

Is this the future of news? An examination of *Samoa Topix*

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## **Abstract**

News in general still relies upon the ethical norms of traditionally responsible news values, such as balance, fairness and objectivity. However, recent research has found that mainstream newspapers are adapting to how readers now wish to engage with the news online – encouraging citizen journalism and commentary to “construct a more pluralist and democratic debate about matters of public interest” (Franklin, 2008, p. 631). Some have argued that by adopting tenets of public journalism, mainstream news media are promoting democratic ideals and embracing what have historically been viewed as alternative media practices. This research aims to examine how one particular example from the global *Topix* news organization creates and disseminates its news online. *Topix* makes an impressively bold statement on their website that they have “combined the best technology with the strongest local participation to create the best destination for news and discussion. By giving everyone access to the tools to talk – and an audience to listen – *Topix* redefines what it means to make the news” (*About Topix*, 2011). *Samoa Topix* claims to be a “leading news community”, “continually updated”, with “thousands of sources” that gives “everyone access,” but how are these transparent and pluralistic claims supported by reality on their web site and what can this case study tell us about journalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

This paper examines *Samoa Topix* as a case study of how news is created in an online, participatory context. *Samoa Topix* claims to be a “leading news community”, “continually updated”, with “thousands of sources” that gives “everyone access,” but how are these claims supported by reality and evidence on the web site? This study will explore whether *Samoa Topix*, as a case study of online news aggregation and journalistic discussion forums, offers “a more pluralist and democratic debate” (Franklin, 2008, p. 631); whether the discussion in forums relates to the news content in any way; if the news stories that *Samoa Topix* aggregates are dependent upon traditional approaches to journalism and if the news topics on *Samoa Topix* are similar to the news topics in the Samoa Observer, the national newspaper of record in Samoa. There has been much research exploring the possibilities of online journalism within the participatory and pluralist context of native reporting. This research hopes to better understand the present capabilities and limitations of online journalism through a case study of *Samoa Topix*.

### **What is online news?**

Journalism, in the broadest sense, examines proximate topics that involve prominent individuals and have broad effects (MacDougall & Reid, 1987). Using these unique qualities as the foundation for growth, mainstream journalism has evolved into a modern bureaucratic network of organizations that aim to observe and objectively document events in a shared reality (Davis, 1996). Yet, like all cultural institutions (Williams, 1977), journalism’s norms and practices are constantly changing. The notion of journalism as a solidified foundation of institutionalized practices, such as news beats and organizational routines (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) continues to exist on one level. While some recent research has questioned this underlying presumption that all media, including newer multimedia content, is equally driven by consistent routines and norms (Keith, 2010), there is still the widespread assumption that some similarities in media routines, organizational influences, extramedia influences, ideological influences and individual influences exist across the journalistic spectrum. Alongside this expanding discussion is the notion that news is a manufactured representation from a decidedly elite ideology (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Tuchman, 1978) - a position further problematized by the increasingly egalitarian online sphere of communication.

Perhaps because of these tensions, contemporary journalism is still largely, and perhaps reflexively, viewed as both the result of cultural influences (Gitlin, 1980; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Robert, 1978) and largely still a professionalized embodiment of reality, which continues to follow a traditional adherence to ethical norms such as balance, fairness (Singer, 2006) and objectivity (Deuze, 2005). Embedded within these ethical norms has been a maintenance to what could be called responsible news values (Norris, 1992) that rely upon a rhetoric of the “social responsibility to inform” (Winter, 1993, p. 18). Some authors (i.e. Masterton, 1992) have suggested that such responsible news values and practices have worldwide application, particularly in regards to issues where norms and values are often seen as crossing national barriers (Dunwoody & Peters, 1992). Journalists in democratic societies around the globe often conceptualize themselves as the “voice of the public” (Rupar, 2006).

The responsible news values of journalism have been under increasing pressure from the capabilities inherent in relatively recent technological advancements. Roughly 30.2 percent of the world population, or just over 2 billion people, were using the Internet as of March of 2011 (Internet World Stats, 2011). Many of those online are not only reading content, but are also creating content that draws upon shared modes of delivery in both the aesthetic style and organizational approach of news reporting that is so widely used in mainstream media. This similarity leads many readers to assume that such content is some form of reputable journalism based on perceptions of professionalized news values, when that might not be the case (Kenix, 2007; Peabody, 2008; Wall, 2005). Such relatively low levels of media literacy have important implications for democracies in an environment where media as a whole is almost completely digitized – and therefore also rapidly altered by content creators and contributors. Indeed, most newspapers have already shifted to either a uniformly or partially digitized format as a response to consumer demand. For example, the *Guardian* newspaper readership dropped from 487,000 in 1985 to 365,562 in 2007. However, the online *Guardian Unlimited* attracts 16 million readers and 147 million page impressions each month (Franklin, 2008). As this shift to digital communication continues, media organizations are increasingly taking advantage of the technological capabilities inherent in online communication.

One such example of how technology is driving changes in the newsroom is through sourcing. Historically, news media have operated largely through a hierarchy of access (Atton 2002a), which often dictates who is sourced in the news according to perceived credibility. This hierarchy of access has extended throughout the media spectrum, regardless of the size of the organization. A study of three regional newspapers in England, for example, showed how the local press, just like its national counterpart, favored elite sources over common ones; male over female sources; and white over black (Ross, 2010). When that is subverted, and citizens are called upon to help create content, then the news can become “an inclusive, radical form of civic journalism” (Atton 2003: 267). This type of journalism has been called native reporting (Atton 2002a: 112–17) and has been found to be an instrumental part of independent current event weblogs (Matheson & Allan 2003) as well as other open publishing sources online, such as Indymedia (Platon & Deuze 2003), which have technological capabilities that easily allow for reader contributions to content. Native reporting has also extended into mainstream websites such as CNN’s iReport, MSNBC’s First Person, Fox News’ UReport and Broadcast Interactive Media’s YouNews. Indeed, iReport, appears to draw as much from Indymedia as it does from CNN. However, the long-held belief that mainstream news media adhere to traditional principles of objective and professionalized reporting, while other, more alternative media allow for individual-level, opinionated ideological influence, could also be eroding in an online news media environment. Recent research has argued that both the mainstream and alternative press are moving away from objectivity as a guiding principle and towards transparency as information becomes more readily accessible to readers (Kenix, 2011). Mainstream newspapers are increasingly adapting to media technology and how readers now wish to engage with the news – encouraging citizen journalism, blogging commentary and reader responses to “construct a more pluralist and democratic debate about matters of public interest” (Franklin, 2008, p. 631). By adopting tenets of public journalism, media as a whole are promoting democratic ideals and adopting what have historically been viewed as strictly alternative media practices (Haas, 2004).

The trend towards transparency, particularly online, may seem to indicate a form of journalism that is less bound by organizational rules and is more open to individual input. However, it also raises questions regarding fairness and balance and the importance of context.

These principles of traditional journalism are no less crucial in a world where news is increasingly produced at a micro level. An important question is whether the appeal inherent in journalism generated from alternative sources overwrites the need for proven credibility. Couldry (2010) analyzed the web sites of what he calls writer-gatherers (a term he prefers to citizen journalist) in order to answer the question: “if there is potentially a democratization of journalism under way, are its likely preconditions being met in the practice of those writer-gatherers?” (139). These preconditions include an extension, even in a new language, of something like journalistic values, or the development of new sources on which journalistic practice can rely; the time for actors to carry out such a role; the money and resources to carry out such a role; and the legitimacy and recognition for such a role (139). Couldry (2010) found that the existence of sites where the public can voice their opinion could possibly lead to a “new form of pressure on related professional elites” (150). However, he argues that we have not achieved this tipping point yet.

While this pressure on professional elites might not be as pervasive as Couldry argues it could be, news media are utilizing aspects of interactive technology to build relationships with readers and “to promote the impression of a greater accountability to a generalised readership” (Conboy & Steel, 2008, p. 654). Scholars have long conceptualized the Internet through the framework of public participation within a directly democratic forum (Bertelson, 1992). As the Internet has grown in popularity, so too have the comparisons to a participatory public sphere first put forth by Habermas (1989). Citizens can presumably engage in an unhindered exchange of information, ideas and rational debate while online. Civic participation has been said to require four basic criteria: “(1) individuals are included; (2) it is voluntary; (3) it refers to a specific activity, which is (4) directed towards influencing the government or authorities in general” (Brezovsek, 1995 cited in Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008). Voluntary citizen participation through online news groups and discussion forums, in particular, appear to meet each of these criteria and are readily available in most online news websites.

An important caveat to the potentiality of citizen engagement online should be that even if one’s activity might be viewed as participatory, it does not necessarily mean it is also considered integral to a deliberative democracy. For example, the mainstream *Guangzhou Daily* has a well-used discussion forum, which suggests some level of participatory engagement not found in

traditional journalism. However, closer scrutiny reveals infrequent follow-up posts, a lack of diversity in topics, a tendency for discussion to focus on issues outside of politics, low levels of complexity in discourse and a lack of meaningful debate online (Zhou et al., 2008). Therefore, even though citizens may be involved in the process of some form of civic participation online, it might not qualify as any actualization of deliberative democracy. That being said, citizen participation and native reporting can empower the “former audience” (Gillmor, 2006, p. XXV) to become more involved in their community and their media. It can serve as a kind of bridge media that links “traditional media with forms of civic participation” (Schaffer, 2007, p. 7). The ability of ordinary citizens to post comments online is in itself a radical departure from established mass media practices. The ability to post like-minded comments also may facilitate a sense of community online. Participating within a thread of commentary allows viewers to not only consume a mediated product, but also works to help create and construct the meaning of that product (Rheingold, 2002). However, anonymously constructed public spheres can also result in a level of debate that quickly turns vitriolic (Kenix, 2011). Anonymous and unaccountable anger within discussion forums can be pointed in almost any direction: specific commentators, those who oppose their views in general, or the creators of the initial post. While these contributions may serve to coalesce the community by helping to confirm what the majority of commentators believe to be right, they also work against a “pluralist and democratic debate” (Franklin, 2008, p. 631). Habermas (1989) argued that democracy can be messy but, by almost any definition, a self-assured, one-dimensional and oppositional fighting front does not equate to democratic debate within a public sphere.

Increased engagement, in whatever form, is not only situated within citizen journalists, or writer-gatherers, but may be within the more professionalized contemporary news media as well. The BBC’s former correspondent Martin Bell calls such news the “journalism of attachment” (Bell, 1998, p. 273). This form of journalism is actively not neutral and makes clear claims about who is right and who is wrong. Journalism of attachment can become much more obvious in times of global conflict, such as the news coverage of the Bosnian war, which largely supported the Bosnian Muslim government and not the Serbs (Gowing, 1997). This type of coverage is not found only in editorial pages but throughout news reporting (Hammond, 2000). In America, the

Pew Research Center reported that 73 percent of Fox news stories included opinions from reporters and anchors. While this number, which far exceeds the 29 percent of opinion from cable rival MSNBC (cited in Johnson, 2005), may be a harbinger of future reporting styles, it raises several important questions regarding the blurring between what is a personal opinion and what are facts supported by credible sources. September 11th further brought forth opinion and commentary directly into news content. Scenes of personal emotion abounded as reporters cried on camera from Ground Zero (Tumber, 2002) and journalists raced to morally interpret who were “the ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ of a state” (Ruigrok, 2010, p. 87).

The increased engagement from citizens and professionalized journalists would presumably lead to a richer mediated news environment. However, research has found that while “there is an abundance of news online” (Redden & Witschge, 2010, p. 184), content itself varies very little from one news outlet to another and little opportunity for the public to actually “participate beyond interpreting and responding to stories” (Redden & Witschge, 2010, p. 185). While there may be a “blurring of news and non-news spaces” (185) on social networking platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook), “the contributions on non-news spaces are often responses to news and involve a repurposing of mainstream news content, underlining rather than challenging the position of the mainstream media as gatekeeper” (pp. 185-186).

There is also supporting research that continues to find relatively little interactive reporting, small gains in public communication and only slight attempts at building relationships with readers across many online news sites (Oblak, 2005; Quandt, 2008; Rosenberry, 2005). Although, it should be said that in 2004, longitudinal research did find definitive improvements in interactivity online over time (Greer & Mensing, 2004). The relatively recent arrival of blogs, wikis and other communicative technological advancements, as well as the continued rise and potential competition of citizen journalism, may now be leading mainstream media into a new interactive form of citizen-based news (Paulussen, Heinonen, Domingo, & Quandt, 2007). This research tests this assumption through a case study of how one particular example, the *Topix* news organization, creates and disseminates its news online. In doing so, this research embraces the academic complexity of what now constitutes online news and hopes to potentially



problematize that definition even further with the goal being a more nuanced and contemporary understanding of a “media world in upheaval” (Keith, 2010, p. 12).

### **Samoa Topix as a Case Study**

Samoa was purposefully selected as a case study to illustrate the changing face of journalism in the context of such dramatic technological innovations, which appear to be radically shifting content and distribution. Journalism within the boundaries of Samoa continues to be formed around profound tensions in press freedoms. In Samoa, journalists work under the threat of the 1992 Printers and Publishers Act, a law that “directs publishers and editors to reveal their sources of information to government leaders such as Prime Minister, cabinet ministers, MPs, and heads of government departments, who claim they have been defamed by the media, mainly newspapers” (Sano Malifa, 2010, p. 41). This might explain why an initial overview of the use of sources in news stories coming out of Samoa rather quickly reveals a heavy reliance on non-specific sources such as “the Government,” “the Cabinet” or even “unnamed sources.” Samoa also has a policy that public funds can be used for legal fees of government leaders in defamation lawsuits. Taken together, many independent journalists in Samoa, like their colleagues throughout the troubled region, live in fear of governmental reprisals for critical news coverage that can extend indefinitely through lengthy court cases fully supported by public funds. While some would argue that Samoan journalists have been “vocal and fearless critics of government abuse” (Singh, 2005, p. 44), it is clear that reporters are under extreme pressure by law to report favorably on the government. On the *Samoa Observer* web site, Savea Sano Malifa, the Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper explains these tensions:

...as unshakable believers in freedom of expression and the public’s right to know, we have unfortunately been engaged in more stressful confrontations with the mighty and powerful than we care to admit. Along the way our efforts to maintain this stand in the face of legal threats brought by government officials has been a source of much frustration (Malifa, 2012).

Given that this is the case, it would be reasonable to assume that Samoans, and those who have emigrated from Samoa, may wish to seek out alternate news about Samoa online.

While alternative online news about a particular geographical region is always of importance to those who live both inside and outside its borders, it is particularly important in this context given that the majority of ethnic Samoans actually live in countries other than Samoa (Statistics New Zealand, 2011). The importance of online news to those who have emigrated from Samoa cannot be understated given such phenomenal rates of their diaspora around the world. Media connects citizens, cognitively and emotionally back to their homelands. Indeed, media now redefines transnational boundaries and actively constructs multiple, temporal public spheres based on a shared cultural identity. Bonini (2011) eloquently states that “the media serve as a portable set, a modular backdrop that represents our home and that we use when we are travelling to take a picture of ourselves, pretending that we never left” (p. 870). Digital diasporas can quickly network and coalesce cultures together through infinitely expanding online models of geo-political mobilization (Gillespie, 2009). This research will examine whether anything close to such a potentiality has been attained in this instance through the relatively democratic online news media about Samoa, which is situated outside the geographic borders of a relatively constrained Samoan journalistic system.

*Samoa Topix*, like all media, sits on a continuum of alternative and mainstream media and is not easily categorized as one or the other. It is a regional section of the parent company *Topix*, which is a privately held company based in Palo Alto, California. It receives substantial funding from three historically powerful newspaper conglomerates: Gannet, McClatchy and Tribune Company (*About Topix*, 2011). Their stated goal, when they first began in 2004, was to aggregate news based on topic categories and present that information cohesively on separate web pages. In response to consumer demand, the company added discussion forums in 2007 so that users could discuss and share news content. *Topix* makes an impressively bold statement on their website that they have “combined the best technology with the strongest local participation to create the best destination for news and discussion. By giving everyone access to the tools to talk – and an audience to listen – *Topix* redefines what it means to make the news” (*About Topix*, 2011). The potential ability for *Topix* to serve as a powerful democratic tool for information dissemination and exchange between and within diasporic Samoan communities and Samoan nationals appears to be present in *Samoa Topix*.

## Research Questions & Hypotheses

This research examines *Samoa Topix* as a case study of how news is created in an online, participatory context. *Samoa Topix* claims to be a “leading news community”, “continually updated”, with “thousands of sources” that gives “everyone access.” This research explores the veracity of these claims, and in so doing, also examines how *Samoa Topix* might be potentially shifting the definitional boundaries of what constitutes journalism in the 21st century. More specifically, this study explores the following research questions:

- R1: Do the comments on *Samoa Topix* illustrate the potential towards “a more pluralist and democratic debate” (Franklin, 2008, p. 631)?
- R2: Does the discussion relate to the news content in any way (i.e. does it drive news content on *Samoa Topix*, repeat news content or show no relation to news content)?
- R3: Are the news stories that *Samoa Topix* aggregates dependent upon traditional approaches to journalism (i.e. professionalism, objectivity, balance, elite sources)?
- R4: Are the news topics on *Samoa Topix* similar to the news topics in the *Samoa Observer*, the national newspaper of Samoa?

## Methodology

A total of 103 forums were qualitatively assessed from the “Forums & Polls” section of *Samoa Topix*. This qualitative narrative analysis of content on the *Samoa Topix* discussion forum was conducted to assess whether news aggregating web sites such as *Samoa Topix* exemplified participatory reader input and deliberative exchange, which the first research question explores. The forums are organized according to date of the most recent comment, so the date when these forums were originally created varies greatly. Each time a new comment is added to an existing forum, the topic moves to the top of the list. The earliest forum was created May 10, 2007 and the latest on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012. After a qualitative examination of forum content, it was possible to ascertain whether a thread was created in response to a news item as an extension or reframing of the news material or if the thread pertained to an extraneous issue. The forum topics were also analyzed to identify possible reasons that the readers of *Samoa Topix* may be engaging with the material and the nature of their participation. In addition, the information design and technological capabilities of the website were also examined for the potential degree of interactivity, participation and exchange possible through *Samoa Topix*.

This research follows the example of previous work, which has examined individual narrative fragments from different sources that combine to form an overarching narrative (Atkinson, 2006; McGee, 1990). This approach argues that meta-narratives are comprised of multiple parts and do not exist as a complete entity but rather as a multitude of pieces. The term, narrative, itself refers to “a dense reconstruction of all the bits of discourse from which [they were] made” (McGee, 1990, p. 70). These bits of narrative can culminate at a specific cultural site, as was illustrated by an examination of the Vietnam War Memorial (Ehrenhaus, 1993) or across a longitudinal range of magazine publications, and as was discussed through an examination of the historical New Zealand newsmagazine, *Earwig* (Kenix, 2010). A broader meaning, which is comprised of previous narrative fragments, can coalesce together into a cultural site that comes to define, in this case, a particular website.

Such a cultural site is created by competing and conciliatory narratives, which are conceptualized against one another to create a larger, comprehensive, narrative. These narratives actually work against and with each other to reformulate a new reality through what has been called an “ideological rhetorical force” (Chatman, 1990, p. 198). Such force comes from the culmination of cultural value and identity. As a narrative forms, a common identity within a particular cultural sphere that is based on “the unity of experiences and actions” (Carr, 1986, p. 149) develops. This shared identity allows those within that participatory sphere to recognize common qualities within themselves, the text and each other. This shared cultural value and identity also inevitably leads to an increased understanding of what it is that is different in other cultural spheres (Kelly, 2004). As Foucault (1989, 1991) argued, and the work of Atkinson (2006) confirms, discourses are inevitably not about a particular person, place or thing. Rather, discourses are part of a complex network of identity and power relations. Thus, this methodological approach, drawing from the original work of Fairclough (1995) and the later work of Atton and Wickenden (2005), examines the interdependencies between textual, discursive and social practices through narrative fragments and constitutive functions. This critical approach also involves a systematic process and examination of lexical choices, questioning the range of possible vocabulary items that could have been utilized otherwise (Matheson, 2005). These

studies can be difficult to replicate and are quite labour intensive (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). However, they also allow for a deeper and more complex level of analysis.

In this study, a total of 104 news stories were collected between October 19, 2011 and January 1st, 2012 from the *Samoa Topix* website. These news stories, or more precisely news headlines on *Samoa Topix* with links to the actual stories from other news outlets, were quantitatively analyzed according to several variables including provenance, topic, the type and gender of the sources used in the story, and whether the stories adhered to traditional journalism principles such as balance and the inclusion of context. The information gathered through this process helps to answer the third research question exploring the level of traditional journalism norms in online news content. Frequencies of these variables may also help to unpack how *Samoa Topix* aggregates news stories, where the items are most likely to come from, and whether that content constitutes content of a sufficient quality, based on prescribed journalistic norms, to be of service to diasporic Samoan populations around the world. This information, when contrasted against forum narratives, will assist in answering the second research question, which explores the interrelationship between forums and the news.

Finally, in order to examine *Samoa Topix*'s news story selection and the quality of its aggregated choices, this research also collected 113 stories from the online edition of the *Samoa Observer* between September 17 and December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011 as a logical point of comparison for Samoan news content. The *Samoa Observer* group publishes three newspapers in Samoa: The *Samoa Observer* from Monday to Friday, the *Weekend Observer* on Saturday, and the *Sunday Samoan*. They have a weekly readership of 350,000, in a country of less than 200,000 people (Malifa, 2012). Topics from the aggregated *Samoa Topix* were compared against news stories reported from Samoa to see if there was any correlation between the two, which would suggest some degree of relevance to Samoan issues. This portion of the study addresses the fourth research question: are the news topix on *Samoa Topix* similar to those in the *Samoa Observer*.

Through this multi-methodological triangulated analysis of over three hundred news articles and news forum postings, this research aims to explore whether *SamoaTopix* has indeed become "the best destination for news and discussion" and redefined "what it means to make the

news” (About Topix, 2011). The results of this study will be discussed in relation to recent scholarship exploring the potential limitations and possibilities of online journalism.

## **Results**

### *Level of Debate*

Examining the possibility of a pluralist and democratic debate on *Samoa Topix* involves exploring whether *Samoa Topix* created an environment online where such deliberative discourse *could* take place and also whether such idealized communication actually *did* take place. *Samoa Topix*, and the umbrella corporation of geographically-specific Topix websites elsewhere around the globe, rely on new technologies to generate activity online. The use of social networking sites and Web 2.0 principles is extensive throughout the site. Icons for Facebook and Twitter as well as prompts for participatory actions such as “Like” and “Comment?” appear repeatedly throughout the website. There is an obvious reliance on users to generate traffic and they are constantly encouraged to “share a story” or “start a new discussion now!” This reflects the widespread movement throughout media institutions to introduce new participatory technologies in newsrooms (Anderson, 2011). These technologies promote “the empowerment of audiences, the creativity of audiences, the fact that audience preferences needed to be taken into account, and the fact that audiences (are) “partners” with journalists in the creation and consumption of news” (p. 557).

Most of the participants on the discussion forums in *Samoa Topix* appear to come from outside Samoa based on the comments made within the forum about the geographical locations of users. Of the 21 people who left 52 comments on the forum “why are samoans so fat?” for example, 5 came from New Zealand, 5 from Australia, 5 from the United States and its territories, 1 each from Tonga, the Cook Islands and the Netherlands and 3 were hidden. The preponderance of those outside of Samoa commenting in these forums was repeated throughout this sample. This may be a result of expatriates wanting to connect with “home” but the low number of local Samoans using the site may also be due to the connection rates and Internet access in Samoa. With a population of just under 200,000 people, only 4.7 percent, or roughly 9,400 people, have Internet access within Samoa (*Internet World Stats*, 2011).

The very existence of a forum section could, in and of itself, be considered a means of giving users (people who are not in control of the content and flow of news traditionally) more freedom to voice their opinion, not only about events but also on how these events are reported by the media. Other existing tools on the *Topix* web site, such as the option to share a story on social networking sites (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) or to email it to someone, for example, could also be considered to enhance the agency of users to disseminate information/news about events they are interested in. So, in theory at least, these tools alone could demonstrate an attempt at “a more pluralist and democratic debate” (Franklin, 2008, p. 631).

However, in practice the forum section is used mainly for two things: a) for people to voice their ethnic views and b) for people of Samoan heritage to express their own ethnic identity. Within those dual narrative umbrellas, this analysis found that only 24.2 percent of forum comments were directly about news stories. This relatively low number would seem to support Redden and Witschge’s (2010) conclusions that online news provides few chances to go “beyond interpreting and responding to stories” (185). While there is the possibility of further exchange embedded within the technology itself, an examination of comments made throughout the forum reveals a cultural site that precludes such interpretation. The broader meaning, comprised by the narrative fragments of commentary made by those posting to these forums, presents a meta-narrative largely oppositional to such discourse.

Another 20.3 percent of forums seemed to have no other purpose than stirring ethnic animosity mainly between people of Samoan and Tongan heritage. The two countries have a long history of conflict and reconciliation dating back to 1100A.D. when Tongan kings ruled the Pacific region. Continued resentment between the two countries was evident throughout the discussion forum. Forums such as “who’s got better athletes out of Tonga and samoa” or “how come Samoans rarely take showers?” are representative of this type “ethnic bating.” One forum titled “why are samoans so fat?” was created on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011 by TONGANZ from Tonga with the opening post: “Have you seen the boo yah tribe? ahahahah fakn slobks.. Samoans are Hella fat and smelly with [diseases](#) ahahahahah,” which prompted the response:

“Tonganz (aka lil One) I remember you now from a previous website. You’re that sad little dwarf hermaphrodite, that is jealous of successful Samoans because you do not possess any talent except for susu poki! That’s how your family survived during those hard times, aye! because they rented you out to sailors that come to nuku’alofa looking for a night of unusual sweaty dwarf debauchery. I thought those stretch-marks around your mouth looked familiar, are you still in a wheelchair lil One (oops! you’re not so little now are you? pu

kele!) or do you walk bow legged with a limp now? Hahaha!!!! See ya later sa'a"  
from Let there be Rock from Wellington New Zealand on November 6, 2011.

The remaining 55.3 percent of forums were largely social and interpersonal in nature. As was reflected continuously throughout all of the forum comments, these narrative fragments were underpinned by a fundamental expression of Samoan identity. Much of the focus in these forums was centered on how to date Samoans (e.g., forum titled "Where are the Samoan men?"), affirmation of Samoan identity and culture (e.g., forum titled "The Orator – The new Samoan movie"), religion (e.g., forum titled "Should Samoans be concerned about new religions within Samoa?"), and Samoans distinguishing themselves around the world for positive (e.g., forum titled "Samoans in the NFL") or negative reasons (e.g., forum titled "Low lives take over South Auckland").

The narrative arc of Samoan representation was threaded through fragments of participants directly relating to their own individual sense of Samoan identity, but, again, not to the news content itself: "This is a SAMOAN TOPIX FORUM. Whatever language we choose to speak, it's OUR choice." (In "Call for deportation" forum," SURF808 from Mililani, Hawaii, Sept. 24, 2009). Other notable post topics were "What does being Samoan mean to those living outside of Samoa?" forum with 109 comments; "I was raised samoan but born thai & filipina Why do the sistas wanna fight me 4?" forum from a young woman who comes from Thai and Filipino parents but was adopted and raised by Samoan parents and considers herself of Samoan identity; "What is your favorite Samoan song?" forum with 924 comments; and the "Ancient Samoa History" forum (37 comments), which discusses links between Samoa and Tonga historically and tensions between the two identities.

*Topix* states that they "encourage the free exchange of views and opinions" (*Samoa Topix*, 2012) suggesting that they support the free flow of ideas necessary for a more deliberative and democratic debate to emerge. They urge users to "try to be interesting [and] polite." But they warn forum participants that if they may get upset by "the free expression of ideas [which] is often heated and offensive, [they should] not use Topix" (*Samoa Topix*, 2012). Outside of these generalized suggestions, which are posted on a separate page from the forums themselves, there does not appear to be any moderation of comments. People have the option to "Report Abuse" next to each comment on a forum and on the homepage. However, judging by the



number of inflammatory comments posted on the forums, it seems that there is either very little reporting of abuse or that *Topix* does not take action against abusers.

For example, one particular forum user, TONGANZ from Tonga, has created or participated in most of the forums that feature ethnic animosity between Tongans and Samoans. Over the course of the three months during which we observed forums, he/she was never absent, suggesting that either no one made a complaint about him/her or that *Topix* does not bar participants from its forums no matter what they post. Examples of TONGANZ's posts include: "ahahahah Samoa is the only place that wipes ass with rocks.. y'all utilize bandages? Fak u use your brain like a normal human being and used [Toilet](#) paper or if outdoors use a [leaf](#)" (Forum titled: "many people eat Horse... but who the heck wipes ass wif Rocks?," November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011) or "hahahah u stink like my sweaty balls after I came back from the bush hhh mui lafa" (Forum titled: Samoans/Tongans -- are Chinese-looking not pure bloods?, November 7, 2011). This lack of response to abusive comments reflects a widespread ambivalence within the media towards reader feedback (Anderson, 2011).

One forum titled "Calls for Samoans to be deported from Australia" was created on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2008 in reaction to a link to a story from the *Samoa Observer's* digital edition. This forum has attracted 4,191 posts to date. The original story explained how Aborigines in Brisbane, Australia, were demanding the deportation of Samoans following the death of a man from their community who was allegedly beaten to death by a group of Samoans between the ages of 15 and 24. At best, this particular forum paints a vivid picture of race relations and immigration tensions in Australia, not only between Aborigines and White Australians, but also between Aborigines and immigrants. The forum has enabled the many ethnic groups in Australia to voice their opinions and vent their anger about racism. For example, Abo 2 from Brisbane, Australia commented on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008:

"Most the crime and sin comes from white fellas, go to the courts and have a look around, all the glassing that goes on started with [the white](#) fellas, all the bikie gangs, and scrap you see in the streets mostly white fellas, piss off and leave us alone never seen so many white fellas suffer from depression, cause they so greedy and selfish many of them live lonely lives and dont even stick together, go home pig faces we dont need ya!"

In an extensive post on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Just Cos I Can from Sydney, Australia commented:

“The government has approved over 2500 Pacific Islander VISA's to come to [Australia](#) & work because the product of "convicts" from way back (eg: YOU) are lazy dole bludging criminals who'd rather get freebies than do a days worth of honest work. I'm sick of people taking credit for the actions of those in the past! Get used to it, Pacific Islander's are taking over Australia & there aint a damn thing u can do about it. Love that bit the most! All that talk about the white man being superior? Bitch please, while Egyptian Pharaoh's were ruling the world, your kind were stuck in caves, hitting each other over [the head](#) with clubs. Your "superior status" is only in your head. White people are raping children, murdering the elderly & screwing over their families every day so fuck up with your deluded bullshit.”

This forum had an overwhelming reliance on racial slurs with almost no connection back to the news story itself. One needs to ask whether this is what a “more democratic debate” looks like. This forum seemed to deliver a vantage point from which to express views most often associated with extreme right-wing, anti-immigration propaganda such as a) immigrants steal jobs; b) immigrants are involved in criminal activity (e.g., “My question is why it took so long to get rid of them. They must have cost the community hundreds of thousands of [dollars](#).” And “Samoan-born so you have to ask - why aren't these animals being sent back to Samoa?”); c) immigrants spend their life on welfare (e.g., “Obviously there is always going to be the handful of islanders doing well but they are the minority. Most, if it not 95% of them are supported by some sort of welfare in the new country.”); d) immigrants have a lot of children so they can stay and get benefits (e.g., “The taxpayer is forking out millions of [Dollars](#) in Hospital bills because these people are unable to control their own appetite. They have in excess of 4 kids knowingly they can't even afford to raise one. Thats okay the government will pay for the rest. Maybe its different there in the states and all islanders are hard working people, we must get all the Arseholes living in NZ then.”). None of these general comments connected directly back to the news story for which the forum was created. Rather, the story served as a catalyst for commentators to express previously held viewpoints on loosely related topics using charged language in an uncensored forum with no accountability.

Some of the participants in forums utilized the hyperlinking technology of the web to post news stories generally related to criminal cases involving Pacific Islanders or allegedly committed by people described as Pacific Islanders. By linking to these stories in forums, the commentator could “prove” the guilt of all Pacific Islanders. For example, one forum participant

posted a link to a *Telegraph* news story titled: “Two violent Sydney robberies linked” in which the alleged robbers were described as “being of Pacific Islander appearance.” Here a relationship is created between these two Sydney robberies that may have been perpetrated by Pacific Islanders and all Samoans – merely by their hyperlinked association.

The research question, which asked do the comments on *Samoa Topix* illustrate the potential towards “a more pluralist and democratic debate” (Franklin, 2008, p. 631) was not supported. *Samoa Topix* appeared to provide a forum for such a potential debate to occur, but based on the narrative fragments found throughout this sample, comments remained largely superficial, ethnically-motivated and quite distinct from the news content within the site. Any deliberation which did occur, was centered upon solidifying the identity of Samoan people and denouncing those who disagreed.

#### *The News and The Forum*

There was no evidence of any forum generating news content. As was stated in the previous section, 24.2 percent of the forums were started with a direct comment on a news story, suggesting that news *could* generate discussion. A visitor must click on “Leave a Comment” below the story to make a comment on a news item. The forums triggered by direct comments, as opposed to those created as forums to begin with, are easy to identify in the list of forums by a small icon that resembles a newspaper. The fact that less than one quarter of the forums were created as a result of a news item indicates that news content generates a relatively low direct response from users. As for the number of comments attached to these forums, they vary wildly from 1 comment up to more than 4,000. This analysis found that as comments increase, the less likely it is that those comments will be directly connected to the original story and more likely that the discourse will descend into some form of mudslinging between Samoans and another ethnic group. So, while the forums that have been created as a result of a comment on a news story initially provide an avenue for users to voice their opinion on a particular event covered in a news story, they however, more often than not end up focusing on other issues than the one presented in the story. For example, a forum titled “Samoan prison gang in Hawaii – USO – Target of FBI investigation” was started by a comment on a news story from *Samoa News* in November 2011.

While the first few posts discussed the presence of Samoan gangs in the United States and the possibility of Polynesians being especially targeted by police, it quickly degenerated into ethnic name-calling. For example, Cherie KahaHane from Springfield Gardens, NY, posted the following comment on November 19, 2011, early in the thread:

“WHY JUST THE SAMOANS ARE POINTED OUT. I FEEL IT GOES FOR ALL RACES OVER THERE. I’M PRETTY SURE THE SAMOANS AIN’T THE ONLY ONES INVOLVED IN WHATEVER THEY ARE DOING WRONG OVER THERE. GANGS HAVE BEEN A PROBLEM IN THIS WORLD FOR A VERY LONG TIME..... WE HAVE TO LEARN TO STICK TOGETHER AND UNITE INSTEAD OF KILLING EACHOTHER AND OUR OWN KIND... MINORITY KILLING THE MINORITY AND THE MAJORITY ONLY GETS STRONGER AND RICHER!! ITS SAD WHAT THIS WORLD HAS COME TOO. I JUST PRAY FOR ALL OF THEM.”

And on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011, Manoa from American Samoa wrote:

“This is not something to be proud of....less than one percent of the general population....75% of inmate population. Something is wrong with this picture...either the police force is targeting the poly's or the poly's are committing most of the crime. Or the judge....u know what i mean...”

These comments demonstrated a certain critical reflection on possible Polynesian gangs in the US, but later comments descend into argumentation and racism: “They are as stupid as an Oakland Niglett.” (Posted by Rich Dude from San Jose, California on February 12, 2012) or:

“Bring all your gangster prisoners here and we'll make them climb a coconut tree upside down.....and of course butt naked. That will be a scene. US recently reported our Prison Systems one of the worst in the world and GAVE us recommendations. Our PM only read the first page of the report...and who knows what he did with it... (Posted by kiuss from Apia, Samoa on February 19, 2012).

### *Journalism Norms*

In a broader sense, examining traditional approaches to journalism in relation to *Samoa* *Topix* was difficult because they do not produce news, they aggregate their news stories. *Topix* uses algorithms that trawl the Internet and selects stories with the word “Samoa” in it. This is obvious given the repeated stories that have nothing to do with Samoa, such as “Christo Velkov wins sailor of the year Award,” a story about a Bulgarian sailor whose only relation to Samoa is that he made a stop in Apia. Thus, if this research focuses solely on *Samoa Topix*, it does not appear that they follow any traditional approaches to journalism. They have no ethics per se since their content appears to be machine-generated. The reason why there are so many stories

about American Samoa in *Samoa Topix*'s timeline, for example, is that they feature the word "Samoa" and because the American media are a lot more present, a lot more stories are produced about American Samoa than there are about Samoa. This raises important questions about online news and the way it is generated. Can an algorithm-generated news service such as *Samoa Topix* provide properly targeted news to a diasporic community? Moreover, can such a service adhere to any kind of journalistic ethic or approach (i.e. professionalism, objectivity, balance)?

*Samoa Topix* aggregates a majority of its content from a small number of news providers, which suggests first, that certain news providers pay more attention to Samoa than others and second, those specific providers can be examined in accordance to traditional principles of news gathering and reporting. At first glance, it may seem that stories about Samoa are disseminated quite widely across the world. Of the 104 stories presented on *Samoa Topix* that were collected for the study, 23.0 percent came from American news outlets, 19.2 percent from *Samoa News*, 15.3 percent from New Zealand, 16.3 percent from Pacific Island news websites (including 9.6 percent from Fijian sources), 9.6 percent from European news providers, 3.8 percent from Australia and 12.5 percent from a variety of other sources. However, most of the news items coming from American news providers had nothing to do with the Independent State of Samoa. The vast majority focused on American Samoa, a U.S. territory. The few stories that were specifically about events in Samoa had to do with the soccer World Cup qualifying in the Oceania region, which was held in Apia, the capital of Samoa, and was widely reported in the U.S. because of American Samoa's surprise performance. The other main topic had to do with the decision by Samoa to adjust its international dateline to be on the same day as Australia and New Zealand, its main trade partners.

This research examined the adherence of *Samoa Topix*'s sources of news to traditional journalism principles, such as the type of sources they used, whether the sources were Samoan or foreign, whether the story was balanced (i.e., offered more than one position), and whether it provided context. Sources were identified as four types: Samoans quoted (25 percent); Samoans mentioned but not quoted (16.3 percent), non-Samoans quoted (41.3 percent), and non-Samoans mentioned but not quoted (36.5 percent). These four types were then subdivided into

three categories: authority figures (e.g., government officials, business or religious leaders, members of the legal system); entertainment figures (e.g., athletes/sport officials, journalists, entertainers); and common sources (e.g., Samoan citizens or expatriates, victims of crime). Each source was coded so one story could have more than one source type. The overall breakdown of sources by category (as shown in Figure 1), demonstrates that, in general, well-known non-Samoan entertainment figures are the sources most often used in stories. When Samoans were quoted, they were most likely to be authority figures.

	<b>Authority figures</b>	<b>Entertainment figures</b>	<b>Common sources</b>
<b>Samoans quoted (25%)</b>	<b>15.3%</b>	11.5%	5.76%
<b>Samoans mentioned (16.3%)</b>	4.8%	<b>9.6%</b>	1.9%
<b>Non-Samoans quoted (41.3%)</b>	16.3%	<b>23%</b>	5.8%
<b>Non-Samoans mentioned (36.5%)</b>	14.4%	<b>28.8%</b>	5.7%

**Figure 1. Breakdown of sources by type and category**

If categories are broken down further, then the most frequent Samoan authority figures quoted are government officials (81.25%), religious leaders (12.5%), and members of the legal system (6.25%). Quotes from Samoan well-known entertainment figures mainly involve athletes/sports officials (33.33%) and journalists (33.33%) while quotes from common sources usually involve Samoan citizens (83.33%) and Samoan expatriates (16.66%). When Samoan authority figures are mentioned but not quoted, they involve government officials (60%) and religious leaders (40%). As for entertainment Samoans mentioned but not quoted, they are usually athletes/sports officials (90%) and entertainers (10%) while common sources are divided equally between Samoan citizens and expatriates.

In the case of non-Samoan authority figures, the quotes usually come from government officials (52.9%), business leaders (35.3%), and equally from military officials and members of the legal system (5.2% each). Entertainment non-Samoans quotes are primarily athletes/sports officials (54.1%), but also a mix of journalists (12.5%), entertainers (12.5%) and a variety of other

sources (20.8%) such as academics or NGO spokespeople. Finally, non-Samoan sources are also mentioned but not quoted directly. Authority figures made up of government officials (40%), members of the legal system (40%), entertainers (16.66%), religious and business leaders (6.66% each) and military officials (6.66%). Well-known entertainment non-Samoan sources include athletes/sports officials (56.66%) and former government officials (20%).

In addition to looking at the sources used in the news items available on *Samoa Topix*, this research also examined if the stories were balanced (i.e., providing more than one side of the story) and provided context. In terms of balance, 38.46 percent of the stories were deemed balanced, 36.54 not balanced while the criteria did not apply to the rest. As for context, all the stories that could provide it did so.

#### *Story Sources*

Almost 20 percent of news items came from another online news service: samoanews.com, which is another American Samoa based news service. This means that while some of the stories may be of interest to Samoans in general, they are not specifically about Samoa. The country that had the most thorough and directed coverage of stories about Samoa was New Zealand. A little over 15 percent of the stories presented on *Samoa Topix* came from a variety of New Zealand media. They covered stories surrounding Samoans distinguishing themselves (e.g., Samoan businessman being made Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit), religion, trade relations (e.g., the impact of changing the dateline), sports (e.g., Samoa performance at the Rugby World Cup, boxing), and culture (e.g., review of Samoan film *The Orator*). Samoans constitute the single largest ethnic group from the Pacific Islands in New Zealand, which may explain why the media are interested in catering to the community. The 2006 census indicates that almost 266,000 Samoans live in New Zealand, comprising nearly 50 percent of the total Pacific Island population in the country (Statistics New Zealand, 2006).

When stories are aggregated based on the presence of keywords rather than according to some type of journalistic guiding principle, there is a great discrepancy in the level of quality of the items on offer. Stories from developed countries (e.g., American, New Zealand, Australia, and Europe) followed traditional approaches to journalism while news from Pacific Island nations was

often less “professional” in its approach. For example, a story such as “Amazing transformation of American Samoa from whipping boys to winners” from *The Guardian* (November 26, 2011) provides a fascinating account of the crushing defeat of 31-0 American Samoa suffered to Australia in 2001 and how the team was rebuilt eventually leading to their remarkable performance at the Oceania World Cup qualifying in 2011. The article includes quotes from the producer of a documentary about the team, the new coach, and a transgender player on the team. In comparison, a story such as “Spreading the 9s code” about a rugby tournament in Fiji posted on the *Fiji Times online* (December 7, 2011) only quotes the chief executive of the Fiji National Rugby League and gives very little information about the tournament itself.

A profile such as “Jimmy 'Thunder' Peau down but not out”, about a Samoan-born boxer now living in New Zealand, published on November 11, 2011 in the *Southland Times*, a regional New Zealand newspaper, is representative of what is traditionally expected in terms of journalistic quality. It features a variety of credible sources, provides background information, and tells a captivating story. In comparison, “Miss American Samoa attends Miss South Pacific pageant” posted on [samoanews.com](http://samoanews.com) on December 7, 2011, is a profile of the American Samoa representative at the pageant and reads like a transcribed interview with quotes put one after the other from a single source. Stories originating from these news providers often failed to provide balance through the use of several sources and context. Several sources were also left unnamed throughout content.

#### *Samoa Topix and the Samoa Observer*

As detailed in Figure 2, the topics covered in *Samoa Topix* and the *Samoa Observer* were similar but represented in very different proportions except for sports. Sports was the most popular topic accounting for 25 percent of news items on *Samoa Topix* and 29.2 percent in the *Observer*. The space devoted to this topic on both web sites is not surprising since sport is an area that gives Samoans great pride, particularly when it comes to their national rugby team. Moreover, the popularity of sports-related stories may in part be due to two major events held in the region at the time the sample was taken: the Rugby World Cup in New Zealand and the Oceania Soccer World Cup Qualifying in Apia, Samoa. However, the difference between the sports coverage by *Samoa Topix* and the *Samoa Observer* online is in the content.



The *Samoa Observer* focused mostly on Manu Samoa, the national rugby team, with stories such as “ Samoans in their hundreds rally for outspoken player” about a player who used Twitter to express his disenchantment about the International Rugby Board and “PM orders audit of millions” about the squandering of \$4 million in funds by management during the Rugby World Cup. *Samoa Topix* linked mostly to stories on events held in Samoa (e.g., soccer, judo, track and field) but with a focus on other countries’ teams. A lot of coverage for example was given to the American Samoa soccer team’s surprising success at the Soccer World Cup Qualifying with stories such as “Glory days for soccer in tiny American Samoa” or “Dreams and history made in Oceania.” A story titled “American Samoa can’t follow up historic win as they fall to rivals Samoa” clearly shows that the coverage is not aimed at Samoans from the Independent State but people from American Samoa. The difference is in great part due to the fact that the *Samoa Observer* is a local newspaper while *Samoa Topix* is an international media aggregator. Since 19.2 percent of the items on *Samoa Topix* come from Samoa News, an online service out of American Samoa, it is not surprising to see that the focus is on the American territory and not on the Independent State of Samoa.

<b>Samoa Observer (113 stories)</b>	<b>Samoa Topix (104 stories)</b>
Sports 33 (29.2%)	Sports 26 (25%)
Court cases 19 (16.8%)	Court cases 7 (6.73%)
Government policy 10 (8.8%)	Government policy 4 (3.85%)
Business 9 (7.96%)	Business 12 (11.54%)
Student awards & scholarships 7 (6.19%)	Student awards & scholarships 1 (0.96%)
Profiles 7 (6.19%)	Profiles 5 (4.8%)
Tourism/entertainment 6 (5.3%)	Tourism/entertainment 22 (21.15%)
Natural disaster/threat 4 (3.54%)	Natural disaster/threat 7 (6.73%)
Traffic accidents 4 (3.54%)	Traffic accidents 0
Labor disputes 4 (3.54%)	Labor disputes 0
Media 2 (1.77%)	Media 1 (0.96%)
International relations 2 (1.77%)	International relations 9 (8.65%)

**Figure 2. Topic comparison between *Samoa Topix* and *Samoa Observer***

When the content in the other categories was examined, it became quite obvious that the two news outlets have very different aims. The second most popular category on *Samoa Topix* was tourism/entertainment (21.1 percent) and business (11.5 percent) with stories highlighting the business community in American Samoa such as “Ace American Industries the big winner at

4th Annual Business Award ceremony” or the Miss South Pacific Pageant. The same categories only accounted for 5.3 and 7.9 percent of items in the *Samoa Observer* respectively.

International relations (8.65 percent) and natural disaster/threat (6.7 percent) were also relatively popular topics on *Samoa Topix* but captured less attention in the *Observer* with 1.7 and 3.5 percent of stories. Two topics that were quite popular in the *Observer*, court cases (16.8 percent) with news items such as “Police officer jailed for prisoner assault” and government policy (8.8 percent) with stories such as “If it’s not broken, don’t fix it” about the decriminalization of homosexuality, failed to garner as much coverage on *Samoa Topix* with only 6.7 and 3.8 percent of stories respectively. Overall, these figures highlight the *Observer*’s distinctly local focus of attention compared to *Samoa Topix*’s more global approach.

*Samoa Topix* also seems to rely on web metrics to boost its relevance and traffic rather than on a particular drive to offer their Samoan readers relevant content. Graphics, such as the ones provided on the homepage under the title of “News Trends,” are used to identify trending topics - a measurement of popularity borrowed from the social networking site Twitter. Stories are also ranked by the number of comments they generate, which can direct users to stories that are driving widespread discussion but may also give unimportant stories an inflated weight. Finally, there are two counters at the bottom of the homepage: one for the number of “Comments made yesterday” and the other, constantly creeping up, for “Total comments across all topics.”

Anderson (2011) argues that web metrics have transformed the way news items are selected in online newsrooms. During his time observing the operation of *Philly.com*, a news aggregating web site in Philadelphia, he noticed that “traffic often appeared to be the primary ingredient in [the web site’s] news judgment” (561). When he probed to see if there was an organizational culture in place that would be used to counterweight “number of clicks” with story quality, web producers (those in charge of aggregating and repurposing stories from the two printed newspapers affiliated with *Philly.com*) admitted that their judgment was more informed by an intuitive knowledge of which stories would get “clicks” (562). There seems to be a significant difference however, between a news outlet like *Philly.com* and *Samoa Topix*. While the former’s selection of stories seems to indicate at least that someone is “at the helm,” the same cannot be said of the latter, which seems to be aggregating stories using an algorithm. This means that

while the stories on *Philly.com* reflect a desire to capture the interest of the Philadelphia public, albeit one that is driven by “number of clicks” and “page views,” the stories collected on *Samoa Topix* only seem to indicate a computer system trawling the Internet for stories with the word “Samoa” in them. This conclusion is based on the relative randomness of stories found within *Samoa Topix*. For example, a story about the victory of Ukrainian judokas from a Ukrainian radio station was linked to on November 14, 2011 because it mentioned in passing that the Judo World Cup was in Apia, Samoa. The story would have been of little significance to Samoans but because it used the word Samoa in the text, it ended up as a news item on *Samoa Topix*.

Considering how *Samoa Topix* seems to be aggregating its news items, it is quite surprising to see that no stories from the *Samoa Observer* was picked up by its algorithm. This is surprising since the *Samoa Observer* is probably the news outlet that publishes/posts the most stories about Samoa. It is impossible to know if the *Observer* is preventing *Samoa Topix* to trawl its stories.

## **Discussion**

The level of discussion found in *Samoa Topix* was found to be largely divisive, ethnically-charged and superficial. However, this study raises an important question: should *Samoa Topix* be lauded for *providing* the tools for a “more democratic debate” despite the fact that they are barely used in this way? Alternatively, should *Topix* and comparable websites be accountable for the fact that these tools alone do not contribute to a climate that supports democratic debate? The relatively superficial, ethnically-challenging and socially interpersonal narrative fragments examined for this study were situated at quite a distance from the news content linked to the site. However, the journalistic quality of the content itself was problematic, which also could have factored into the context of debased forum discussion. In assessing the democratic capabilities of *Samoa Topix*, one needs to ask is the act of providing the tools sufficient? Can *Topix* really say that: “By giving everyone access to the tools to talk - and an audience to listen”, it “redefines what it means to make the news”? This technologically-deterministic perspective absolves *Topix* and other sites like them from any responsibility to foster and maintain debate. Surely, if one is to provide the means for discussion then there is at least some onus on that operating body to

facilitate that discussion as well. Undoubtedly, *Topix* is under financial constraints that limit them from intervening in such matters, but as scholars examining these forums, there are important resultant questions that arise from the repeated instances of anonymous bullying happening throughout news forums such as these. At a minimum, forums could be encouraged, through active posts by those who are employed by *Topix*, to focus on news content and news-related issues.

The lack of adherence to traditional journalism norms found within content linked through *Samoa Topix* suggests a lack of training, experience and resources in news outlets from the Pacific Island region. While more established media (e.g., from New Zealand, Australia, the United States) that find their stories on *Samoa Topix* reflect fairness, balance and context, the same cannot be said of media such as Samoa News, the Fiji Times online, or Fiji Village for example. Among the many factors behind these differences is the lack of money and resources, the lack of trained journalists, and the pressure on freedom of the press experienced in many Pacific Island nations. The founder and editor of Talamua Media, Apulu Lance Polu has bemoaned the lack of trained journalists in Samoa and has argued that training is necessary to “enable journalists in school and on the job to bring balance, responsibility and professionalism ” (Enoka, 2011) to local journalism.

There was no obvious parallel between the content found in *Samoa Topix* and the *Samoa Observer*. From a liberal pluralist perspective, this, in and of itself, suggests a lack of relevance to what is actually happening in Samoa. The news items selected for *Topix* suggests a disconnect in focus to events in Samoa. The generalized topics emphasized in the *Topix* website also work to construct a reality not reflected within the news about Samoa from within Samoa. Given that the *Observer* is the paper of record from within Samoa, one would have assumed at least a slightly larger reliance on its content within *Topix*, but that was not the case here. It could be argued that perhaps an aggregator of news content simply does not make sense in a country of such a small size. However, there are a plethora of independent websites around the globe that actually are talking about Samoan issues and covering Samoan news. One comprehensive example is the Pacific Scoop website edited by Auckland University of Technology’s Pacific

Media Centre. The algorithms used to aggregate content in this instance simply did not appear to reflect the issues relevant to Samoa itself.

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