*M Pritchard*
*C du Plessis*

# An exploratory analysis of citizen journalists as editorial gatewatchers: a case study of Gautrain blog posts vis-à-vis completion for the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup

*ABSTRACT*

This study is a qualitative analysis of citizen journalists' blog posts relating to the Gautrain Project in South Africa, with a main focus on the Gautrain's readiness to commence operations on 8 June 2010 for the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup. This article is based on sections of a current MTech study on citizen journalism.

*Citizen journalism* as a phenomenon is examined within the context of the blogosphere. The gatekeeping theory is used as an approach to journalism in the online environment. So far, only a very limited number of studies have specifically addressed gatekeeping in the online environment where citizen journalists decide what is news and which issues need to be raised on the public sphere agenda. In the online context this is sometimes referred to as *gatewatching*.

Although not professionally trained journalists, citizen journalists often perform the same gatekeeping functions as professional journalists. As *gatewatchers* of mainstream media content, press releases and other background information, citizen journalists may reintroduce debate in the public sphere and introduce new insights previously overlooked by the mainstream media.

This article demonstrates how citizen journalists acted as editorial 'gatewatchers' on the topic of the Gautrain project's readiness for the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup in terms of seven categories. It also illustrates that when functioning as editorial gatewatchers, citizen journalists have the potential to establish new criteria for newsworthiness in the public sphere.

*Maritha Pritchard is a Senior Writer for Gautrain Provincial Support Team. Prof Charmaine du Plessis lectures in the Department of Communication Science at the University of South Africa.*

*INTRODUCTION*

Journalism practised by ordinary members of the public – also referred to by many theorists as citizen journalism – is rather complex. When attempting to define citizen journalism, several contested definitions emerge. Currently there is no mutually agreed upon definition of citizen journalism (Cohn, 2007).

The concept *citizen journalist* is neither popular among traditional journalists nor among ordinary members of the public who function as citizen journalists. Similar arguments highlighting the lack of an accurate definition of citizen journalism are also raised by Schaffer (2005: 24), Skube (2007) and Tilley and Cokley (2008: 94). Cohn (2007) concurs that an accurate definition of citizen journalism can be elusive owing to the interchangeable use of similar concepts such as *participatory journalism, stand-alone journalism, networked journalism, open-source journalism* and *distributed reporting*. According to Rich (2009: 26), citizen journalism refers to the involvement of readers and viewers in the reporting and dissemination of news. It is also referred to as 'participatory journalism' or 'user-generated content'. Citizen journalists, though they may make regular contributions, are referred to as 'citizens' because they are not staff members of a news organisation.

For the purposes of this study, Rosen's definition (2008) of citizen journalism is adopted: "When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's citizen journalism."

Citizen journalists typically engage in simultaneous, distributed conversations without the need for any intermediaries. Since its inception, the Internet has emerged as a significant news source. The advent of personalised news sites – often created by consumers without any formal training in journalism – represents a significant phenomenon in this context. This means that any news consumer can now act as a news provider (Gunter, Campbell & Touri, 2009: 185).With the rise of Web 2.0 and of social media, users are now able to generate and share content as journalists, broadcasters, critics, reviewers, publishers or public performers (George & Scerri, 2007: 3). Many users use blogs to share content with their online audiences and, in this way are further also able to act as citizen journalists. Blogs are Web 2.0 applications and journals that are available on the Web and are also referred to as *self-published online journals* or *weblogs* (Rosenberg, 2004).

Rosenbloom (2004) explains that blogs allow bloggers to sidestep the corporate media gatekeepers to engage with millions of computer users around the world on any topic or event. Initially, blogging was a niche activity performed by a few people conversant with blogging software (Brady, 2005: 4; Singh & Shahid, 2006; Stone, 2003: 6). As blogging software became easy to use for the amateur, both citizen journalists and professional journalists started blogging and sharing opinions about events (Gillmor, 2005: 11). These bloggers also link and cross-link to and reference one another's sites and commentaries that drive the development of blog technology and the making of the worldwide blogosphere. The structural design of Web 2.0 participation is a 'technological catalyst' for citizen journalism, one that depends upon easy-to-use web-publishing tools (Rosenbloom, 2004).

Reynolds (2003:81) acknowledges that blogging is a new form of journalism. Lasica (2003b) maintains that the "… is-it-or-isn't-it-journalism debate arise[s] from the relatively new idea of ordinary people publishing online". Blogging can be a form of journalism, especially when bloggers add comments based on original research, blog posts based on interviews conducted with newsworthy subjects and/or blog posts by someone considered to be an authority on a topic. Gillmor (2006: 137,139) classifies blogs as citizen journalism and adds that blogs can be acts of civic engagement. Blogs offer more depth than professional journalism, which is limited to space or airtime. Any blog worth reading shares the same characteristics as those written by professional journalists, namely voice, focus, real reporting and good writing (Gillmor, 2006: 114). Chung (2006: 1), writing in the same year, remarks that blogs are influential tools in journalism, which "… challenge conventional notions of who is a journalist and what journalism is". Yet, in a blog survey conducted by the Pew Internet Project in 2006, only 34% of bloggers considered their blogs to be a form of journalism (Lenhart & Fox, 2006).

Domingo and Heinonen (2008: 7) state that bloggers "commit journalism" in their various roles as specialised writers, amateur reporters and media commentators. Bloggers' role as media commentators is the most popular in the blogosphere. Although blogs do not follow journalistic conventions, their purpose is to collect, analyse, interpret or comment on current events, thereby performing the same social function as the institutionalised media (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008: 6).

Searls (2008a) maintains that blogs are the most common form of citizen media to share the same ideals with traditional journalism, namely accuracy, thoroughness, fairness, transparency, and, most importantly, independence. Blogging is participatory journalism that is inherently constructive (Searls, 2008b). This differs from traditional journalism, which objectively reports facts while leaving the construction or interpretation of events up to the reader.

Blogs challenge the conventional understanding of what journalism is and have revitalised the voices that expect a paradigm shift in journalism in the Internet era (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008: 3). A study conducted by Universal McCann (2008: 5) concludes that blogs have become a mainstream medium worldwide and, as 73% of online users read blogs, the medium can be regarded as a collective rival for traditional media.

Any form of digital and networked journalism is no longer exclusively the function of professional institutions or of salaried work (Deuze, 2008: 108). Blogs openly challenge institutional or professional journalism by offering either competing or complementary information about news and current affairs (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008: 12).

Within this context, Habermas's (1989: 227) perspective that the "effectiveness of a public sphere in the political realm is tied to freedom of speech and opinion, freedom of the press and freedom of association and assembly" is certainly relevant. The fact that anyone can freely utter opinions and publish a newspaper, however, does not result in the formation of public opinion. The public no longer comprises people who are formally and materially on an equal footing. In addition, publicist institutions are merely mediatising individual opinions and can both grant a privileged status to, or boycott, the private interests flooding into the public sphere.

With regard to the blogosphere in South Africa, research by 24.com established that by January 2008 there were 4 000 active South African blogs that had received more than 10.5 million page views each month. In their survey, 24.com concluded that 75 per cent of bloggers were active in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town. The findings also indicate that with regard to demographics, an equal percentage of males and females were bloggers and 58 per cent were between the ages of 25 and 44 (Cole, 2008).

Another study was conducted among black bloggers, English-speaking white bloggers and Afrikaans personal blogs by the Internet and Democracy Blog (2008), a research initiative at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. This study found that the South African blogosphere was fairly polarised and the results indicated that these bloggers preferred to associate with other bloggers – whether in South Africa or abroad – who share similar racial and ethnic backgrounds. Using Amatomu, Technorati and Blogpulse to analyse the hyperlinks on South African blogs, the study found that English-speaking white bloggers comprised the largest and most trafficked portion of the South African blogosphere. The second largest and most trafficked were Afrikaans bloggers who also formed the most isolated group. Lastly, black bloggers, though they were the smallest in number, were the most integrated with bloggers from other ethnic backgrounds (Internet & Democracy Blog, 2008).

The growth of blogging in South Africa could have been hampered as a result of the small number of people with Internet access. Wasserman (2005: 163) points out that apart from the innovative use of cell phones by grassroots and activist groups to access the Internet, South Africa still lags behind the developed world in respect of Internet connectivity. Internet connectivity correlates with the geographical, economic, racial, gender and class divides of apartheid. Similarly, global solidarity and activism tend to be limited to the intellectual and socio-economic elite. The Freedom of Expression Institute (2007) maintains that the voice of the poor is missing in the media and South Africans should thus discuss ways in which poor communities and those in rural areas can utilise blogging to tell their stories.

By March 2009, Internet penetration for the South African population was established at 9.4% or 4.6 million (Internet World Stats, 2009). The Internet penetration average for the world is 23.8%.

In this study, citizen journalism as a phenomenon is examined within the context of the blogosphere. The *blogosphere* refers to all blogs and their interconnections. Blogs therefore exist together as a linked society (Miller, 2007: 287). The gatekeeping theory, as proposed by Singer (1998), is used as an approach to journalism in the online environment. To date, only a few studies have specifically addressed gatekeeping in the online environment. The role of citizen journalists can be seen as the introduction of new insights previously overlooked by the mainstream media (Cassidy, 2006: 11).

## 1.  GATEKEEPING THEORY WITHIN THE WEB 2.0 BLOGOSPHERE

Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim and Wrigley (2001: 233) explain that the gatekeeping theory was initially proposed by psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947) and first applied by White (1950) in a case study of choices made by the wire-service editor of a small Midwestern newspaper. According to this theory, there are conditions that may either constrain or facilitate the passage of news items through the gatekeeping process (Cassidy, 2006: 7). As a result, news messages are shaped by an intermediary who eventually only transmits a small number of messages in the news media. News story selection is determined by newsworthiness criteria that are often instinctively applied. Because of ideas among news providers as to what will catch the attention of a news audience, certain types of stories are more likely to be selected than others (Shoemaker *et al*., 2001).

Gatekeeping persists despite the advent of new technology and new gatekeepers, but only at a much faster pace. As early as 1998, Singer (1998) perceived the role of the journalist as gatekeeper to be threatened by the Internet, in which users have access to any information that might interest them.

Citizen journalists are also performing a gatekeeping function in the online environment. A study of political videos by Harp (2007: 20) confirms that ordinary members of the public are performing the functions of editorial gatekeepers when contributing to the videosharing website, YouTube. Even if clips are taken directly from television shows, users are able to decide which parts of the show to highlight. While the blogosphere noticeably increases individual control over content, it also significantly decreases the 'power and authority' of the traditional general-interest intermediaries, especially that of newspapers, magazines and broadcasters (Rosenbloom, 2004).

To date, millions of bloggers have provided commentary about various topics of interest that can be commented on or distributed to millions of other users on different social media platforms. Some of these comments provoke debate and even evoke scepticism, but have added much depth to the way in which relevant issues are discussed and debated, especially by the traditional mass-market media (Rosenbloom, 2004). Influential bloggers are considered to be opinion makers/shapers. A study conducted by Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) concluded that bloggers who perceived themselves to be opinion makers/shapers have a high degree of supposed influence. In addition to being opinion makers/shapers, influential bloggers are also called A-list bloggers. Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005: 968) explain that a small group of so-called A-list bloggers have the largest influence on both the media and on the public's perceptions of blogging. Haas (2005: 393, 394) cautions that a small number of highly influential bloggers might set the news agenda in the same way that elite mainstream media are setting the agenda for smaller news organisations. Haas (2005: 393, 394) emphasises that "… while weblogs are produced by and for the public, they are not 'of' the public". Blogs cover mostly the same topics as those covered by mainstream news media. It seldom transpires that blog writers engage in any independent news reporting. Instead of challenging the dominance of mainstream news media, bloggers tend rather to strengthen mainstream media dominance. As a result, blogs have lost their potential to realise the ideals of public journalism "… as an alternative to mainstream journalism's dominant commercial and political interests".

However, Bruns (2008a: 94) points out that consistent critical and negative treatment of journalists and media organisations by citizen journalists might reduce their standing with users.

Buckland (2004) argues that though blogs provide important voices, they are not regarded as journalism in that they are not subjected to traditional criteria such as balance, fair comment and accuracy checks. The same views are held by Andrews (2003: 63) and Regan (2003). According to Brown (2005: 42), citizen journalism is not professional journalism:

> "… there is a difference between 'citizen' journalism and 'professional' journalism. A professional journalist's No.1 obligation is to be accurate. A citizen journalist's No.1 obligation is to be interesting."

Bruns (2008a: 264) explains that citizen journalism is not entirely free of power structures. Similar to the traditional media environment, citizen journalism also features key debutants and opinion leaders. Yet, citizen journalism still holds the potential to challenge traditional power relations.

A study of the South African blogosphere conducted by 24.com (Cole, 2008), concluded that 48 per cent of bloggers used their personal experiences as a source for their blog posts, whereas only 24 per cent used local and international media sites and media releases as sources.

Bruns (2003: 5) prefers the concept *gatewatching* to that of *gatekeeping*, considering the former to be more suitable within an online context. Gatewatchers essentially *publicise* news by directing it to sources rather than *publish* it (for instance, by composing a report from all the available sources). *Gates* refers to all the publishing technologies controlled by the media organisations.

Bruns (2008b: 250) further states that the concept *gatewatching* better describes how citizen journalists are on the lookout for content that is passing through the mainstream media's gates and which could be relevant to the concerns and interests of their own audience. Instead of performing the role of a gatekeeper in a traditional journalistic sense and/or producing original content, gatewatchers interpret, reintroduce alternative viewpoints, emphasise, point to political bias or substandard journalism, and add new insights by previously overlooked first-tier media debates.

Gatewatching is typically performed through filter blogs. Li (2005: 133) explains that filter blogs extract useful information from large numbers of external topics that are generally outside of the bloggers' personal identity. Filter bloggers resemble editors in the traditional media.

## 2. *BLOGGERS AS CITIZEN JOURNALISTS*

According to Searls (2008a), blogs are the most common form of citizen media that share the same ideals as traditional journalism, namely accuracy, thoroughness, fairness, transparency and, most importantly, independence. Bloggers' roles as media commentators are most popular in the blogosphere. As citizen journalists contribute voluntarily to the blogosphere without

seeking to make a profit, citizen journalism has the ability to replace the manufactured consent and advertising properties of the public sphere with engagement in political debate. In so doing, citizen journalism's free-speech motives pose a challenge to the controlled commodification of information. Domingo and Heinonen (2008: 7) argue that bloggers "commit journalism" in their various roles as specialised writers, amateur reporters and media commentators. Although blogs do not follow journalistic conventions, they have the intention of collecting, analysing, interpreting or commenting on current events and they therefore perform a social function similar to that associated with institutionalised media (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008: 6).

Describing gatewatching, Bruns (2008b: 252) argues that citizen journalists use the media's own tools and resources either to point out omissions, misrepresentations or biases in mainstream media content, or to differ in opinion from news stories, press releases and other background information. According to Deuze, Bruns and Neuberger (2007: 388), citizen journalism to some extent corrects mainstream journalism's preference for hard news. Featuring mostly soft news, citizen blogs display frustration with the rather uniform, institutional and gendered focus of traditional, mainstream hard news. For that reason Woan (2008: 103) suggests that when citizen journalists check facts, interview sources and raise public issue awareness, they essentially perform the same functions as professional journalists.

However, bloggers do not only fact-check mainstream media, but also one another's blogs. When bloggers fact-check the blogosphere, the result is a peer-review system that exposes fake blogs, fraudsters and other forms of content vandalism (Holahan, 2007: 5). As news, facts, jokes and links are constantly scrutinised, checked and challenged in the blogosphere, Searls (2001: 215) maintains that blogs have become the peer-review journalism of the future. Blogs are fed by informed peer-to-peer contribution much like the nature of open-source peer-reviewed software. The goal is neither to attract bogus stories nor to attract advertising revenue as is often the hidden agenda of traditional journalism. Tilley and Cokley (2008: 98) suggest that citizen journalism often challenges false 'citizen' voices who manufacture false content by posing as citizens.

The collaborative peer-reviewing of the blogosphere results in a self-correcting system. Ribstein (2006: 185) explains that a blogger tends to refrain from inaccurate, irresponsible, false or harmful posts as these would damage the readership relationship with his/her readers. The interactivity of comments, trackbacks, links and page-ranking mechanisms of search engines provides a self-correcting system that ensures aggregated accuracy in the blogging subcommunity. Bloggers build up a publishing track record over time as does any news publication. When a blogger gains a reputation for accuracy and relevance, the readers perceive his/her posts to be credible (Lasica, 2003a: 70).

When citizen journalists freely engage in the conversational mode of journalism, the public sphere is reinstated without the mediatising of individual opinions. Gillmor (2006: 16, 18) proposes that open-sourcing the news is a digital version of a small-town tradition of "barn-raising". Searls (2007) elaborates that bloggers "raise a barn" by generating new knowledge in an environment where many contributors actively participate without anyone claiming any ownership. Consequently,

blogging is equated to open-source development where anybody can build on ideas and make improvements.

Haas (2005) discusses several studies that have found that topics debated in popular citizen-based media are the same as those debated by the mainstream media. Gill (2004), Bowman and Willis (2005: 6) and Regan (2003: 68) all confirm that citizen journalists using blogs may influence the mainstream media news agenda and shaping of stories. For instance, Drezner and Farrell (2004) argue that blogs focusing on new or neglected issues have the potential to "socially construct an agenda that acts as a focal point for mainstream media", which, in turn, shapes the larger political debate. In this regard Bruns (2008b: 263) states that citizen journalism facilitates "a more open, multi perspective and democratic debate". Citizen journalists become engaged in the news and are assisted and recognised by professional journalists (Gillmor, 2005: 11). Users' ability to publish comments right below each post is the most fundamental characteristic of a blog. Whittaker (2004: 176) explains that blogs tend to "develop into small virtual communities" in which more people contribute their ideas and opinions. A blog author will initiate a conversation that can be transformed into a debate within minutes as readers actively start following up. This conversation then extends to other blogs in which bloggers comment on other weblog posts in their own blogs and use a trackback tool to provide information about their comments in the original post, with a link to their own weblog (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008: 4).

This study is a qualitative analysis of blog posts in respect of the readiness of the Gautrain Project for the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup, when it commenced operations on 8 June 2010. Based on the literature review, the analysis was initially done regarding the role of bloggers as citizen journalists in terms of the following five categories:

Category 1: Pointing out omitted facts
Category 2: Recommending solutions
Category 3: Pointing out false reports
Category 4: Correcting facts
Category 5: Suggesting alternative information sources

However, during the analysis of the blogs in the sample, the following two categories were also added:

Category 6: Advancing an issue
Category 7: Criticism

## 3.   THE SOUTH AFRICAN GAUTRAIN PROJECT

The Gautrain Project, a R25,4-billion new train and bus service, commenced its 54-month construction period in September 2006 in Gauteng amid resistance from opposition politicians and affected communities. Upon completion it will comprise 10 stations over an 80 km route across three metropolitan areas, namely Tshwane, Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni (*Engineering News*, 2007: 28; Venter, 2007: 30).

At the time of Gautrain's announcement in 2001, bidding for the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup had not yet started (Ash, 2009: 6) as the World Cup was only awarded in 2004 (Mbabela, 2006: 11; Venter, 2009a: 16). Consequently, Gautrain was never a 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup project (Venter, 2009a: 16). Contractually, Gautrain's Sandton-airport link was scheduled to be completed on 27 June 2010 and the remainder of the route in mid-2011 (Sapa, 2009; Venter, 2009b: 18). Yet public pressure mounted to have the Gautrain ready for soccer fans during this major international event on 9 June 2010 (Venter, 2009a: 16). Throughout the construction of the Gautrain, contradictory messages were communicated about Gautrain's ability to have the Sandton-airport route ready for the World Cup (Ash, 2009: 6; Cox, 2005; Sapa, 2009: 4; *Sunday Tribune*, 2007: 2; Venter, 2009c: 16). However, in March 2010 Gautrain Management CEO Jack van der Merwe announced that the airport link would be operational from 8 June 2010, three days before the start of the World Cup (Venter, 2010: 16).

On the day that it commenced operations, the blogosphere reflected both much praise and criticism for Gautrain's services. In fact, search keywords related to the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup dominated Google searches among local Internet users, with Gautrain being the third most searched topic (MyBroadband, 2010). Moreover, Gautrain was one of the most popular hashtags on Twitter during the FIFA Soccer 2010 World Cup and #gautrain received 678 mentions in South Africa (Fuseware, 2010). During the event, over 100 000 tourists used Twitter in South Africa.

To report their experiences of their first ride on Gautrain, citizen journalists posted blogs and tweets including photographs and videos about the historic moment. In fact, citizen journalists initiated a Facebook group called "Gautrain inaugural breakfast run", whereby Facebook and Twitter users were invited to post their experiences on the first train that left Sandton Station for the airport at 05:24 (Van Wyk, 2010a: 3). Several blogs and photos of the event followed on Flickr.

By the end of its first day, Gautrain had carried between 9 000 and 11 000 passengers (Sapa, 2010). A few teething problems were experienced as new systems tried to cope with first- time passenger volumes and caused congestion (Van Wyk, 2010b: 3). While some bloggers praised the system, many also doubted Gautrain's readiness to carry passengers for the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup.

## 4. RESEARCH QUESTION

The following research question guided this study:

How did citizen journalists act as editorial gatewatchers in the blogosphere with regard to Gautrain's readiness for the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup?

## 5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research method employed for this study was a qualitative and ethnographic content analysis. Predetermined categories as obtained from the literature were used, but new categories were added where necessary. As content analysis is a hybrid technique (made up of different aspects), the quantification of categories is also provided.

According to Bauer (2000: 133), content analysis is "a technique for making inferences from a focal text to its social context in an objectified manner". Altheide (1996: 16) recommends the use of ethnographic content analysis in qualitative studies. This approach emphasises a systematic "recursive and reflexive movement" between concept development, sampling data, collection data, coding data and analysis interpretation. Ethnographic content analysis is analytic, yet it allows for new categories to emerge throughout the study. Consequently, ethnographic content analysis does not follow the rigid process of classical quantitative content analysis where all content has to fit predefined categories, but allows for both the collection of numerical and narrative data. To this end, items can be counted and included in emergent categories while extensive descriptions of content are provided. Similarly, Weber (1990: 10) proposes that the best manner in which to conduct content analysis is to combine both qualitative and quantitative methods – otherwise known as an antithetical mode of analysis. Du Plooy (2002: 194) also maintains that a frequency count is the only type of quantitative data that can be obtained in qualitative studies.

In terms of this study, ethnographic content analysis was also applied, and new categories emerged while initial categories were discarded as analysis progressed. New categories that emerged during the analysis included Category 6, Advancing an issue, and Category 7, Criticism.

### 5.1 Sample and criteria for inclusion

Participatory journalism was of specific interest to the sample for this study. As such, a function of participatory journalism is annotative reporting where grassroots reporters add their comments and fact-check information, typically in blogs (Bowman & Willis, 2005: 34). Furthermore, participatory journalism is evident when readers add their comments to blogs or reports by mainstream staff journalists (Lasica, 2003a). With this in mind, both blog posts and annotator comments were included in the sample.

This study used a purposive sample of posts in the form of blogs, blog annotator comments and citizen journalists' annotative blogs on mainstream journalists' online reports. All the posts related to Gautrain as a topic on its first day of operations, namely 8 June 2010.

Purposive sampling is fairly commonly employed in content analysis (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006: 158). When purposive sampling is used, elements are eliminated from a study when they fail to meet specific required criteria (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006: 91).

Criteria for inclusion in the purposive sampling for this study were the following:

- Blog posts, blog annotator comments and citizen journalists' annotative blog posts on mainstream media reports making reference to Gautrain, posted on 8 June 2010.
- Blog posts and annotator comments initiated and written by citizen journalists (consequently, blogs and annotator comments written by professional journalists were eliminated).
- Blog posts and annotator comments written in English.

- Spam comments and blog posts written by marketers or advertisers were not included in the sample.

Only blog posts that fully met the above purposive sampling criteria were included in the study.

In order to draw the purposive sample, blog search engines were used, namely Google Blogs (2010), which resulted in 68 blogs; Icerocket Blog Search (2010), which resulted in 72 blogs; and Social Mention (2010) which resulted in 81 blogs. Although many blog search engines were available, the abovementioned produced the most results. For example, some blog search engines gave no results when searching for *Gautrain* as a keyword, whilst local sites like Afrigator required blogs to be registered with the organisation, hence producing limited results.

In many instances, bloggers posted under pseudonyms or did not reveal their demographic information; however, posts revealed that most bloggers were South African, with a fair number of expatriates giving their opinions about Gautrain.

Some of these blogs tended to be short-lived and only appeared on the Internet for a limited period of time. The blog search for this study was accessed between June 2010 and July 2010, and some blogs may therefore not be available later.

In order to draw the purposive sample for citizen journalists' annotative blogs on mainstream journalists' online reports, Newsclip media monitoring service was used, which resulted in 103 online reports. However, not all these reports facilitated citizen journalists' annotative blogs and many were eliminated from the sample. After eliminating blogs that did not qualify for the sampling criteria, a total of 10 blogs (192 cases) were included in the sample. In addition, 12 mainstream media reports (572 cases of annotator comments) were selected. In total, the sample included 764 cases which is considered a sufficient number in order to reach meaningful conclusions.

## 6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings indicate how, in terms of seven categories, citizen journalists acted as editorial gatewatchers with regard to the readiness of the Gautrain Project for the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup. They also illustrate, through one category that emerged during the coding process (Category 6, Advancing an issue), that citizen journalists – when functioning as editorial gatewatchers – have the potential to establish new criteria for newsworthiness in the public sphere (see the discussion of the findings for Category 6 below).

After analysing the overall frequencies of categories, it was evident that Category 6, Advancing an issue, was most frequently expressed, while Category 5, Suggesting alternative information sources, was the least frequently expressed. Findings expressed in terms of frequencies are illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of category frequencies in descending order**

| Category | Category name | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| 6 | Advancing an issue | 262 | 34% |
| 2 | Recommending solutions | 201 | 26% |
| 7 | Criticism | 104 | 14% |
| 4 | Correcting facts | 80 | 10% |
| 3 | Pointing out false reports | 53 | 7% |
| 1 | Pointing out omitted facts | 50 | 7% |
| 5 | Suggesting alternative information sources | 14 | 2% |

The overall findings can be elaborated as follows:

### *Category 1: Pointing out omitted facts*

Category 1, Pointing out omitted facts, is indicative of comments on information that was overlooked or omitted from reports. This category represents 7% of the cases in the sample.

As gatewatchers, citizen journalists alert readers to omissions in other blogs or mainstream media reports. Consequently, gatewatching involves a peer-reviewed process that is equated with open-source software development, where any contributor can discover and report weaknesses or problems. Moreover, gatewatching as an open-source, self-correcting and peer-reviewed process is also confirmed by the findings of categories 3 and 4. Citizen journalists used the media's own tools and resources to point out omitted facts (Bruns, 2008b: 252).

Table 2 below provides some examples of online gatewatching in this category:

**Table 2: Examples of online gatewatching with regard to Category 1: Pointing out omitted facts**

| Category 1: Pointing out omitted facts | |
|---|---|
| **Frequency** | **Verbatim quotes from blog posts** |
| 50 cases (7%) | • "What is the daily tariff to park your car and does it include the security or does a security guard come as an extra?"<br>• "You seem to be missing an important point."<br>• "Maybe some of you could come up with good reasons why that is the case."<br>• "The article says it is R9.50 for the first 24 hours to park. I presume it will be similar after that period."<br>• "'Strange' that they advertise the train and all the prices for the different distances – but not, what the daily parking ticket would cost you." |

*Category 2: Recommending solutions*

Category 2, Recommending solutions, contains comments that outline an alternative course of action that needs to be taken. It also includes new solutions to and insights into issues that were reported. This category represents 26% of the cases in the sample.

Although citizen journalists did not follow journalistic conventions, they commented on current affairs and reintroduced alternative viewpoints (Bruns, 2008b: 250). In this way they performed the same social function generally associated with traditional media (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008: 6). In addition, as gatewatchers, citizen journalists added new insights that the first-tier media debates or fellow bloggers had previously overlooked. This implies that citizen journalists wield considerable power and authority to recommend alternative courses of action. Consequently, traditional intermediaries such as mainstream media and publicist institutions no longer maintain the privileged status to flood the public sphere with private interests. As such, the reinstatement of the public sphere is facilitated (Habermas, 1989).

Table 3 below provides some examples of online gatewatching in this category:

**Table 3: Examples of online gatewatching with regard to Category 2: Recommending solutions**

| Category 2: Recommending solutions | |
| --- | --- |
| **Frequency** | **Verbatim quotes from blog posts** |
| 201 cases (26%) | • "If the management hears of one of these brouhahas on the train ... they should make the price unaffordable."<br>• "PS ... and Julius Malema stay out of it … do not spoil the good deed that was started when you were still in black label nappies."<br>• "Gautrain users should drive themselves to the stations and not be ferried by buses."<br>• "Yep, now they just got to fix up their website, gone through all the pages – there is some contradictory information between pages, regarding prices, week passes, etc."<br>• "For the cost of a high-speed train that only goes to Pretoria and the airport – Johannesburg could have had a monorail system that circled the city by following the centre of the highways." |

*Category 3: Pointing out false reports*

Category 3, Pointing out false reports, contains cases where citizen journalists alerted readers to information that was incorrectly reported or when other bloggers and professional journalists were reprimanded for making false or inaccurate statements. This category represents 7% of the cases in the sample.

By checking facts in both the mainstream media (Woan, 2008: 103) and one another's blogs for accuracy (Holahan, 2007: 5) and then reprimanding those who provided false statements, the citizen journalists here performed the same functions as professional journalists. This is indicative of gatewatchers' challenge to the controlled commodification of information either by other fellow bloggers or by mainstream media reports. As with the findings of Category 4 below, Correcting facts, this category, Pointing out false reports, furthermore underlines the self-correcting peer-reviewed citizen-journalism gatewatching process. As such, gatewatching adheres to the values of free speech in the blogosphere.

Table 4 below provides some examples of online gatewatching in this category:

**Table 4: Examples of online gatewatching with regard to Category 3: Pointing out false reports**

| Category 3: Pointing out false reports | |
|---|---|
| **Frequency** | **Verbatim quotes from blog posts** |
| 53 cases (7%) | • "What a stupid remark, what does this football journalist and German investor think: they would put second-hand trains?"<br>• "I have gone through the site and cannot see the contradictions you are referring to."<br>• "The reason why I emerged from my lurkerdom, and went through the somewhat cumbersome process of registering to leave a comment, is because I felt the tone of this particular article was rather unfairly negative, and I felt that the gist of it was partly a specific jab at the people who tweeted from the event, ie me."<br>• "If I, a shop owner from Benoni who tweets, would be critical if criticism were appropriate, then implying that hundreds of journalists would only flatter after experiencing music from floating musicians, is dangerously insultive."<br>• "Hahaha, the narrowmindedness in comments such as yours always amuses me." |

*Category 4: Correcting facts*

Category 4, Correcting facts, contains comments where citizen journalists supplied the correct facts for facts incorrectly reported. This category differs from Category 1 in that citizen journalists also provided the correct facts and not only pointed out omitted facts. This category represents 10% of the cases in the sample (the fourth most frequent).

Searls (2001: 215) points out that citizen journalists not only check and challenge incorrect facts but also provide the truthful facts and therefore engage in peer-review journalism. By collectively correcting facts, gatewatching thus becomes a self-correcting, peer-reviewed process among citizen journalists. In this way, blogs maintain their credibility and online citizen journalist gatewatchers collectively earn a reputation for accuracy.

Table 5 below provides some examples of online gatewatching in this category:

**Table 5: Examples of online gatewatching with regard to Category 4: Correcting facts**

| Category 4: Correcting facts | |
|---|---|
| **Frequency** | **Verbatim quotes from blog posts** |
| 80 cases (10%) | • "@Henry, this is an unsubsidised service, whereas I doubt that the Dubai train is unsubsidised."<br>• "As @MIMI, the leg between Pretoria and Sandton will be available in a subsequent phase of the project."<br>• "@Tshepo This has nothing to do with the ANC, it was privately funded and coordinated."<br>• "The headlines should have been: Gautrain ushers in new era in transportation for the haves."<br>• "But that's the job, primarily, of journalists and not self-appointed Twit Leaders." |

*Category 5: Suggesting alternative information sources*

Category 5, *S*uggesting alternative information sources, contains referrals to other relevant online sites and documents, mostly in the form of hyperlinks. This category represents 2% of the cases in the sample.

In this study it was established that citizen journalists were on the lookout for content in the mainstream media that could be relevant to their own audiences' concerns and interests and alerted them to these media (Bruns, 2008b: 250). In this manner, gatewatchers reintroduce a plethora of sources that are seen to be relevant, useful or interesting for the news agenda. This implies that a large variety of issues are open for discussion in the public sphere.

Table 6 below provides some examples of online gatewatching in this category:

**Table 6: Examples of online gatewatching with regard to Category 5: Suggesting alternative information sources**

| Category 5: Suggesting alternative information sources | |
|---|---|
| **Frequency** | **Verbatim quotes from blog posts** |
| 14 cases (2%) | • "I will however suggest that you go to gautrain.co.za for all fares."<br>• "Those that want to commute from the East can use the Rhodesfield Station to get to Sandton at R21 a trip, or a monthly rate of R1 388 for train, bus & parking (http://join.gautrain.co.za/fares.aspx)."<br>• "To follow the #Gautrain conversation on Twitter, click here."<br>• "This is how our friends over at Zoopy.com reported on the GauTrain ..."<br>• "There were a couple of hiccups and I offloaded (puked) them here, for those that are interested, but outside of that, it was one awesome experience." |

### Category 6: Advancing an issue

Category 6, Advancing an issue, indicates citizen journalists' remarks in praise of a topic, as well as their comments commending a topic under discussion. This category represents 34% (the most frequent) of the cases in the sample.

Citizen journalists act freely as media commentators (Searls, 2008a) and become engaged in the topics under discussion (Gillmor, 2005: 11). As a result, readers of posts who are praised or commended actively follow up and extend the positive conversation (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008: 4). As gatewatchers, they specifically emphasise and advance the positive merits of news. Consequently, good news can be regarded as having been the most prominent criterion for news in the sample. This is in direct contrast to mainstream media where bad news is perceived to dominate the headlines. This finding confirms the assumption of Deuze *et al*. (2007: 388) who maintain that citizen journalism's inclination towards soft news corrects mainstream journalism's preference for hard news and displays citizen journalism's frustration with the rather uniform, institutional and gendered focus of traditional, mainstream media hard news. This finding also indicates a possible new criterion for newsworthiness in the public sphere when citizen journalists function as editorial gatewatchers, namely a marked preference for soft news.

Table 7 below provides some examples of online gatewatching in this category:

**Table 7: Examples of online gatewatching with regard to Category 6: Advancing an issue**

| Category 6: Advancing an issue | |
| --- | --- |
| **Frequency** | **Verbatim quotes from blog posts** |
| 262 cases (34%) | • "So, I'm going to say it and you can douse as much Train-Envy-Juice as you want at me … I'm saying it … I was fortunate enough to be seated on the first commercial Gautrain ride to OR Tambo International Airport …yes … the first … *does happy dance*"<br>• "We now have a world-class public transport system that we can be proud of."<br>• "Regardless of our petty games, the Gautrain is a must-do for anyone living in Joburg-Pretoria-Midrand (eventually) – I believe everyone should experience it, even if it's for a short trip … everyone needs to feel, smell, touch and live the Gautrain for just one stop … it's an incredible thing and it makes me so proud to be a South African and, better yet, a Joburgerian!"<br>• "Our breath was taken away, and we all felt extremely proud to be sharing in the dream of what the Gautrain is."<br>• "What a superb experience ... the sort of infrastructure that assures we have the potential to become a world-class city!" |

### Category 7: Criticism

Category 7, Criticism, refers to negative value judgements and observations about a topic under discussion. This category represents 14% of the cases in the sample (the third most frequent).

Citizen journalists frequently voice their scepticism about the status quo and news reported. Moreover, as gatewatchers, citizen journalists frequently express views differing from those expressed in news stories, press releases and other background information. Regarding the readiness of the Gautrain Project for the FIFA Soccer World Cup, the role of criticism can therefore be regarded as one of adding depth to how issues are debated and discussed in the public sphere (Rosenbloom, 2004).

Table 8 below provides some examples of online gatewatching in this category:

**Table 8: Examples of online gatewatching with regard to Category 7: Criticism**

| Category 7: Criticism | |
| --- | --- |
| **Frequency** | **Verbatim quotes from blog posts** |
| 104 cases (14%) | • "What a RIPOFF!"<br>• "I am disappointed in Gautrain, after my visit yesterday to Marlboro station."<br>• "I think Gautrain is a bit of a dumb name though."<br>• "I did have a family whose expectations I had set fairly high based on the PR and hype you've been dishing out in the lead up to today."<br>• "The public at large can easily be duped with shiny, fast, first-world things, with a few pokes at the fire of patriotism." |

## 7.  CONCLUSION

When acting as editorial gatewatchers in the blogosphere with regard to the readiness of the Gautrain Project for the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup, editorial gatewatchers in this study preferred advancing positive news and providing alternative solutions to issues. This indicates a possible new criterion for newsworthiness in the public sphere when citizen journalists function as editorial gatewatchers, namely a preference for soft news.

They consequently not only challenge the orientation of mainstream media towards hard news, but also counteract the commodification of news to serve private interests in a narrow range of topics. Eliminating the need for intermediaries to set the news agenda or interpret events, citizen journalist gatewatchers thus continuously introduce and discuss new insights and a plethora of additional news sources previously overlooked by first-tier media debates or fellow bloggers. Moreover, as critics, citizen journalist gatewatchers often voice their scepticism regarding the status quo, thereby adding depth to how issues are debated and discussed in the public sphere.

Gatewatching is a collective, peer-reviewed and open-source process whereby anyone is allowed to identify problems or inaccuracies freely, and to introduce new viewpoints or solutions. As gatewatchers correct facts, point out false reports and alert others to omitted facts reported in fellow citizen journalists' blogs or mainstream media reports, gatewatching becomes a self-correcting system in the blogosphere. As a result, citizen journalism maintains its standing and

citizen journalist gatewatchers collectively earn a reputation for enforcing both free speech and accuracy. However, their continuous criticism and negative treatment of journalists and news organisations can also reduce the reputation of citizen journalists with users. Because of the digital divide, citizen journalists' influence on the mainstream media in South Africa is also still limited.

As few studies have addressed gatekeeping in the online environment, it is recommended both that this relevant issue be explored in further studies and that a larger sample be used.

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