

**Learning to use
(and perhaps profit from)
“citizen journalism”
(that’s right, blogs & such)**

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As tempus fugited and technology flourished back in the good ol' days at the dawn of the 21st century, newspaper people faced the age-old dilemma: fight or flight. That is – or so the hoary story goes that's told around boardrooms from what used to be Knight-Ridder to Gannett – fight just to stay afloat and keep the corporate bean counters happy, or turn over the keys to the presses to the IT whiz kids tucked away in the convergence closet. After all, look at the array of gee-whiz, new-fangled gadgets reporters were playing with: blogs, camera phones, podcasts. Whew, the average Luddite might exclaim, what's next?!?

Fear not, it's not techies run amuck, it's just new ways of doing what we already know how to do – deliver the news with accuracy and passionate objectivity, without fear or favor, remember? But probably what sticks in our collective craw is that today's technology means ordinary people can post news in real time. We'll leave the debate about who is doing precisely that for later. Right now let's concentrate on finding a happy place with technology: Where does all the brave-new-world tech stuff leave community newspapers? Perhaps right where they need to be to compete against the big metros and broadcast stations in the same market. In other words, technology can be used to claim a unique niche.

In a world where everyone's a journalist, the so-called citizen media can be used to help people understand and cope with disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. An article in The Convergence Newsletter opined that Katrina coverage by ordinary folks via blogs and other methods resulted in “deliberative dialogue, public problem solving, cooperative and complementary action and, finally, the value of hope.” (Although that quote is strictly out of context for Katrina coverage, the spirit of the words is equally applicable as

when Jay Rosen wrote them for his 1997 book, “Public Journalism: Theory and Practice.”)

But that’s not all technology has to offer the dedicated journalist. Blogs and video blogs (vlogs) can help community newspapers grow in prestige and, perhaps, market share in a crowded new media world. Such techno-breakthroughs offer what Geoff Dougherty, a former reporter with the *Chicago Tribune* but now founder of the *Chi Town Daily News*, says is ultra-local news. Other advocates echo his sentiments, calling citizen journalism an experiment in conversations with readers, and not news passed down from gatekeeper to reader. Some other examples are:

- CNN depended on “citizen journalists” during Katrina as it broadcast some pictures and video feeds from digital cameras and mobile phones. Sure, in the past we connected with newspapers by letters and phone calls, but the new technology adds speed and interactivity. People were engaged in the story quicker, and perhaps with more empathy and understanding, than if they had to wait for the newspaper or, if the power was still on, the TV news (Sheerin, 2006).
- *MyMissourian.com*’s backers write on the top page that the site is an example of “grassroots journalism” for their specific community in Missouri, which also reaches out beyond the boundaries of the state via the Web.
- At *The Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, Wash., the paper uses vlogs. Video may eventually become a big part of a newspaper’s online content; community newspapers can capture the market now and get readers used to seeking it on their site rather than on a competitor’s site.

- The BBC has twice recently run interactive reports that offer Web users insight into two of the world's trouble spots: BBC reporter Martin Asser lined up a panel of ordinary Iraqis to answer questions from readers about daily life in Iraq; and Africa editor Russell Smith set up his laptop in the Ethiopian village of Moyale to take readers' e-mails to the villagers asking about daily life during a disastrous drought. Both reports were supplemented with pictures from the panelists.
- *BlogBurst*, which debuted in April 2006, offers commentary and articles to newspaper publishers on such diverse issues as travel, women's issues, food, technology and entertainment from 600 bloggers.
- South Korea's *OhMyNews*, launched in February 2000 as an answer to what some deem a conservative mainstream Korean media, has thousands of citizen reporters who cover stories from the mundane to the sublime.
- Journalist Michael Weiss and his financial backer, Michael Eisenberg, launched www.scoop.co.il in Israel this past winter after attending the *OhMyNews* citizen journalism conference in 2005. Weiss said he launched the site because of the high level of cross-ownership of the Israeli media, which produced what he termed homogenous news. He said he so far has several hundred citizen reporters.
- A South African Web site (www.reporter.co.za) is actively seeking and paying for citizen-journalist stories.
- The Fort Myers News-Press in Florida sends what it calls "mobile journalists," or "Mo Jos," out into neighborhoods to cover issues and events and also to seek out citizen input.

- The number of vlogs and blogs is growing, thanks to improved technology and faster Internet speeds. It's estimated 15,000 new blogs go online every day, with more than 275,000 posts per day. In 2004 there were 3.2 million blogs, of which 55 percent were active (Lasica, 2004).
- And new words add more vitality to the language daily. Blog (think in terms of a personal journal open to the public, with the latest entries – called posts – on the top instead of the bottom) is on the cusp of clichedom. But now we also have to learn new words before they make the dusty volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary. For example, blogosphere (the number of active blogs out there in cyberspace), photoblog (posts that have pictures) and blogroll (a list of links to other blogs, usually along the side) were not on an editor's lips even just a few years ago (The Economist, 2006).
- Morris Communications' President William Morris told The Convergence Newsletter in the April 4, 2006, issue that his company is gearing up to use even more technology: "We are embracing much more video and photography with and through the newsrooms we serve. For instance, we are sending reporters out with digital cameras to cover the story whereas in the past they would just have pens and paper. This is an example of convergence in the field" (Morris, 2006).

Clearly, it's not our grandparents' news anymore. But that begs the question: "What hath journalism wrought?" (Apologies to Samuel F.B. Morse, who was pretty handy with technology himself.) If we define community journalism as journalism that is "relentlessly local," then the era of the blogger and the era of the citizen journalist is the

era of getting more local news – down to the neighborhood, block and street level – onto a Web site. Think of it: We know instantly what is happening around the world or within D.C.’s political beltway, but how many of us know our neighbors? Or how well their kid does in Little League? Or what the town council rep said during a debate on the water district proposal? Media conglomerates are good at informing us about the world at large, but the new technology can be used by community newspapers to adequately run a local paper’s Web site for a town of, say, several thousand or so.

The trouble is that many blogs have devolved into political rants, but if used properly to report events on that ultra-local level, a blog can make us feel empowered. We again are part of the process, we once again know our neighbors as we scurry from work to home to our kids soccer games on those hectic days managing our cell phones and e-mail.

That means technology will change traditional journalistic practices. Don’t misunderstand, inverted pyramid ledes with all their whos, whats, whys, whens, wheres and hows will likely still be around, but what is changing is that many more newspapers are using textual and video blogs to connect with readers, mostly younger readers. It can also mean that some papers – and community newspapers can lead the way here – will allow citizen journalists to do some of the work (Fisher, 2006).

But what’s holding some news organizations back is the worry that separate rules (for accuracy and readability, among other things) should be set up for citizen journalists. And, if we do this for new participants, how much work gets shifted onto the backs of already overworked editors? The trade-off is that the news organization can gain deeper ties into the community as circulation generally drops across the board and our readers

grow older. Still, each editor and/or publisher has to make the decision. Those who decide to go with the new wave of technistas can be “relentlessly local.”

It also means that the traditional role of gatekeeper will change. Hurricane Katrina showed that newspaper reporters and readers in the affected regions all were involved in the unfolding drama. The poignancy of the situation came through in the blogs and cell phones as people connected with each other sans editors with all their space and time limitations. It took that disaster to point out the truth in Mark Deuze’s online journalism model that says journalists interacting with citizens blur the line between producers and consumers. We all become, in effect, “prosumers” (Robinson, 2006). Perhaps this “journalism without borders” approach also allows reporters and editors to be more citizens than detached observers. If so, then it certainly will signal a sea change in the way we practice and teach journalism.

So if our comfortable media world does get turned upside down, what do we as media pros and those who teach future media pros need to know? Steve Outing, in a Poynter column from late 2004 (which is like an eon ago in the fast-developing online world) wrote that journalists, techies and our readers all can learn from each other.

For example, newspaper folks abhor inaccuracies. Sure, papers print mistakes, but nothing gets printed that isn’t first checked, or so the theory goes. Yet bloggers publish things willy-nilly without getting it vetted and damn the consequences, or so the generalization goes. A case in point is the 2004 election when some bloggers said John Kerry was going to win the presidency and they based that claim on dubious exit poll data. The traditional media later smugly laughed in that “Dewey-Defeats-Truman” way but bloggers argued that they posted the info, said it hadn’t been confirmed, said where

they got it from, and then left it up to the readers to decide if it was useful. It's a rather libertarian point of view that unsettles traditional journalists (Outing 2004b).

So the above paragraph means tradition über alles, right? Not so fast. Outing mentions that it was bloggers who exposed "Rathergate." In essence, Outing wrote, bloggers with credentials recognized that a detailed analysis of George Bush's military record was missing from the news reports and the fall-out from the blog chatter unsettled the traditionalists. And remember that Matt Drudge, by no means a traditional journalist, published reports of Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky while Newsweek was still working on the story (Outing, 2004b). The lesson is simply that there are plenty of holes in all stories and that maybe niche reporting from citizens can fill in gaps (Kramer, 2004).

To turn the tables, bloggers argue that traditional media mavens are too stuffy and predictable. There's nothing wrong, they say, with letting reporters reveal their personal opinions. As such, some of them see themselves as the traditional descendants of 18th century colonial pamphleteers. For example, in 2004, Slate announced that 45 of its 49 newsroom employees said they would vote for John Kerry, and the world did not end (Outing, 2004b). And a person would have to be from Mars or Venus not to recognize that Fox News only seems to be fair and balanced when it wants to be. Therefore, having a conversation with readers adds vitality to a story and may help stories develop in ways the writer did not originally anticipate. When readers contribute – or correct – it strengthens a story, the techies say.

Academic researchers surveyed 100 current events bloggers with the highest Internet traffic in 2005 to find out their views on their impact on society and what they

think of themselves as citizen journalists. Of the 59 who answered the online questionnaire, more than 90 percent said blogs were an important contribution to a democratic society; 93 percent said checking out the facts and sources presented in the traditional media was important; about 95 percent said they relied on other blogs, Internet sources or newspapers for their info; and almost 90 percent opposed having an editor check their posts for accuracy (Murley and Smith, 2005).

So if the editors aren't checking posts it's because bloggers say it's transparency that matters. Blogs don't have to be objective, and citizen journalists don't have to be impartial, as long as the facts are clear, they say. The technoratti argument is this: Trust the voices of the readers/writers. However, it's that juxtaposition of community and journalism that scares the bejabbers out of traditionalists.

Well, not all. J.D. Lasica, in a column in the Online Journalism Review from 2004, writes that discerning readers are just as careful as the eyeshade-wearing editors of yore. Readers will tend to believe a story if they know the author can be held accountable, if writers reveal their identity, and cite their sources. In other words, it's all about transparency (Lasica, 2004). To prove that point, Lasica quotes a survey from 2004 that asked blog readers who they believe: 61 percent believed the bloggers over the mainstream media.

Why? The article mentions some main reasons (Lasica, 2004):

1. Bloggers are niche experts in one area. Community newspapers can exploit this by having one citizen journalist cover his or her block, club or organization.

Traditionalists will argue that objectivity goes out the window. Yes, but remember transparency.

2. And that transparency means bloggers will be honest about their motives and biases. It will also add a personal voice that other bloggers (translation: younger readers) seem to want.
3. A blogger can link to reams of documents. Got someone tilting at windmills down at city hall? Have the blogger link to pdf files of all the red tape and paperwork.
4. This is a generalization, but bloggers seem to admit mistakes quicker because they are called on it by other bloggers. Contrast that to traditional newspapers, which have a corrections box inside, and broadcast news where mistakes are rarely acknowledged.
5. But that's not all. A blog is generally simple and easy to navigate. All it offers is some text, some pix and maybe video because not a whole lot is being done yet with Flash and interactive content (Outing, 2004a).

Now, how do professional news organizations deal with evolving technology, and what's their take on citizen journalism? In a Poynter column titled "The 11 Layers of Citizen Journalism; A resource guide to help you figure out how to put this industry trend to work for you and your newsroom," Steve Outing has a few suggestions on how to utilize citizen-journalism impulses (Outing, 2005):

- **Public comment**: This is the basic step and it could give reporters insight to facts that were missed or point out new sources who can help develop the story. The key is to recognize that the story is not done once posted; metaphorically speaking, it has a life of its own. The news organization has to decide what is open for comment, but Outing suggests everything

from obits (with postings of remembrances from those who knew the deceased) to calendar listings (with comments from people who have seen the speaker or event) is fair play. However, this model takes vigilance because editors may have to watch for objectionable content. Also, the courts are still wrangling with the concept. If a post goes up unedited, then is it merely a fair comment post? Or if there is some degree of editing (i.e., not posting certain comments), does that mean there is some degree of responsibility and, therefore, is the host organization potentially liable? As a partial solution, Outing suggests some sort of registration system identifying users could be utilized, especially if it lets readers report tasteless content.

- **Add-on from citizens**: The next step is for the news organization to recruit experts to write sidebars. For example, say a local soldier is returning from Iraq, the V.A. spokesperson could write about what services are offered for all returning vets, or the nearby college president could write about educational opportunities. The key here is to find the experts who can add zest to a standard story.
- **Open-source reporting**: This is a loose partnership between reporter and the public that not only lets the citizen-journalist perhaps write a sidebar, but also guides the reporter in writing and researching the story. For example, before the college president's annual State of the College speech, the reporter asks readers to submit questions, etc. Then he or she may write the story and put the first draft in a blog for feedback, publishing the

final version online or in the newspaper. *The Spokesman-Review* sometimes does this.

- **Citizen blogs**: This can break down two ways: Either the news organization can host anyone who is interested in writing a blog, or it can offer to host selective experts. The idea is to offer blogs that complement what the site already offers from its paid staff. For example, a community paper may not have a large enough staff to cover every sport. A blog from a knowledgeable participant can make up for that deficiency. A problem is that a volunteer blogger may start out strong and then the posts get fewer and fewer as time and life go on. Perhaps some sort of monetary reward may help, either a free subscription to the newspaper itself or a token fee to cover gas, etc. Once that is determined (especially if the blogger gets some sort of stipend), it must be made clear to all that the blogger does not work for the news organization. Rather, the Web site just hosts the blog. The sites of the papers in Bluffton, S.C., and Lawrence, Kan., do this well.
- **“Transparency” blogs**: Again, this can fall into two types. If the paper has an ombudsman or a citizen news council, the chair can write a blog that reveals inner workings. Or an editor can write a blog about the news process, perhaps even reviewing the daily editorial budget meeting. *The Spokesman-Review* has such a blog.
- **Edited citizen-journalism**: In other words, news entirely from the community with editors polishing the final product. Photos from contributors can be played up big here. The editor’s job would be to

recruit writers and guide them on the basics. This means that a lot of content may be specific to a certain core of readers, so the editors have to make sure a broad and diverse group of readers are contributing. The *Greensboro News & Record* in North Carolina offers YourNews, which is a subsite off its main site that follows this model.

- **Unedited citizen journalism**: Same idea as above, but with perhaps a couple legal headaches since the host site will be blamed for inappropriate postings. Outing suggests a “report misconduct” button for each story and pic posted. There are many such citizen-journalist sites (with the emphasis on community and less on journalism) that can be found on www.GetLocalNews.com and www.DailyHeights.com (a neighborhood citizen-journalist site from Brooklyn).
- **Print add-on**: Take any of the above examples and add a new print product to it. (This shouldn’t be confused with the ink-and-paper broadsheet or tab already printed by the host). The new product can be free and delivered to subscribers or distribution points. The content will be the best stories and pix from the Web and the idea is to show off the citizen-journalism site. As such, ad rates would be lower than the ROP edition and, therefore, the new print product can be a new market for small businesses that haven’t advertised before. Examples: My Town, from The Daily Camera in Boulder, Colo.; Northwest Voice, from The Bakersfield Californian; and Bluffton Today from South Carolina (part of the Morris chain of papers).

- **Pro & citizen journalism**: South Korea's *Oh My News* (the English language version is at <http://english.ohmynews.com>) is a good example of this model of small news staffs working with citizen partners. Not everything submitted by one of its thousands of citizen journalists gets posted, but citizen reports account for about 70 percent of content. Another example is Geoff Dougherty's *Chi Town Daily News*, launched in December 2005. He trains people living in Chicago's boroughs to write about what is going on in their neighborhoods. By the summer of 2006 he had 15 reporters – none of them professional journalists – and he was the sole full-time staffer (Luft, 2006). The project was funded through a \$12,000 grant from the University of Maryland's Center for Interactive Journalism and is run by an Illinois non-profit, PublicMedia.

Most of what has been discussed thus far has focused on text. But other points of interaction with the community can be found by using vlogs and podcasting, thanks to greater broadband penetration.

Colin Mulvany at *The Spokesman-Review's* Web site in Spokane, Wash. (www.spokesmanreview.com), thinks he is one of the few vloggers in the country producing unique video content for a host newspaper Web site. His goal is to produce two videos a week, ranging from two- to three-minutes long. To do that, he focuses on one-subject stories to get viewers interested. Mulvany believes that broadcasters are used to (and trained to) add their own voices to a story, but he said the advantage to seeing

video on a newspaper site is that newspaper reporters let their subjects tell a story (Mulvany, 2005).

Podcasting (audio delivered over the Internet) can also help community newspaper Web sites gain prestige and harness technology. An audio file can be created with a portable recorder and then uploaded to an Internet site rather easily. A blog with an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed can retrieve podcasts automatically. Without station overhead to vex them financially, podcasters don't need a big audience. And, as technology evolves, video podcasts may well be a part of the future (Lunt, 2006).

Finally, since someone has to pay the bills, it should be noted that the technocrats work both sides of the organization. Increasingly, advertisers find that interactive tech stuff works for them, too. Simply put, interactive ads give viewers the chance to ask for more info, vote for a product concept (or similarly express an opinion), and, of course, buy things (Harris, 2006). The keys for the tech-savvy ad rep is to make sure the copy is persuasive enough to provoke a response and, in these convergent times, make sure ads are unique. In other words, banish the "one size fits all" mentality.

Not enough research has been done to determine what kind of ads work best, though pop-up and pop-under ads are generally reviled. Yet banner ads and interstitial ads (something that appears as an interim item from the time when a reader clicks on a link to the time the link appears) seem more functional for community news organizations. Banner ads would seem to be a good solution since the longer a reader is on a site, the more likely that same reader is to buy something (Harris, 2006).

Boil it all down, whether news or advertising, and it seems that the new and evolving technology is an ideal way for community news organizations to level the

playing field with the big competition in the nearby cities. Or, to quote the poet Robert Frost, “We have ideas yet that we haven’t tried.”

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