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CNN iReport, the Haitian cholera epidemic, and the limits of citizen journalism

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Ten months after a catastrophic earthquake struck Haiti, the country was forced to confront what has since become the worst cholera outbreak in modern history. Haiti's reputation as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and cholera's stigmatization as a disease of the poor contributed to a dominant narrative in Global North news media in which the outbreak was seen not only as tragic but also inevitable. The failings in traditional news media provided a valuable opportunity for citizen journalism to elevate marginalized voices and challenge dominant narratives. Our study examines whether citizen journalism lived up to this potential through a discourse analysis of CNN iReport coverage of the Haitian cholera epidemic. Our findings demonstrate that iReport coverage failed to close the participation gap between the Global North and Global South, reproduced familiar narratives of Americans as heroes and Haitians as victims, became home to rumors and misinformation, and reproduced tropes of Haitians and cholera victims as backward and ignorant. In short, our study found that iReport coverage of Haiti's cholera epidemic embodied the same discursive formation as that of traditional Global North news media. In closing, we argue that scholars must exercise caution when applauding citizen journalism without first critically examining citizen journalism content.

Introduction

On January 12, 2010, Haiti became the epicenter of the world's attention when a catastrophic 7.0 M_w earthquake struck the island nation, killing as many as 300,000 people (Brown 2012). Ten months later, Haiti faced yet another disaster—a cholera outbreak. From the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*, cholera is one of the most dangerous and deadly of all diarrheal diseases. Despite being eradicated from countries with developed water treatment and sanitation infrastructures for over a century, cholera is endemic in nearly 50 countries, infecting between one and four million people every year (Ryan 2011; WHO 2015).

News media narratives frequently depict cholera as a disease of the poor, reinforcing stigmas of "ignorance, filth, and backwardness" (Briggs 2000, 1). These same tropes were present in global media coverage of the 2010 cholera outbreak in Haiti. Haiti's reputation as "the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere" and the unsupported, yet persistent, belief that natural disasters increase the risk of outbreak did not help (Katz 2013; Polyné 2012, xviii). In fact, many reporters discussed the post-earthquake spread of cholera in Haiti as seemingly inevitable, despite the fact that the disease had been absent from the

island for over 100 years. For example, NBC's Brian Williams reported on *NBC Nightly News* on October 25, 2010:

> It's what all of us worried about when we arrived in Haiti, just hours after the quake … beyond the death toll, the inevitable spread of disease. Now it's happening in Haiti, an outbreak of cholera in that nation struggling every day, still, just to survive.

Yet, cholera did not manifest itself out of thin air, as Williams' report implies. The disease was brought into the country by Nepalese soldiers, peacekeepers working for the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) (Schuller 2012). Despite rampant rumors among Haitians that the outbreak originated from a UN camp near Mirebalais, Global North news media either resisted reporting these claims or countered them directly with erroneous reports that the Nepalese UN workers had all tested negative for cholera (Katz 2013).

The influx of new media production and distribution technologies has fostered what some scholars refer to as a "participatory culture," one in which audiences should be understood as productive participants in meaning making (Jenkins 2006). Citizen journalism, in particular, often is praised for its ability to act as a democratizing agent, elevating the voices of those excluded by traditional media gatekeepers (Murthy 2013; Wall 2015). Although studies have found that citizen journalism can provide an important counter-narrative to traditional media (Palmer 2012; Wall 2015), citizen journalism does not exist outside of hegemonic power structures (Kperogi 2011; Meadows 2013). Thus, our study seeks to examine how discourses of power, stigma, and globalization are navigated through citizen journalism coverage of the 2010 cholera outbreak in Haiti.

This study follows the call from Wall (2015, 10) to explore "the ways citizen journalism intersects with race, gender, class, and other categories of marginalization." We begin with a brief historical context of the United States' relationship with Haiti, including a discussion of how Global North news media stigmatize cholera epidemics in the Global South. Next, we review literature on citizen journalism, noting both the opportunities and challenges of contesting narratives produced by corporately dominated news media. We then present the findings from a critical discourse analysis of the Haitian cholera assignment on CNN's citizen journalism site, iReport. In closing, we argue that despite the importance of citizen journalism, it does not always live up to its potential to elevate marginalized voices and challenge dominant news narratives.

Haiti and Hegemony

The Republic of Haiti was founded in 1804, after a slave revolt overthrew the French colonialists who had ruled the island nation for almost 400 years. At its founding, Haiti became the first modern state to abolish slavery, 60 years before Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Beyond its geopolitical significance, the Haitian Revolution contested the ideology of power that manifests as slavery. As Reinhardt notes:

> Here was the West, equipped with a whole ontology based on the notion that Blacks are inferior to Whites, unable to take care of themselves, naturally designed for slavery, the bottom rung of the ladder of human evolution—and these Blacks kept winning battle after battle. (Reinhardt 2005, 250)

By challenging an ideology of white supremacy, the Haitian Revolution produced ontological uncertainty for American slave owners. In fact, both the United States and France refused to recognize Haiti's independence until many years later. France's eventual recognition came with a cost—a demand for millions of dollars to compensate former plantation owners who lost property during the revolution. Taking advantage of Haiti's inability to repay this debt, and using the Roosevelt Corollary to justify US intervention in Latin America, the United States took control of the island and paid off Haiti's debts in 1915 (Brown 2012; Farmer 2006). Exemplifying the force of military and monetary power during its 20-year occupation, the United States established a national boundary that still exists between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. As soon as the United States left Haiti, the Dominican dictator ordered all Haitians living on the Dominican side of the border to be executed.

While media coverage of Haiti often depicts the country as "plagued by political violence" (Polyné 2012, xviii), little attention is given to the United States' role in Haiti's political instability. As Noam Chomsky argues, the absence of this history from the American cultural memory is unsurprising:

> The facts are extensively documented, appalling and shameful. And they are deemed irrelevant for the usual reasons: they do not conform to the required self-image, and so are efficiently dispatched deep into the memory hole, though they can be unearthed by those who have some interest in the real world. (Chomsky 2004, 19)

Exemplifying Raymond Williams' view of hegemony as "the wholeness of the process," the United States' relationship with Haiti demonstrates a "complex interlocking of political, social, and cultural forces" (Williams 1977, 108). This structural relationship continues to be evidenced in dominant discourses about Haiti. As Robert Lawless (1994, 475) argues, "little has changed in almost two centuries; Haiti remains the primary whipping boy of the white-dominated world, blamed for everything from AIDS to zombies."

Malady Kolera as the Other

In the early 1980s, AIDS began receiving substantial media attention, with Haiti widely pegged as the epidemiologic culprit. According to the national press, AIDS was a Haitian epidemic brought back to the United States by the homosexual population (Farmer 1996; Potter 2009). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention went so far as to promote the notion of the "4-H club" of AIDS—homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroin addicts, and Haitians (Triechler 1999). Eventually the blame shifted away from Haiti, but not before such rhetoric badly damaged the country's tourism industry and reinforced a narrative of Haiti as "a breeding ground for disease" (Potter 2009, 210).

Cholera similarly has been stigmatized as a disease of poor, uneducated, and "primitive" people (Briggs 2000). Television news coverage of cholera epidemics over the last several decades has situated the disease and those affected as an Other, different from and inferior to those who see themselves as immune. As such, Briggs (2010, 42) argues that cholera represents "a hybrid object—a fusion of biomedical pathogens and human vectors." Cholera is entwined in discourses of power by maintaining a tautological social hierarchy—inferiority explains infection and infection validates inferiority. Such was the case in Venezuela, where poor and indigenous residents were blamed for a cholera outbreak, while the state and the media aimed messages at the "good sanitary citizens who

were not 'at risk' for the disease" (Briggs 2010, 58). Media coverage of Haiti as "the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere" and the recipient of substantial foreign aid have further positioned Haiti as a hopeless, backward country unable to survive without outside intervention. As Polyné (2012, xiii) argues in *The Idea of Haiti*, the Global North has "produced discourses that intensify the notion of a progress-resistant, deviant and childlike nation unaware of the material and ideological benefits of democracy and capitalism." Under this ideological construction, the cholera outbreak in Haiti was seen not only as tragic but also, as Brian Williams reported, inevitable.

Voodoo is a frequent topic in media coverage of Haiti, often taking the form of bloody imagery that casts Haitians as cannibals and witches (Brown 2012; Potter 2009). Some American religious leaders claim that Haiti's present suffering is the product of a pact Haitians made with the devil long ago (McAlister 2012). Coverage of voodoo further exoticizes Haitians as barbaric, godless, and even responsible for their own sickness. Through exoticization, dominant ideologies suppress the threat of countercultures by transforming the Other "into meaningless exotica, a 'pure object, a spectacle, a clown'" (Hebdige 1979, 133). Discourses of exoticization are strengthened further through aid-based exchanges. In the days and weeks following the earthquake, many Americans came to understand their relationship with Haiti as one of saviors and victims. While the amount of relief money and press coverage dedicated to Haiti during this time demonstrated an uncharacteristic concern and transnational connectedness, these interactions were accompanied by a "white savior" discourse that sustains Global North/South power imbalances (Cole 2012). News reports focused on the generosity of American citizens and organizations, reinforcing a binary view of Americans as active, compassionate agents and Haitians as weak, desperate recipients.

Overall, Global North news coverage of Haiti's cholera epidemic has failed to deviate from familiar narratives about the country. Journalists incorrectly claimed that the cholera outbreak was homegrown, did little to correct the record after these reports were proven false, failed to sufficiently question the United Nations' denial of responsibility, and situated Haiti as a backwards, helplessness country in need of Americans' saving generosity (Cole 2012; Katz 2013; Polyné 2012). In light of the United States' history of contempt for Haiti, the failures of US news media are unsurprising. Yet, these failures provided a valuable opportunity for citizen journalism to challenge traditional news narratives and elevate marginalized voices.

Citizen Journalism

According to Goode (2009, 1288), citizen journalism refers to "a range of web-based practices whereby 'ordinary' users engage in journalistic practices." The practices range from blogging about current news events, sharing photos and videos, posting commentaries, and providing eyewitness accounts of events (Wall 2015). Although, in principle, the internet is not a necessary component of citizen journalism, in practice, the ease of use and increased reach of digital production and distribution technologies has expanded the journalistic possibilities of the public (Usher 2011). Scholarship on participatory news practices relies on a wide range of terminology, with some studies referring to similar phenomena as user-generated content, participatory journalism, social news, citizen media, and more (Scott, Millard, and Leonard 2014). We align ourselves with citizen journalism research that emphasizes the distinction between professional and citizen journalism,

as in Nip's (2006, 218) assertion that citizen journalism means "people are responsible for gathering content, visioning, producing and publishing the news product" and Wall's (2015, 2) definition of citizen journalism as "news content (text, video, audio, interactives, etc.) produced by non-professionals."

Many scholars and practitioners view citizen journalism as a form of resistance in an otherwise corporate-dominated media ecosystem. This approach emphasizes the similarities between citizen journalism and alternative journalism, in which open participation signifies a rejection of hierarchies and an elevation of oppositional voices (Platon and Deuze 2003). Kperogi (2011, 315) describes this view as construing citizen media "as inherently counter-hegemonic, as the emerging, as yet uninformed but nonetheless potent antithesis to the traditional media." Murthy (2013, 1181) argues citizen journalism offers "the ability to hold journalists, governments, and others accountable through the global public exposure of their corruption, fraud, etc." Palmer (2012, 370) suggests that citizen journalists exercise power in their relationship with commercial news media by "harnessing the clout of the corporations in order to flood the mediascape with competing interpretations of global conflict." Similarly, Wall (2015, 12) suggests researchers should "embrace high expectations" afforded through this paradigm shift in news media and view citizen's productions as "beacons that light the darkness amidst disaster and bravely expose the fearsome shadows of oppression."

Skeptics argue that an overly romantic approach to citizen journalism overlooks the ways in which citizen journalists are bound by the same ideological constraints as professional journalists, can be coopted by corporate media hegemons, or can reinscribe racial hierarchies (Kperogi 2011; Mahrouse 2009). Lindner, Connell, and Meyer (2015) found that almost half of citizen journalism sites include former professional journalists on their staff. Further, the authors argue, "professional journalism still maintains a greater share of the authority to define which organizational structures, practices, and norms are seen as legitimate within online journalism" (566). This finding aligns with Goode's (2009) observation that citizen journalists unconsciously draw upon the mainstream norms and traditions of professional journalism. Similarly, Meadows (2013) argues citizen journalism that is not community-based and closely aligned with local understandings adopts the same discursive formation as traditional journalism.

Research on CNN's iReport demonstrates both approaches to citizen journalism. Kperogi (2011) and Daubs (2016) argue that CNN benefits from the exploitation of digital labor on iReport. This argument resonates with Wall (2015) and Scott, Millard, and Leonard (2014) who frame iReport as a playground space that is both marginalized and controlled by CNN. Palmer (2012), on the other hand, challenges this view. While recognizing iReport as a form of exploitation, Palmer argues that it is also a site of subversion, as iReporters use the CNN brand for their own desired gains. Through analysis of both iReport coverage and iReporter interviews, Palmer shows that professional and non-professional journalism are interdependent, which offers great potential for "the disruptive capabilities" (383) of citizen news production. Further, Hellmueller and Li (2015, 619) argue iReport offers an important opportunity "to reconstruct the participatory–professional relationship in which audiences have become journalists' co-workers" in covering world news events. The authors present a typology of iReporters based on their positions with CNN: "*commentators* as post hoc participants to CNN's new coverage, *eyewitnesses* and *sources* as participators, and *co-workers* of professional journalists" (624, italics added).

While previous studies of iReport ask important questions about structure and agency, exploitation and resistance, professionalism and amateurism, our study examines the site's content to better understand whether or not iReport fulfills the democratic potential of citizen journalism in its coverage of global issues. Using the iReport assignment "Cholera outbreak" as a case study, our study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1a: To what extent did iReport coverage of the 2010 cholera outbreak challenge dominant narratives found in Global North news media and elevate marginalized voices?

RQ1b: To what extent did iReport coverage of the 2010 cholera outbreak embody the same discursive formation as mainstream Global North news media?

Method

Launched in August 2006, CNN iReport "invites people around the world to upload stories, photos and videos that they think deserve attention from a wider news audience" (CNN 2012). According to CNN, iReport is more than a warehouse for community contributions; rather, "Your voice, together with other iReporters, helps shape what CNN covers and how" (CNN 2016). One way CNN organizes contributions is through assignments, issue-specific pages selected by CNN producers "based on topics in the news or stories that CNN expects it will be covering soon" (CNN 2016). An assignment page offers a focused home and defined archive for any contributions pertaining to the topic of interest. "Assignment: Cholera outbreak" was created on October 22, 2010, one day after the Haiti National Public Health Laboratory confirmed the presence of *Vibrio cholerae* in the country. The main assignment page features a brief introduction to the cholera epidemic and a call for contributions: "Are you in Haiti or the Dominican Republic? Let us know what's going on and share your photos and videos" (CNN iReport 2010).

We conducted a critical discourse analysis of all iReports submitted through the "Cholera outbreak" assignment. While the assignment page lists 151 reports filed, only 138 iReports currently are retrievable, a discrepancy likely explained by some posts being taken down for violation of iReport community standards (CNN 2016). In addition, we collected available metadata for all iReports listed under the "Cholera outbreak" assignment, as well as metadata for any iReporters who submitted to this assignment, including submission information (e.g., upload date and location), popularity measures (e.g., views, comments, shares), and submitter biographical information (e.g., home location, description, number of iReports uploaded).[1]

All 138 iReports submitted through the "Cholera outbreak" assignment include text (ranging from one sentence to several hundred words), 116 include one or more photos, and 21 include videos. The oldest iReport was uploaded October 21, 2010, a day before the assignment was created—meaning it was tagged with the assignment after the report was submitted. The most recent iReport was submitted December 30, 2010, but the assignment page is categorized as "ongoing." A two-minute video about a coffin maker is the most watched iReport with 37,198 views, although nearly half of the iReports (N = 68) have received fewer than 100 views. Overall, the median viewcount is 100.5. iReports are either "vetted," and thus marked with a red "i" emblem in the top right corner, or labeled with the words, "NOT VETTED BY CNN." According to CNN, an iReport becomes

"vetted" after a CNN producer "fact-checks and verifies the details of a story" (CNN 2014).[2] In the "Cholera outbreak" assignment, 47 iReports (34.1 percent) are marked "vetted." A total of 57 iReporters contributed to the "Cholera outbreak" assignment. The most prolific iRe-porter submitted 27 reports, while 42 of the 57 iReporters contributed one story each.

Findings

Citizen Journalism Without Citizens

Although citizen journalism has the potential to elevate marginalized voices, such as local voices in the coverage of global issues, only one iReporter who submitted to the "Cholera outbreak" indicates on his profile that he is a native Haitian—a pastor who uploaded one 10-minute video tour of an outdoor clinic. Three other iReporters indicate they are permanent residents of Haiti: two are American missionaries and one is an Amer-ican aid worker. Although several iReporters do not report their nationality, most iReporters in the "Cholera outbreak" assignment are either short-term volunteers or amateur journal-ists who spent a few days or weeks in Haiti during the cholera outbreak. A smaller number of iReporters discuss the epidemic without having spent any time on the ground in Haiti. Thus, although the assignment page invites those "in Haiti or the Dominican Republic" to participate (CNN iReport 2010), very few contributors to "Cholera outbreak" represent local voices.

Further, the view count totals in the "Cholera outbreak" assignment demonstrate a lack of diversity in the voices being heard on iReport. Of the 25 most viewed videos, 22 were uploaded by two iReporters. These two iReporters, RoseannD and johnnycolt, were the most prolific iReporters in the assignment, having submitted 27 and 22 iReports, respectively. In total, these two iReporters account for more than a third (35.5 percent) of the available videos and 92.1 percent of the total views in the assignment. Further, these two iReporters account for 26 of the 47 "vetted" videos in the assignment (55.3 percent). The vetting process does two things for CNN. First, it allows the network and its producers to retain gatekeeping control. As CNN explains, vetted reports have been "selected and approved by a CNN producer to use on CNN, on air, or any of CNN's platforms" (CNN 2014). Although all iReports are accessible online, only vetted reports have the potential to challenge or broaden the parent network's coverage by reaching CNN's sizeable television and online audience. Even within iReport, the assign-ment page offers a "Best in Class" category composed of the most recent, popular, highly rated, and vetted videos. Thus, CNN's editorial control exercised through the vetting process extends to iReport itself. Second, the vetting process creates an implicit set of guidelines for what CNN producers see as quality content. As Kperogi (2011, 324) argues, this system allows CNN to "win over non-professional citizen journalists first by making its news values seem like, as Gramsci would say, the 'common sense' values of all and then by legitimizing these values not so much by manipulation as by active consent." In other words, CNN sets the parameters for contributions and determines which stories are verified and verifiable. In doing so, CNN compels iReporters to uphold the same viewpoints and news values as those central to CNN's corporate agenda. That CNN producers disproportionally favored two iReporters, who will be dis-cussed in detail later, demonstrates a conservative risk-avoidance strategy, a lack of imagination, or both.

It is also worth noting that even though the most recent iReport in "Cholera outbreak" was submitted on December 30, 2010, the cholera epidemic in Haiti is ongoing. In the five years since *Vibrio cholera* was brought into the country, more than 700,000 Haitians have been infected and nearly 9,000 have died, making the epidemic the worst outbreak of cholera in modern history (George 2015). Yet, there have been no new iReports submitted to the "ongoing" assignment in more than five years. This drop off in attention mirrors the decline in coverage of the issue on iReport's parent network. Using LexisNexis, we found 87 CNN transcripts that included the words "Haiti" and "cholera" in the two months between October 22, 2010 and December 31, 2010; yet, we found only 9 transcripts including those same words in the five years between January 1, 2011 and December 31, 2015. The news media has a longstanding bias toward "newness." Absent new developments, media interest in ongoing crises eventually subsides and is redirected elsewhere (Downs 1972; Moeller 1999). iReport coverage of the cholera epidemic in Haiti embodies this same structural weakness, likely exacerbated by the fact that the vast majority of contributors are visitors, not permanent residents of Haiti. A citizen journalism site cannot thrive when it relies on reports from those geographically distanced from the story. Further, the iReport assignment's name may itself be a limiting factor in soliciting reports of cholera's continued impact. The title "Cholera outbreak" emphasizes the initial spread of the disease, whereas alternate titles, such as "Cholera epidemic" or "Cholera in Haiti," would better reference the ongoing crisis. Again, parameters set by CNN shape what contributors understand to be acceptable submissions on iReport.

Humanitarian Storytelling and Parachute Journalism

Most of the submissions in iReport's assignment "Cholera outbreak" fall into one of two categories. The first category is first-person narratives told by American aid workers and medical volunteers. These reports range from a text story about a two-week medical humanitarian trip by an American college student (Janelle10 2010) to a photo of aid workers discussing sanitation and hygiene (gwennmangine 2010) to a press release for an upcoming trip by The National Association for the Prevention of Starvation (AmintaCross 2010). Submissions by these iReporter-humanitarians largely situate the relationship between Americans and Haitians as one of aid providers and aid receivers. Despite the admirable intentions of humanitarian storytellers, activist-centric stories tend to reproduce the same racialized power dynamics found in traditional media coverage (Mahrouse 2009). The second category is stories produced by amateur or aspiring journalists. These reports range from a photo essay of cholera patients by a self-identified "independent journalist" (riofilms 2010) to a student journalist's broadcast-style video about a UN mission (ampena 2010) to photos of Youth With a Mission volunteers distributing water bottles (jasenchung 2010). Reflecting a more traditional form of journalistic storytelling, these reports were submitted by Americans who briefly traveled to Haiti in conjunction with various aid organizations. As such, they bear the familiar hallmarks of parachute journalism, including limited cultural and historical contextualization (Macdonald 2008).

The two most prolific iReporters in the assignment exemplify these two categories: RoseannD as the humanitarian storyteller and johnnycolt as the parachute journalist. As the Disaster Response Communication Officer for Samaritan's Purse Haiti, an evangelical Christian organization, Roseann Dennery's earliest iReports focus exclusively on the efforts of her employer. For example, a 600-word iReport, titled "First Hand Account

Cholera," details the organization's efforts to offer prevention education, water filtration services, and medical assistance to Haitians infected or vulnerable to infection (RoseannD 2010a). Consistent with other humanitarian storytellers in the assignment, Dennery's earliest submissions situate her organization, its goals, and its actions at the forefront of her iReports. In essence, humanitarian storytellers use iReport as a public platform for organizational messaging and branding.

Over time, Dennery's reports change to focus more on the stories of Haitians affected by the cholera outbreak and less on the public relations work of her organization. For example, a December 8 iReport offers the story of one man's struggle to find transportation to the clinic (RoseannD 2010b). Dennery quotes 39-year-old Peter at length, who tells her, "I was very scared. I thought, 'what if I can't get to help? I will die.'" The work of Samaritan's Purse is not absent from these later iReports, but the organization moves to the background while Haitian voices move to the foreground. In Dennery's final report in the assignment, she closes with the following:

> We will continue working 24 hours a day treating the people of Cite Soleil until this ends … and will keep telling these stories until this is over. It's part of the bigger story of Haiti, of a remarkable people who have overcome time and time again. (RoseannD 2010c)

While Dennery notes the work of her organization, she places it within the context of a story about Haiti's resilience. Although most humanitarian storytellers in the assignment essentially perform public relations work for their organizations and, in doing so, reinforce an aid-based relationship between Americans and Haitians, Dennery's iReporting evolved to offer more nuanced and empathetic narratives.

Although exemplifying the parachute journalist, Johnny Colt is not a typical citizen journalist. The original bass guitarist for The Black Crowes, Colt has submitted 270 iReports from around the world, including stories from Haiti, Japan, Jordan, Nauru, and his home city of Atlanta. Part gonzo journalist and part provocateur, Colt was identified by Hellmueller and Li (2015, 626) as illustrating the rare "co-worker" iReporter, one who gathers news and edits stories, "requir[ing] the highest level of journalistic knowledge and skills." Although Colt's submissions are at times sensational—his second report in the assignment is headlined "Is HAITI Worth Saving?" (johnnycolt 2010e)—and seeping with bravado, Colt ventures beyond the familiar health clinics to seek out stories throughout the country. He is also openly reflexive about his positionality as a parachute journalist reporting on a global health crisis. For example, an October 30 post discusses Colt's ethical code for covering stories while in Haiti:

> If a person cannot shake my hand, they are not in a position for me to make a personal connection and, thereby, off limits to my camera. As far as the children lining the hospital's floors, if their parents aren't there to give me permission to communicate and photograph their kids, then shots will not be taken. (johnnycolt 2010b)

The format of iReport allows for such a mixture of original reporting and editorial commentary, sometimes within the same submission. For example, a November 20 video describes Colt's efforts to report from Cap-Haitian. Colt details the numerous checkpoints, bribes, and threats he encountered while producing the story, while also weaving in interviews with locals who have grown weary of the United Nations' presence in Haiti (johnnycolt 2010a). Rather than rely solely on government officials, aid workers, and other "experts,"

Colt's iReports draw heavily from "man on the street" interviews. In doing so, Colt's reporting offers local perspectives and voices not typically found in Global North news media.

Humanitarian storytelling and parachute journalism collide when Colt visits Samaritan's Purse clinic and interviews Dennery for a November 28 video post, titled "iReporter to iReporter—Meet RoseannD" (johnnycolt 2010d). Although the video discusses the work of Samaritan's Purse, the main focus is Dennery's use of iReport. Colt displays her iReport URL and proclaims in the opening titles: "Roseann Denery [sic] is a HERO. She is also an iReporter." In accompanying text, Colt describes Dennery as using iReport to "get the story to the world," and says her reports "are filled with a bittersweet quality … [that] reminds us that the human spirit does triumph." This report is Colt's penultimate submission to the "Cholera outbreak" assignment, and it is as much a tribute to iReport as it is a story about Haiti. As assignment submissions began to dwindle in number, Colt used the post to celebrate iReport as a citizen journalism platform, including its two most prolific contributors: the humanitarian storyteller and the parachute journalist.

Watchdogs and the Rumor Mill

Speculation about the outbreak's origin began appearing in the assignment's earliest iReports. Most of these iReports rightly blamed the United Nations for cholera's presence in Haiti, seemingly embodying the watchdog function of journalism, a role valued by professional and citizen journalists alike (Holton, Coddington, and Gil de Zúñiga 2013; Murthy 2013). Considering most Global North media outlets did not question the United Nations' role in introducing the disease until mid-November 2010, these iReports bring to mind citizen journalism's potential to elevate narratives marginalized by traditional media. However, iReport coverage of the outbreak's origin more closely resembles a digital rumor-mill than fact-based reporting. For example, the first post to offer a possible explanation for the outbreak does not mention the United Nations; rather, it links the cholera outbreak to a massive oil leak from a hydroelectric plant and suggests the Haitian government might be involved in a cover-up (Teledjol 2010). While the post links to an article by a Haitian news agency, there is no reasonable scientific explanation for an oil leak producing a cholera outbreak.

This type of speculative, and ultimately erroneous, reporting reflects a larger pattern of rumor and misinformation within the "Cholera outbreak" assignment. This pattern is most evident in the circulation of a photo that depicts a soldier standing beside a UN truck that appears to be dumping waste into a body of water (Figure 1). This photo appears in six separate iReports and is the only photo posted by multiple iReporters. Several iReporters claim to have found the photo on Facebook and decided to re-post it on iReport. Most of these posts are relatively brief, allowing the photo to speak for itself, for example: "The earthquake is being blamed for the cholera outbreak, but look whats happening behind the back drop" (EMMA011210 2010) Other iReporters express disbelief that the United Nations could be responsible for the outbreak, for example: "Whats wrong with the U.N. there givng the people in haiti colera by dumping sewage in to water arent they supposed to be the ones supposed to be keeping peace then why are they making all theese people die" (seibman2 2010) Underlying each of these posts is a sense of outrage, as demonstrated in the first iReport to include the photo:

FIGURE 1
CNN iReport image erroneously circulated within the cholera outbreak assignment. The image was intended to depict how the United Nations was to blame for the epidemic

> I know my country is poor and we're going trough a hellish time right now ever since the earhquake and the Cholera issue but … does that give the U.N. the right to dump WASTE into our WATER ????? I really want to put the shame on them by sharing this photo !!!! (MDothee 2010)

Although these posts correctly blame the United Nations for bringing cholera to Haiti, the photo does not accurately depict the source of the outbreak.

There are two possible explanations for how cholera traveled from the UN camp in Meille, a small village north of the capital city Port-au-Prince, to the Artibonite River. One possibility is that leaky PVC pipes connecting the camp's latrines to septic tanks near the river led to contamination (Katz 2013). The other explanation involves the waste disposal company SANCO, who dumped the camp's septic tank waste into open pits on hills above the river. But neither leaking PVC pipes nor overflowing sewage pits are depicted in this photo of a UN worker disposing waste directly into the water (Katz 2013). Regardless, some iReporters insist this photo is a smoking gun:

> this picture describes what U.N. and M.I.N.U.S.T. A.H is doing in Haiti. they use portable toilet then have this truck (picture) pick up the toilet and dump it in some river far from the capital mostly in rural community where water from the river still being use. (Lessage101 2010)

Notably, in late October CNN.com reported that all of the UN Nepalese peacekeepers at the Mielle camp had tested negative for cholera when, in fact, none of the soldiers had been tested. CNN.com subsequently retracted the story and removed it from its website archives (Katz 2013). Thus, even though citizen journalism can be a source of rumor and misinformation, traditional journalism can also be prone to false reporting.

Despite the rumors and misinformation circulating on iReport and CNN.com, on November 1 Colt posted one of the earliest and most accurate reports of the United Nations' involvement in the outbreak:

> Some Haitians are beginning to blame the Nepalese. Cholera is endemic in Nepal and there have been outbreaks over the summer. New Nepalese peacekeepers have been rotating in as late as October 9th. Waste from the Nepalese contingent's camp is said to be overflowing and dumping into the water table in such a way that it has infected a tributary to the great Artibonite River. (johnnycolt 2010c)

Unlike dominant news media, Colt does not draw from official sources in his reporting; instead, his story relies on local voices. This story would have struggled to survive the fact-checking scrutiny of traditional news editors—the post was verified by CNN—but it is worth noting that Colt's report was published weeks before other media outlets traced the outbreak to the Nepalese peacekeepers (Katz 2013). Another iReporter posted two photos that more accurately depict how cholera might have spread in Haiti: one shows a SANCO truck driving into a UN camp and another depicts a SANCO truck dumping waste into a pit (Hewill 2010). Although these photos are more consistent with cholera's origin in Haiti, they received less attention and gained less traction. Notably, all six iReports featuring the inaccurate dumping photo were posted during a period of heated protests and clashes with the United Nations in Haiti. It is possible that during this time of conflict, the simpler narrative of open disregard for Haiti by the United Nations was more appealing.

Dehumanization and the Other

Exemplify the western gaze, Global North news media frequently exoticize Haitians as backward, violent, and in need of outside intervention (Chomsky 2004; Polyné 2012). This discourse is also abundant in iReport's coverage of cholera in Haiti. For example, the post "Canadians Brave Cap-Haitien" presents Haitians as bitter and unappreciative:

> Hostile looks and comments were geared towards us at every turn. Death threats and even road blocks were a few of the things that we encountered the last few days. The locals believe that we, white people, are the cause of cholera; a deadly disease that is sweeping the country at a rapid rate. (MonikaB7 2010)

While references to Haitian violence are common, even more frequent in iReport coverage of the cholera outbreak are posts that exploit victims of the disease. Writing about the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, Murthy (2013) characterizes traditional media coverage of disasters as "disaster porn" and "corpse shows." Similarly, Bhan (2005, 472) criticizes media coverage of "wailing relatives and dead bodies lying in hospital morgues," made worse by the fact that in most cultures "photographing and filming the deceased in various stages of undress and decomposition violates the dead and their dignitary rights." Yet, iReport coverage of the cholera outbreak was rife with photos and videos of patients and victims in varying degrees of duress. This visual abundance of suffering and loss not only further reinforces the Othering of Haitians and cholera victims, but as Pantti and Andén-Papadopoulos (2011) point out, it also abdicates the gatekeeping role of CNN. While the most drastically exploitative posts included "disturbing content" warnings, CNN essentially can circumvent the journalistic standards of ethical imagery through iReport because these images were shot and submitted by non-professionals. Although Murthy (2013) optimistically suggests that local citizen journalists might be more reluctant to use such images, the cholera assignment on iReport provides little evidence to support this claim.

Despite the frequent use of dehumanizing imagery, iReport coverage demonstrates some of the counter-hegemonic potential for citizen journalism. First, references to voodoo are virtually absent, thus avoiding the stereotype of Haitians as bloodied, godless, devil-spirit worshippers prevalent in Global North media (Potter 2009). Second, a few iReports directly tackle the issue of victim exploitation in gory and shocking imagery. For example, in an October 30 post, Colt writes about the ethics of reporting on a health crisis in the Global South. In a thought-provoking post, Colt offers a level of introspection uncommon in traditional news coverage:

> When I stepped through the large metal gate of St. Marc Hospital, I realized that I have no idea how to photograph this situation. All that was running through my mind was: "How do I do this without making the cholera victims and their families feel like they are being exploited." (johnnycolt 2010b)

The question is deceptively simple, but it represents a fundamental ethical challenge for journalists covering disasters. While much of iReport's coverage of Haiti's cholera outbreak was exploitative, Colt's essay demonstrates the potential for greater self-reflexivity in citizen journalism. Colt continues:

> I watch another photojournalist clicking away. He is shooting a person whose eyes are rolling back in their skull-like head. The subject has no idea he is being photographed and no family at the hospital to support him. This scene unnerves me.

If we are indeed, as Lewis (2012, 851) describes, "moving away from journalism and its professional exclusivity, and toward information and openness as a way of seeking the wisdom of the crowd to solve journalism's boundaries," then it is important to consider media ethics within citizen journalism. iReport coverage of Haiti's cholera outbreak demonstrates both citizen journalism's ethical lapses, in the form of exploitative visuals, and its potential, the opportunity for reflexive interrogation of journalistic practice.

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that iReport coverage within the "Cholera outbreak" assignment did little to close the participation gap between the Global North and Global South. While the assignment incorporates stories produced by non-professionals, very little of this content was produced by Haitians. Further, narratives depicting Americans as heroes and Haitians as victims are prevalent in the assignment. Embodying the "white-savior industrial complex" (Cole 2012), much of the coverage focuses on foreign humanitarian aid organizations offering services for Haitians who "desperately need" help. The iReport assignment also serves as a space for the exchange of rumor and misinformation. Even posts that correctly trace the outbreak's source to the United Nations rely on false evidence. Our study found that the same traditional media tropes of both Haitians and cholera victims as backward and ignorant reappear in posts on this citizen journalism forum.

Overall, our case study of iReport's assignment "Cholera outbreak" demonstrates the need to exercise caution when considering citizen journalism's potential. The challenges facing citizen journalism go beyond issues of free labor (Daubs 2016; Kperogi 2011); they include weaknesses in its content. Our first research question asked about iReport's ability to challenge dominant narratives and elevate marginalized voices. In the case of

the "Cholera outbreak assignment, we found little evidence to support such an optimistic view of citizen journalism. In keeping with Goode's (2009) argument that citizen journalists draw upon mainstream norms of professional journalism, many of the iReporters in the assignment reproduced familiar disaster-reporting tropes (Murthy 2013). Issues of access, infrastructure, literacy, and language related to the digital divide can help explain the lack of Haitian participation on iReport (Regan 2015). Also, iReport was not the only citizen journalism platform available to Haitian contributors at the time of the cholera outbreak. For example, Jane Regan (2015) co-founded Haiti Grassroots Watch, an "experimental, collaborative watchdog" (324) journalism project originally intended to oversee the post-earthquake recovery and reconstruction efforts from "the point of view of Haiti's majority" (330). In terms of our second research question, our findings are consistent with Meadows' (2013) assertion that citizen journalism detached from local communities will fail to provide alternative discursive formations. Overall, our study found that iReport coverage of Haiti's cholera epidemic embodied the same discursive formation as that of traditional Global North news media.

However, our analysis uncovered a few examples that suggest more mature, and possibly subversive, forms of citizen journalism are possible on iReport. For example, while the two most prolific iReporters in the assignment, RoseannD and johnnycolt, did little to challenge dominant narratives or journalistic structures, their contributions demonstrated increased conscientiousness and introspection over the course of the assignment. Later in the assignment, Dennery focused less on the work of her organization and more on the experiences of Haitians, while Colt moved beyond health clinics to report stories happening around the country. The convergence of the two iReporters in Colt's interview with Dennery (johnnycolt 2010d) offers a unique alternative to traditional epidemic reporting, one that reflected voices of those within the cholera response community as well as the community of citizen journalists covering this response. Unfortunately, coverage of the cholera epidemic on iReport "ended" before it grew to include more diverse and local perspectives.

While political economic critiques of iReport emphasize the corporate interests of CNN (Daubs 2016; Kperogi 2011), it is also important to recognize how the site's structure shapes its content. iReport hosts a series of topic collectives (e.g., "Assignment: Cholera outbreak"), but it does not offer a clear mission collective. Most citizen journalism entities have explicitly or implicitly defined objectives that include encouraging global inclusivity, challenging dominant media, elevating marginalized voices, and more specific goals pertaining to the local context (Goode 2009; Wall 2015). Thus, most participants view citizen journalism as a political act. While iReport certainly hosts alternative and dissident voices, the site's collective identity is dependent on iReport's parent network, CNN. Ultimately, iReport is ancillary to and in the service of CNN—as stated on the iReport FAQ, contributors submit to iReport in order to "shape what CNN covers and how" (CNN 2016). Our analysis of the "Cholera outbreak" assignment indicates that non-professional journalists submitting to iReport are not intent on challenging the narratives established by the professional journalists working at CNN. iReport is designed to support CNN, not question the discursive formation under which it operates.

While citizen journalism offers the potential to elevate marginalized voices and challenge dominant news narratives, our study demonstrates the need to critically examine citizen journalism content to better understand how well it lives up to this potential. More critical analyses of citizen journalism content are needed, though such research must proceed with caution. Critiques should avoid "punching down" by focusing on whether or not the citizen journalism in question reproduces dominant discursive

formations. Not all citizen journalists see themselves as alternative journalists determined to challenge the hegemonic control of traditional media (Platon and Deuze 2003). Many citizen journalists are private citizens with an unsophisticated understanding of news production and corporate ideologies; yet, they are attracted to the participatory function of citizen journalism. While scholars should not hold non-professional journalists to the same standards as professional journalists, we also should not romanticize citizen journalism without first deeply engaging with what citizen journalism comprises.

NOTES

1. In November 2015, CNN announced a major change to iReport. Whereas iReporters previously created a profile for uploading iReports, the site now pulls content from other social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) tagged with #CNNiReport (CNN 2015). As such, iReport has become more of a content aggregator than a host site for original content. iReports previously submitted directly to CNN, including those in the "Cholera outbreak" assignment, are still accessible on the site.
2. In August 2014, CNN began referring to approved iReports as "verified" rather than "vetted" (CNN 2014).

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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