Citizen journalism is defined as a type of newsgathering that is based on the participation of public individuals who collect and share information. It has been posited as a stimulating and innovative way to counter the pitfalls of mainstream media coverage. Widening the base of informants with user input from everyday people allows for more diverse and immediate coverage of events. Citizen journalism is considered, in this sense, more democratic and potentially anti-hegemonic. The concomitant rise of social media, exemplified by so called “twitter revolutions” in Iran and during the Arab Spring, supports such an optimistic view of citizen journalism. It is not simply innovative or radical journalism, but part of a democratisation process, a tool and an index of a functional civil society.

This paper seeks to question the presumed innovation of citizen journalism through a case study of CNN’s iReport platform, where citizen journalism is adopted by a mainstream media channel. We will consider a few highlights in the platform’s history to determine how this form of citizen journalism diverges from CNN’s traditional news coverage, and if these differences are truly innovative. We will argue that the concept of innovation serves as an important marketing and business strategy for such corporations who seek to appropriate the strategies of citizen journalism. The rhetoric of innovation, however, masks certain negative consequences of this journalistic practice. For instance, since the citizen reporter does not have a defined status, the validity of the information provided is difficult to check, and their copyright over the material is ambiguous. Platforms like iReport also instigate the dissemination of unethical forms of “sousveillance”, whereby individuals are watched not only by the government from above, but also by their peers.