcome your participation in the website. Our goal in offering this website is to encourage the reporting, discussion and debate on a variety of topics, and we wish them to be as open and unfettered as possible.

By posting content at [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za), a user is giving [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za) the right to display such content on the website and its affiliated publications and to use such content for promotional and marketing purposes.

We require our users to follow a few basic guidelines:

- Users cannot upload to the website, or distribute or otherwise publish through it, anything that is libelous, defamatory, obscene, pornographic or abusive, or that otherwise violates any law.
- [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za) can be used only in a noncommercial manner. You cannot, without the express approval of [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za), distribute or otherwise publish material containing any solicitation of funds, advertising or solicitation of goods or services.
- Any information users disclose when posting a message at [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za) becomes public. [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za) users should also be aware that, when users voluntarily disclose personal information, that information may be collected by others and may result in unsolicited messages from others.
- While we do not and cannot review every message posted at [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za) and are not responsible for the content of these

messages, we reserve the right to delete, move, or edit messages that we deem abusive, defamatory, obscene, in violation of copyright or trademark laws, or otherwise unacceptable. We reserve the right to remove the posting privileges of users who violate these standards of forum behavior at any time.

- Repeatedly posting off-topic items or "spamming" our website by posting the same message in multiple topics or otherwise deliberately disrupting our website is unacceptable behavior that may result in the user's losing all privileges and access to our site. We reserve the right to prohibit users who in any way violate acceptable behavior from participating in our site. Users remain solely responsible for the content of their messages.

By continuing to use [www.reporter.co.za](http://www.reporter.co.za), you agree to abide by the terms of this policy.

## **Appendix 6: Reporter.co.za Copyright Declaration**

### **COPYRIGHT**

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## Appendix 7: Reporter.co.za Story Guidelines

### STORY GUIDELINES FOR REPORTER.CO.ZA

#### Language and style tips

You want people to understand you, so please follow these tips:

- Articles should be in English.
- Write simply. Use common words to describe something.
- Keep your sentences short, preferably with no more than one thought per sentence. Long complicated sentences with words used inappropriately means your readers will:
  - (a) get bored
  - (b) lose your train of thought.
  -
- A sentence should have a fact in it. If it doesn't, it must be there to explain something, elaborate on something, or substantiate something. Or it can be a comment or remark that you think is important to the story. In which case, put in quotation marks if this is something that someone else is saying to you.
- Always use people's first names and their surnames, and indicate their gender (man/woman). If you are referring to a child, please supply the child's age.
- Finally, use a spell check (SA or UK English, not American) if you have it on your computer.

#### Story structure

Start with an event, or a fact.

Use active tense. Tell us **What, When, Who, Where, How** and **Why**

(ie *What* happened/is going to happen? *When* did it happen/is it happening? *Who* did it happen to? *Who* said this? *Where* is this? Give us the street, suburb and city. *How* come this is happening? Or, *how* is it happening? *Why* did it happen/why is it happening?) *Who* is the story about? *Who* are your attributing statements of fact to?



Then ask yourself: So What? Why should your readers care about this? Does your story explain the context or relevance of the news you are reporting? It must, otherwise people won't want to read it.

### **Sourcing**

Where did you get the information from? Make it clear next to each sentence or fact you introduce to your story. Remember to give their full name - as well as their titles, if you are quoting them and it relates to the article.

### **Quotes / Attributing comments to other people**

If you are quoting someone, then use their exact wording in its entirety.

Don't take people's words and use them inappropriately. Their comments must be in context of a discussion or the event you are re-telling.

You can only put quote marks around a sentence attributed to someone else if you have recorded exactly what they said, in their own words.

You need to write it down at the same time someone is saying it, or tape it on a recording device that you then transcribe.

### **Accuracy**

When in Doubt, Leave it Out.

This is a golden rule. While there may be exceptions to some rules, this is one you have to remember - always.

Another good rule is: Always double-check names and numbers.

There is a responsibility on a reporter to make the effort to ensure that the facts are right. Being unaware of this is not an excuse, nor is being lazy.

If you get something wrong by being careless, you could be in trouble. It may be a small thing, in which case someone may catch you out and embarrass you publicly, or it could be something serious that could lead to you facing legal action.

A good habit to get into would be to make sure that at least two people tell

you the same fact. Stories with only one source are one-sided, and weak. This does not apply to the columnist section, where articles are clearly an opinion on a particular topic.

For more advice about this, please read our sections on the Citizen Reporter's Code of Conduct, Corrections Policy and Legal Terms and Conditions.

### **Article Length**

It is up to you. This is a website, so you can write as much as your readers will find interesting.

A rule of thumb is to write from about 200 words up to 400 words depending on the importance of the news you are reporting.

Longer or shorter articles may be accepted on a case-by-case basis.

## **Appendix 8: Reporter.co.za Sections**

### **SECTIONS FOR REPORTER.CO.ZA**

#### **NEWS ZONE**

##### **Eyewitness To:**

If you just happen to be on the scene when something happens, report it as it is happening. Describe it. Ask people standing around you what they saw, and what they think about it. Quote them. Send in your story, with any photographs you may be able to take with your digital camera or your cellphone camera. Do you know how to record video or audio clips? Send that in too.

##### **Be a Watchdog:**

Take up an issue in an impartial way, by photographing or reporting on it factually. For instance, send in a photograph of an overcrowded ward in a hospital, with details like the time, date and place you took it as well as a written description of what you are wanting to illustrate. Whatever the issue or event, please just remember to keep yourself safe - no picture is worth your life - and do not break the law yourself in the process.

##### **Holiday News:**

It's summer and it's the end of the year. Are you having fun? What's cool - where? Do you know about a hot event? Where is the place to be for New Year's? How expensive are restaurants, clubs and hotels at the coast this year? What's the top music track that people are listening to over this holiday season? What issues are on your mind as we prepare for 2006? Write about it. Be informative and entertaining.

##### **Youth Zone:**

You don't have to be over-18 to report the news. In fact, do you want adults to be speaking for you? If not, this is your space. Make it what it you will. Come

on: write articles you think other people your age will be interested in reading... For instance, the social issues you may be dealing with in your life or at your school could make for very interesting stories, on topics as diverse as the latest fashion trends to schoolground bullies or coping with ADHD, the drug scene or the clubbing scene. Interview your friends or people your own age when you're out and about - with their consent of course, telling them it's for this website.

### **News from Abroad:**

If you're an expat, why not give us news from abroad? You could give a first-hand eyewitness view to news events like the Paris riots, the London bombings, living in Indonesia after the bomb blasts etc etc You could give us input into the social/political issues your adopted country is dealing with, or pass on what you've learnt from your experiences (like their own problems with crime and what they are doing about it, how your new country is tackling job creation or trying to grow the economy, or if it's got a good public transport system that SA could learn from). Otherwise, you could write descriptive articles on the city/town you're living in, taking up social issues like how to become assimilated in a new culture, and how that place's municipal system or voting procedure works. Basically, give all of us back in SA a thing or two to think about.

### **Consumer Watch:**

Report on good or bad products/service - provided you give the companies involved the chance to respond to the complaint. Remember, a reporter must present a scenario and let the readers make up their own minds. You are not a reporter if you just give your own opinion. Yes, we know this is harder than just spewing out venom!

## **REVIEWS**

### **Creative Art Reviews:**

Have you been to the movies, listened to a music band you want to tell people

about, attended an interesting exhibition or been to a great/dreadful theatre show? Become a Creative Art Reviewer for [reporter.co.za](http://reporter.co.za)

### **Technology Review:**

Are you using hi-tech gadgets and keen to share your insights about the pros and cons? Do you know about a new virus doing the rounds that you can warn other people about - whether on a PC or cellphone? Do everybody else a favour by report on it.

## **THE FUN ZONE**

### **Make a Citizen's Arrest:**

Is there something or someone who is letting the community down? Make a 'cyberspace citizen's arrest' to teach them the error of their ways. In a humorous way please. We don't want to get sued to hell and gone.

### **Bad poetry corner:**

Do you have a knack for writing limericks?

Do you have a funny way with words?

We want some irreverent humour. So come on all of you - try to work a smile out of us!

## **Q&A - BECOME AN INTERVIEWER**

If you have access to a newsworthy/society/sport personality, then a Q&A style interview could make for interesting reading. You can display it with your questions, and the answers your interviewee gives you.

We would recommend using a tape recorder during the interview, so you can transcribe all the comments accurately when you're back at your computer.

## **COMMUNITY ZONE**

**Events from your life:**

An events calendar where you can alert people to anything interesting that's coming up, whether it's a concert in your area or a speech at a Rotary Club or a big school event.

**Sport Zone:**

Are you part of a social league that is so much fun - or so competitive - that you want to write about it? Does your 'varsity team get publicity? Is your child keen on a sport that gets no publicity? Well, report on it. You can report about the state of that sport in South Africa, publish your fixtures and results, report on the end-of-season deciders... You name it. This is your zone.

**School Report:**

Post your school sport results and write about issues affecting school coaches and how schools can organize team sponsorships. Report on your end-of-year matric results, accompanied by interviews on how the results compare with previous years and what has impacted on the results. Teachers and administrators, what about sharing information on the preparation of lesson plans, how to mentor promising pupils and the best way to go about accessing bursaries?

**Do Your Civic Duty:**

Put municipal officials and your neighbours on good behaviour: Report on people despoiling nature and polluters of any description, activities in your area's parks, noise levels, out-of-order traffic lights, peak-time traffic gridlocks, the state of play with your area's municipal water pipes and electricity readings, illegal fireworks displays. Or anything else you can think of..... Come on, be a responsible resident of your town or city.

**Serving SA:**

Do you know anything about the people who serve you every day? Why don't you start asking them, and tell us what's interesting about them. What if the person behind your supermarket check-out counter is a volunteer charity worker in her spare time? Or the garage mechanic you see once a year may

be a drag racer at weekends? Find out. And then tell the rest of us. Everyone is interesting if you ask the right question.

**Positively Good:**

Want to praise someone? As long as you're not pressuring your friends to write about you, why not? For instance, is there a community policing forum volunteer who is doing good things? Did someone save your dog from harm? Share with us.

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