

Study highlights benefits of user-generated content to digital platform

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Many online platforms (e.g., Huffpost, Wikipedia) host user-generated

content (UGC) and content developed by professional reporters.

In a new study, researchers examined data from more than 120 local news outlets hosted by a large online news platform in Austria to determine how UGC by citizen journalists affected the amount and type of content produced by professional journalists and considered the implications that these spillover effects might have for users' engagement with the platform.

The study found that as experienced citizen journalists reduced their production of content, inexperienced professional journalists increased their output, which led to a decline in overall content hosted by the platform and a drop in overall viewership.

The study was conducted by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University, Copenhagen Business School, Nova School of Business and Economics, and Ludwig-Maximilians University. It is published in *Management Science*.

"Digitization has led many online platforms to leverage user-generated content for tasks that professionals have historically conducted," explains Ananya Sen, assistant professor of information technology and management at Carnegie Mellon's Heinz College, who led the study.

"The content and behavior of users and professionals on these platforms have been mostly studied in isolation, which means the interactions within the platforms—which can have important implications for [online communities](#) and strategy—remain largely unexplored."

Sen and his colleagues used data from an [online platform](#) used by a network of local newspapers covering Austria. The platform attracts 2.2 million users monthly and consists of 122 local outlets published by 77 regional offices. Articles are written by professional journalists directly

employed and paid by the platform, as well as by unpaid citizen journalists. Articles from both sources are published chronologically without editorial intervention.

Until September 2018, the platform used a status index to recognize the contributions of citizen journalists, awarding them points for writing [news articles](#) and receiving comments. When the platform updated its software, the status index was taken away, which removed a nonmonetary incentive.

Researchers used this change as an external shock to the platform's supply of UGC to identify the spillover effects between UGC and content developed by professional journalists. Among the study's findings:

- Experienced citizen journalists reduced their production of content or left the platform when the status index was removed.
- Experienced professional journalists did not change their behavior, but inexperienced professional journalists increased their output.
- There was an overall reduction in the amount of content hosted by the platform, especially in terms of local news and from more isolated regions.
- This had detrimental effects for the platform, with a decline in overall engagement by users (as measured by clicks on articles), especially for local news; the platform may have needed to hire and pay salaries to additional [professional journalists](#) to produce enough articles to close the gap left by the departing [citizen journalists](#).

The study's findings highlight the importance of understanding platforms as complex ecosystems. Given the spillovers between UGC and the content developed by professionals, the authors suggest that [online](#)

[platforms](#) do not treat professionals and amateurs as separate markets and that they identify the interdependencies between these interacting sets of contributors to maximize [platform](#) engagement and revenue.

"Prior research has mostly highlighted the harmful effects of digital platforms on local news, but we offer a [different perspective](#) by analyzing the fundamental role of UGC," suggests Pedro Ferreira, professor of engineering and [public policy](#) at Carnegie Mellon's Heinz College, who co-authored the study.

"By pooling diverse and dispersed users with similar interests and involving them in producing local news, digital platforms can facilitate access to local news in areas that otherwise might not get enough attention and could otherwise become news deserts."

More information: Ananya Sen et al, (How) Does User-Generated Content Impact Content Generated by Professionals? Evidence from Local News, *Management Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1287/mnsc.2023.4962](#)

Provided by Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz College

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