

**Building Community Online:
A twice-weekly's experience extending its reach
with the Hartsville Today citizen-based news site**

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Abstract

With the help of a J-lab/New Voices grant, a twice-weekly South Carolina newspaper created a citizen journalism site to broaden its reach and encourage more community involvement. It sought to examine how a small newsroom can adjust to the digital transformation that empowers the former audience to do many things once reserved for journalists. As a multi-year study of such a site, a combination of research methods were employed: in-depth interviews with the newspaper staff, survey, and content analysis of postings. Results of the first wave show that HartsvilleToday.com is vibrant and that the community finds the idea of such a site appealing. But the news staff still struggles with how to relate to it while the ad staff has done very little selling of the online space.

Building Community Online: Extending a twice-weekly's reach with Hartsville Today

Introduction

The past decade has been one of upheaval in journalism, especially in newspapers. Even as Wall Street firms are dropping analyst coverage of the industry (MacMillan, 2008), members of the "former audience" increasingly have become producers of information, shifting news from a lecture to a conversation (Gillmor, 2004).

The number of news-oriented sites run by those outside the traditional mainstream media has grown quickly. One list has more than 80 (Dube, 2005). By 2008, another database listed nearly 850 such sites in the U.S. and North America (Knight Citizen News Network).

This study examines the challenges, successes and shortcomings of one venture, HartsvilleToday.com, during its first two years operating in a small South Carolina town.

The process of creating the site as part of a J-Lab/New Voices grant and its first five months of operation have been examined in detail (Fisher & Osteen, 2006). This paper concentrates on assessing whether such sites can be used by and be useful for small daily and nondaily newspapers. It uses in-depth interviews with staff members at the partner newspaper, the *Hartsville Messenger*, augmented by a content analysis of postings and some data from a community survey that sought to determine people's desire for such a site and awareness of Hartsville Today. This study is one of the first longitudinal studies of such a site.

A decision not to edit the site and to rely primarily on users to point out problems, with the newspaper staff and university researchers checking occasionally, was as much the product of the twice-weekly's limited staffing as anything else (Fisher & Osteen, 2006). Such a decision is well up Outing's (2005a) citizen-journalism hierarchy of giving users control.

HVTD, as it commonly called, went live on Oct. 27, 2005. In June 2008, it surpassed its 1,000th registered user in a town of 7,500 people and a market area of about 20,000 (Fisher &

Osteen, 2006). We estimate that about 10% of registered users are out of town (we are preparing a more comprehensive analysis of this). Raw usage logs show 25,000 to 40,000 visits a month, but those include search bots, hacker probes, etc. Without sophisticated audience tools, we are left with flawed estimates by Compete and Quantcast (Niles, 2007) of 3,000 to 5,000 people a month.¹

Hartsville, S.C., has a small college (Coker), a statewide science and math high school, a Fortune 1000 corporate headquarters² (Sonoco) and an arts community. But it is not so different from surrounding towns as to make it unrepresentative.

The newspaper was recently sold to Media General, which has expressed interest in HVTD as a model for similar sites at other small papers. One question is whether HVTD will be incorporated into Media General's proprietary system. HVTD was set up to take advantage of several features of the Drupal open-source content management system that help shape the site's organization and maintenance. Maintaining a similar, logical organizational structure is important to not only keep HVTD from turning into just a chat room, but also because clear organization has been shown to encourage people to participate (Tedjamulia, Olsen, Dean, & Albrecht, 2005).

Some HVTD users, fearing for its future, had suggested petitioning for its continuation (Puffer, 2008). One measure of success certainly has to be when community members find the site valuable enough to fear for its existence and propose action to ensure it continues.

This study seeks to answer questions about how the newspaper staff relates to HVTD, how receptive the community may be to such a venture and whether HVTD, as reflected in its postings, is a vibrant site.

¹ <http://www.hvtd.com/usage>. Compete: <http://siteanalytics.compete.com/Hvtd.com>. Quantcast: <http://www.quantcast.com/hvtd.com>. The Quantcast plug-in is not installed on the site, and Compete relies on users to install a browser plug-in.

² Detail at <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2008/snapshots/544.html>

Literature Review

Defining new journalism relationships

A decade or so into the rise of the "citizen journalist," we still have not settled on a term that adequately describes the concept and gains wide approval. "Participatory journalism" was favored by some early observers (Bowman & Willis, 2003) and still is widely used (Kolodzy, 2006). Others include grassroots journalism (Gillmor, 2004), stand-alone journalism, open-source journalism, networked journalism, collaborative journalism and "we-dia" (Gant, 2007, p. 34).

This paper generally uses citizen journalism, although HVTD prefers "community storytelling," "community news," and "community conversation" because some people recruited as contributors were concerned about being "journalists" (Fisher & Osteen, 2006, p. 11).

While we debate this increased public participation, we also are debating the role of journalists. Some have suggested that journalists, especially editors, become "pathfinders" (Newhagen & Levy, 1995), "gatewatchers" (Bruns, 2003) or "content shepherds, whipping the chaos of reader-generated content into a manageable morass" (Glaser, 2004). Others also see the role changing from one of story generalist and media specialist to story specialist and media generalist, with less emphasis on functional skills and more on "connective abilities" (Fisher, 2002). Even absent the growing pressure of public participation, Bruns (2003) notes there are simply too many news sources and new criteria of newsworthiness for specific audiences for the gatekeeper model to remain viable. Bentley et al. (2006) say that "guides and enablers" will be an important part of forging stronger ties between journalism organizations and their communities.

If the emergence of participatory media is seen as one more step toward giving users what they want, where they want it, how they want it and when they want it – then: "News consumers are leading the way. ... News media have to catch up. ... Media organizations that can serve only part of a consumer's media mix are marginalizing themselves" (Ifra, 2004, p. 12).

Smaller newsrooms are already closer to the community than their big-city counterparts as reflected in their continuing strong circulation (Snedeker, 2007). The digital revolution, however, will not stop at the suburbs, and people are increasingly likely to get at least some news and information online, especially as mobile devices proliferate and become more powerful.

One recent study of weekly newspaper Web sites found that 56 percent of the initial sample had no online presence. Of those that did, basic features of online sites – hyperlinks, archives of information and classified ads, and interactivity – were largely missing. The study concluded: "The potential for local community weekly newspaper Web sites to dominate the local information marketplace is still just that – potential" (Mitchell, Collins, & Saunders, 2008).

The challenge for news organizations, especially small community-based ones, will be how to integrate public participation into existing workflows or create new ones to accommodate the changes (Storm, 2007). Even if, as Storm found in practice at BlufftonToday, few citizen contributions make it directly into the main product, they still inform and broaden the reporting. A news organization might try ignoring an "open-source philosophy" in which "every piece of news is important to somebody and [that] lets the public readership decide what it wants to read" (Bentley et al., 2005). But easy-to-use tools that let the average person become a media participant make holding out for long unlikely (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Outing, 2005a).

The rise of citizen-journalism sites

Many citizen-journalism sites are independent (Dougherty 2008), but increasingly news organizations have been encouraging "citizen" contributions. Some, such as CNN, encourage contributions directly to the news organization, with the best incorporated into the main news report, such as at <http://www.cnn.com/ireport>. The iReport became so popular – an estimated 100,000 contributions – that CNN also recently began a separate site, <http://www.ireport.com>, solely to highlight them (Shields, 2008).

Newspapers and local TV stations have, to varying degrees, opened their portals, often with separate sites such as Scripps's YourHub.com and more recently Triblocal.com in Chicago (Duran, 2007). And there already have been some spectacular failures, such as the collapse of independent sites Bayosphere near San Francisco (Grubisich, 2006) and Backfence, which started in the Washington, D.C., suburbs and had been criticized for having little local identity and a templated feel (Potts, 2008; George, 2005).

One truism of successful sites is that they "focus on a specific locality ... not an entire region" as Bayosphere did, and "they try to capture the unique flavor of those communities" (Grubisich, 2006). Glaser (2007) says, "One of the mistakes made by media companies and startups trying to cash in on hyper-local sites is the idea that there's a way to copy-and-paste the success of one operation and make it a franchise in other locales." In 2008 remarks to an American Copy Editors Society meeting, Travis Henry, Your Hub's former editor, said some of its sites closed because of lack of nurturing by the local paper.

If properly nurtured, citizen-journalism sites can create a sense of community, which can be a component of credibility (Bentley et al., 2006). That same study found that those who read newspapers and watched TV heavily were more likely to become registered contributors.

Though many independent citizen-journalism sites consider other media to be competitors, partnerships with another media outlet are seen (Glaser, 2008). Glaser says, however, that nearly all sites say some kind of community outreach is needed to reach the contributors necessary to keep a site viable, encourage more contributions, and form the critical mass that may make it attractive for advertisers.

Typing citizen-journalism sites

One early expectation of lowering or eliminating the barriers to online publishing was that it would bolster democracy (Sunstein, 2004) and open the gates to "a renaissance of the notion, now threatened, of a truly informed citizenry" (Gillmor, 2004).

Numerous blogs and some specialized sites are devoted to the kinds of political and governing discussions envisioned, but far more blogs are created with the object of "keeping family and friends abreast of life events," moving "between the personal and the profound" (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). Blogs dealing with politics and civic life are just one among many specialized communities. Online users can easily filter them out, prompting warnings about "serious dangers to democracy" from some of those who initially hoped easy access to communications tools would boost civic life (Sunstein, 2004).

Early in this decade, the digital frontier often went from individual bloggers to coalesced "interest clusters" (Kumar, Novak, Raghavan & Tomkins, 2004). The sharing and online community engendered by such groups, and later through social media sites such as MySpace and Facebook, might help community-based, citizen-contributed news and information sites by making people more used to sharing – a form of public speaking.

While citizen-journalism sites are not blogs, the experience, though thinly documented so far, appears to parallel that in the blogspace – less emphasis on politics, public safety and similar civic news and more on lifestyles and community life (Littau, 2007; Fisher & Osteen, 2006).

Deuze (2003) has proposed four types of online journalism. Blogs, for instance, are most like his index and category sites that produce little or no original content, but that link heavily to others. Yet they also can straddle into meta and comment sites, where journalists themselves often explain how the news is produced, or share and discussion sites, where people come together to exchange ideas (the most freewheeling of these being the completely unmoderated

bulletin boards that some sites still use). His last category is that of mainstream media sites that provide repurposed copy from the newspaper or broadcast or create new content for online.

The difficulty in categorizing any particular operation can be seen in the suggestion by Bentley et al. (2005) that citizen journalism/community news sites best fit into the share and discussion sites. HVTD, however, also has served as a way for the twice-weekly newspaper to post stories of its own ahead of its publication cycle (which may change now that it has a more flexible main Web site under new ownership). And judging from comments received occasionally from users and potential users, they sometimes confound the HVTD site with a blog, using the term as an all-encompassing definition for any system that lets a person post stories or snippets of information online.

Littau (2007) sees such sites as more of a hybrid between mainstream news sites and share and discussion sites. Both he and earlier work by that research group (Bentley et al., 2005) propose a critical difference in that citizen journalism sites, to have that moniker, should be moderated or edited. (MyMissourian is moderated/edited with the help of students at the University of Missouri journalism school.) According to Littau, "The notion that citizen journalism is moderated is what separates citizen journalism from a typical community blog, and in fact is what elevates the posting format into a news format."

As we shall see, however, this definition can pose difficulties for the typical small community newsroom that does not have access to a pool of such free or low-cost help.

Method

As a case study, the objective is not only to describe what is being observed, but also to begin to explain why (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009). As such, a case study benefits from using multiple sources of information to provide a more complete picture of and explanation for what is being observed (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009; Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

This case study relies primarily on semi-structured interviews done in June 2007 with members of the staff of the *Messenger*, supplemented by a content analysis of postings and a telephone survey that asked people about their awareness and desire for a site such as HVTD (a survey of HVTD's registered users is being developed to seek a better understanding of their views of the site and motivations for joining).

Specifically, the semi-structured interviews begin with a formal list of questions, but the interviewer is free to follow up, probe, and explore other interesting topics that might arise (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009). To help elicit candid responses on organizational questions, the newspaper's four rank-and-file staff members were promised confidentiality. (Two have since left the paper.) The city editor at the time – now the editorial editor – submitted a written statement with permission to be quoted by name. The woman specializing in online ad sales also agreed to be quoted by name. As she was alone in that position, a meaningful conversation about the challenges of selling the site would have been impossible without identifying her.

The content analysis involved a systematic coding and analysis of one month of postings to the site in March 2008. The 246 items from March 2008 were coded by the author and an assistant for source, type, section in which they were posted, timeliness, whether the poster's identity was clear, and whether a picture was included with the story or reply. Intercoder reliability was checked by randomly (using an online random number generator) selecting 10% of the items. Agreement was perfect on items except type, timeliness, and whether a picture was associated with the posting. In those cases, Scott's pi was calculated at 0.85 for "type" and 0.84 each for "timeliness" and "picture," within the bounds generally considered acceptable for reliability (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 1998).

The coding was the same scheme used to analyze the first five months' postings from HVTD in 2006 (Fisher & Osteen, 2006), thus there is the ability to do some longitudinal analysis of the

site's development and growth. One additional category (a catch-all called "Hartsvegas") has been added since 2006, and minor changes were made to parts of the codebook just to clarify how to code pictures, for instance.³

The telephone survey was conducted in in December 2006 using a probability sample. RDD was used in drawing the sample with 341 usable numbers. A total of 150 people were interviewed, resulting in a 44 percent response rate. Registered HVTD users were excluded because they will be surveyed separately later, leaving the final sample size of 142.

The Newsroom and HVTD

In the interviews⁴ with the four rank-and-file *Messenger* staff members, and in the statement submitted by then-City Editor Jim Faile, four themes emerged: A wish for more public participation in Hartsville Today, its growing use to develop story ideas and check the community pulse, and a feeling it might be helping the paper as opposed to earlier fears of hurting circulation. In contrast, the fourth theme was that the newspaper could have promoted the site more and that the staff had yet to use its full potential.

More public participation

All of the four rank-and-file staff members wished more people would become involved with HVTD. "From the very beginning until now you definitely can see growth in it," said one, while still wishing for even more participation. "All I see is the same people on it," complained another. From the third, "I would prefer we had more people involved to give us a little broader perspective of what the community thinks." But the fourth person said it was "really just a matter of getting people on there and letting them realize how easy it is, the true power of it, that it will be around for a long time, and there will be more people who use it."

³ A copy of the codebook is available from the author.

⁴ The questionnaire is at the end of this paper.

There also is some uneasiness, however, that HVT D does not always meet their ideal for a "community storytelling" site. "One of the things that I see is somewhat of a lack of understanding about what 'community storytelling' really is," Faile wrote. "Certain aspects of the site seem to me to have taken on the nature of a chat room."

One staff member pointed to a heated topic – the alleged rudeness of some local librarians. "The library changed because they got feedback on what was going on, and it was public feedback that they had to respond to. Now, that can be done very poorly and can be very bad. But I think ultimately the community benefited from that exchange."

Growing use of the site, and its stories, by news staff

The library story, which largely played out on HVT D, also prompted some rethinking of what the newspaper covers, the staff member said. "The only way that story would have gotten into the paper was, perhaps, through letters to the editor because 'Did you have courteous exchanges with the librarians?' isn't that much of a story," the staff member said. But, "It's important to people."

Every staff member now checks HVT D regularly. "I try to check the site several times most days, including weekends," Faile wrote. Others said they average three to five times daily. "It's like I open up my e-mail and then I open up Hartsville Today," one reporter said. From another: "I usually try to go to it every day and look to see what's on there just to see, like I said, for story ideas, what's going on that we might not initially hear about."

One reporter said HVT D rarely had anything not heard from other sources. But another got story ideas, and "a couple of times they beat me out, too. ... I didn't like that."

Note that the staff members go to the site rather than use more efficient RSS feeds. It may be hard to teach some journalists new tricks, but it also highlights how they can be hobbled by outdated technology. The *Messenger's* computers were a generation or more behind, hindering use of an updated browser so that an online RSS reader like bloglines.com could display properly.

The *Messenger* has used HVTD items in the paper and its Monday total market coverage circular. Faile singled out commentary by Richard Puffer, a college professor and former spokesman for Sonoco Products (the Fortune 1000 company headquartered in Hartsville), and a story on soup kitchen volunteers by Jana E. Longfellow. Both were paid stringers and promoters for HVTD at times during the first two years.

"More frequently, the site has pointed staff toward stories that otherwise may have otherwise been overlooked," Faile wrote, for instance a sinkhole under a street. "We were not immediately aware of the problem. But a resident of the neighborhood took pictures and posted them on HVTD, and we were able to get a reporter on the story."

HVTD also pointed the *Messenger* toward a downtown vandalism spree. "We were able to publish a front page story that alerted business owners to the problem," he wrote.

Staff members said complaints on HVTD had also highlighted unhappiness with some of the paper's sports coverage.

HVTD has not hurt, as first feared

In staff interviews⁵ before HVTD went online, one clear concern was that the site could hurt the newspaper's circulation. The newspaper had its own Web site, but it was difficult to update and had only some of the stories from the paper, with no original content. There was a chat room, but it was largely filled with spam. Three years later, there was total agreement that HVTD had not hurt the paper at all but may have enhanced it.

"I don't think it's hurt the *Messenger*. It's only helped the *Messenger*," one said. The paper's circulation actually was up slightly, said another. Reflecting on the initial concerns, one staff member said: "I guess we didn't know exactly how it would play out, what it would be. But I

⁵ These included not only the newsroom staff, but circulation and advertising

don't think it has hurt; I think maybe it has even helped because people actually on the site have commented about stories that we've done and said, 'You ought to read the paper.' "

Faile agrees. "I do not think HVTd has hurt the paper in any way that I can see," he wrote. "In fact, I think some of the content may have prompted people to pick up a copy of the paper."

The Messenger could have done more

Still, a clear feeling existed that the *Messenger* could have done more to recruit contributors and use the site. "I don't think we've done enough to publicize it in our paper that it's there. We never have any little banners," said one reporter. Another said the newsroom should do more to post items off the publication cycle: "I think people here need to take it more seriously, know that this is a great tool, and there could be more done with it if they would put a little effort into it."

Two said they tried to mention HVTd in columns from time to time. "I think certainly because it was an experimental thing and no one knew what to expect that there are some things we could have done better if we look back at it, but I think we got off to a good start," one said.

None found any problem in being "ambassadors" for HVTd, and several said that while interviewing people they often distributed yellow business cards created to make people more aware of HVTd and encourage registrations. One said HVTd was often a topic of conversations at the civic club to which the person belonged. Another suggested the paper should have brought in local government and public safety leaders for online chats. Several said the paper's management, which became occupied with problems at the company's nearby daily, failed to get into the community enough to promote it.

"We have a pattern, and you get into that pattern, and then something has to jolt you out of it. You have to rise above it and say, 'Oh man, I'm just doing the same thing over and over again.' You have to make a conscious effort to change it," one staff member said. "Either you see it yourself or someone slaps you in the back of the head and makes you see it."

The person said a slightly younger and larger newsroom might have been different.

"I think a lot of people thought it was going to be a fad and it would just go away after a year, whatever," the person said. "But I think it's here to stay, and I think that if we pulled the site down today, we would hear about it within an hour – from a lot of people."

Selling Ads on HVTD

Hartsville Today has had about a dozen advertisers, the first starting about five months after it went live. The *Messenger's* former owner, Osteen Publishing, did not break out specifics, but it is doubtful revenue has come close to the \$10,000 publisher Graham Osteen estimated it would normally take to set up a site like HVTD (Fisher & Osteen, 2006).

Glaser (2004) hoped that if such sites "bring more people into the editorial process and help the media cover smaller communities better, the so-called bush league content might just bring in major league revenues, at least in aggregate. The idea is to tap into smaller advertisers who hadn't considered newspaper ads before." The counterpoint was one *Messenger* salesperson who said it was difficult to figure out how to sell online without cannibalizing the paper in a small town where most businesses had a fixed advertising budget.

Into the mix came Susan Alexander, an experienced media saleswoman who had sold print and online for several years with a large chain. "It really was not a hard sell," she said. Relatively few ads were sold, however, as she was gradually pulled into more print selling and then brought to Osteen's nearby daily.

The challenge that many small papers are likely to share is getting the necessary traffic reports and technical support, Alexander said, along with the nagging question "How hyperlocal do you want to go?" and still remain viable.

The newspaper's marketing area includes some neighboring small towns, but when she tried to sell HVTD as a combo package, "I always got the objection, "But it's Hartsville. ... And it's

very tough to get them past that because of the branding." Yet, those towns of a few hundred people are too small to support a stand-alone site, and were HVTD broadened specifically to include them, would the focus and motivation of its users become too diluted?

All HVTD's ads have been front-page banners or sidebar rectangles. Because of other priorities, the Osteen staff did not create positions on other pages, and Alexander said that's critical for effective selling. But inside placements also pose a new challenge of getting "click through" reports, she said. While Alexander said she could tell a client how many times its ad had been seen on the home page, it would not have been possible to do the breakdowns by other parts of the site. "Once you open it to inside pages, the banner could have been seen 40,000 times, but 20,000 on 'Faith' (one of HVTD's subject areas) and 20,000 somewhere else. I can't tell you where they were on the site."

Such tracking software can be expensive, which makes it a challenge for smaller news operations, she said. As an alternative, ad salespeople also must learn to ask for a client's Web reports, she said, specifically where online traffic is coming from. She recalled one HVTD advertiser that she said was not thrilled that "impressions" was the only metric she had. "Then I started saying let's look at Web trends" for two months before and after the online ads had run. "And all of a sudden you started seeing more hartsvilletoday.com and themessenger.com falling into their top referring URLs."

HVTD opens a new market, she said, "pretty much that high-middle to high-income demographic." But to ensure such a site is successful, "You have to make sure you're committed, bottom line. Do not treat this as a stepchild. It needs to be just as important a part of your paper as your paper and your paper's Web site. And it needs to be promoted. Everything needs to be promoted."

Quantitative Findings

Community survey

Results gleaned from a December 2006 telephone survey of the community illustrate the challenge, but promise, of a site like HVTD.

Respondents were read this statement: *Hartsville Today is an Internet site where people can share information and photos on happenings around town. The Messenger also files stories to it on days it does not publish.* They then were asked to agree or disagree with this: *Hartsville needs a site like Hartsville Today.* Of the 142 people interviewed, 89 (63%) agreed and 22 (16%) strongly agreed. Twelve disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 19 did not answer.

However, 95 (67%) said they had never heard of Hartsville Today despite a year of speeches to civic groups, mentions in the newspaper, banners at events and distribution of bright-yellow business cards encouraging people to visit and join. Thirty-three (23%) had heard of the site but never visited, and 13 (9%) said they had visited. (One person did not answer.) Those 13 were asked five questions to help assess their feelings toward HVTD. A small number of respondents in the sample may be limited in further statistical analysis, but they reveal some patterns, hence helping to define an issue. For instance:

- 10 of the 13 agreed and two strongly agreed with: *I find the information on Hartsville Today credible.* None disagreed. (Totals do not equal 13 because of one refusal.)
- 10 agreed and 1 strongly agreed with: *I find the information on Hartsville Today useful.* One disagreed.
- All 13 agreed or strongly agreed with: *Hartsville Today helps broaden the Messenger's coverage of the community.*
- Eight agreed and three strongly agreed that *people should have to use their real names when posting on Hartsville Today*, but two did not agree, one strongly.

- Six agreed and two strongly agreed that *things should be edited before they are allowed on Hartsville Today*, but four disagreed.

An additional four questions sought to determine "community storytelling orientation" (agree and strongly agree are summed into "positive," and disagree and strongly disagree are summed into "negative"; nonanswers are not listed. N=142):

- Newspapers should listen more to people like me in the community when deciding what local stories to cover (79% positive, 18% negative).
- A newspaper could improve coverage of the community if people like me could easily contribute local stories and photos to it or its Web site (83% positive, 13% negative).
- Local stories written by members of the community are at least as believable as those written by journalists (71% positive, 26% negative).
- I am more likely to read a local story written by someone in the community (75% positive, 22% negative).

The results for the four were combined to produce a CSO score. No significant correlation was found with support for Hartsville Today, but the results argue for more community participation in news work.

The survey also reminds us the "digital revolution" does not spread evenly. While 66 (46%) had access to high-speed Internet, 47 (33%) had no access and did not use the Internet. The remainder used dial-up connections. Of the 95 who connect, 65 (68%) do it primarily from home, 24 (17%) from work and six from a public location like the library.

The first key point of the content analysis is that the number of postings from one month (246) equals almost the entire number from the earlier five months (274). The number of contributors also increased, to 51 during the one month versus 34 for the earlier period.

There remains a Zipf, or power, curve – a phenomenon found in many online situations (Nielsen, 1997) – but as Figure 1 shows, it is flatter and has a longer tail, which indicates participation in HVTd has broadened. That is the hoped-for outcome as registrations increase. And while Richard Puffer and Jana Longfellow, two former stringers for HVTd, remain among the top contributors, many of the other names have changed. The postings continue to come overwhelmingly from the community, 97% this time compared with 72% in 2006. One *Messenger* staffer posted one time during the 2008 month. The remaining six non-community posts came from the author, who creates polls and occasionally moderates disputes.

The ability to easily identify who is posting also increased. A "clear ID," defined as a last name and enough of the first to be recognizable, or a recognizable ID picture, was present 59% of the time, compared with 39% earlier, and an ID picture itself (as opposed to a nonspecific picture like a flower, or no picture at all) was available 54% of the time (compared with 7% two years earlier).

The mix of items also has shown a noticeable shift (Table 1). News and sports have become a much smaller proportion, as has "community conversation," which we have defined as *the author, not acting in the traditional journalistic role of neutral reporter, seeks to inform the community – which includes expressing an opinion – on an issue, call the community to action (including solicitation of contributions to HVTd) or thank the community for participation*. But replies have skyrocketed to more than half of the total.

As Littau (2007) noted, sites like HVTd are not the great cauldrons of politics and democratic thought to which the early visions subscribed. Our coding scheme is not the same as Littau's, but

looking at how people categorize their posts, we get a similar idea. Posts dealing with politics and civic life would most likely go into "governing/safety," "business," or "education." Comparing the top categories from 2006 and 2008 (Table 2), governing/safety was the only one that appeared in the top five (in 2006) and dropped out of the top in 2008, replaced by "hobbies."

Considering only "story" posts and replies, not photos, about 17% went into governing and safety, education or business. The combined proportion is still less than arts/entertainment (19% - stories only) and not much more than calendar items and polls (15%).

Some contributors categorize their posts differently than a journalist might so that a political story occasionally might creep into "neighbors," for instance, or might start as a stand-alone photo in an image gallery. When photos are included in the overall mix, governing and safety, education, and business combined account for just 14% of the posts, and even correcting a few miscategorized ones are not likely to push the proportion much higher. For instance, the most popular photo category, "Happenin' Hartsville," (which is filled with things like block parties, museum exhibits, etc.) had 11% of the overall postings (and more than half of the 45 photo-only entries), and even photos that marginally might have something to do with governing or politics are a minuscule proportion. The "news" pictures gallery had just three photos.

One other indicator of the vibrancy of a site is the timeliness of the postings – are stories posted close to when events happened and do replies quickly follow? Timely has been defined for HVTd as within 48 hours before or after an event (the former designed to take in "advance" stories) for an original post and within 48 hours of the post in the case of replies. This is much more time than journalism's deadlines, but these are not journalists. Three quarters of the sports items and replies met this standard, while 42 percent of news postings did. Just 18 percent of community conversation items did, but by their nature that is to be expected, since someone can strike up the conversation at any time. A quarter of the photos were timely, but almost half could

not be determined – a product of Drupal's system that encourages assigning photos to galleries before they are attached to stories. As a result, many photos are put in by users without caption information.

Conclusion

In two-and-a-half years, Hartsville Today has become a vibrant online community with many of the same growing pains and characteristics of others (Bentley et al., 2005), including at least one plagiarism case and more than a few rough-and-tumble discussions in its comments. It provides a source of news and information the twice-weekly newspaper cannot reach with its staff or that it might not even deem worthy of putting in the paper, but yet is important to people. And there is a favorable attitude in the community toward such citizen journalism.

The newspaper's staff, however, still struggles with its relationship to the site, a situation likely in many small newsrooms where just getting out the paper is enough of a job. The paper's owner also is struggling with the idea that, unlike a printing press, the Internet is a constantly morphing medium that does not lend itself well to "set up and forget" operation and may require realignment of and additions to technical staff. In addition, little has been done to integrate HVTD into the newspaper's marketing and ad sales efforts. In the newsroom, HVTD seems to be viewed as just another source, albeit one that gives a broader view of the community and one that has the ability to scoop the newspaper, but not necessarily as a full partner.

The drop in staff posts to the site between 2006 and 2008 is troubling because viable citizen journalism sites require input and nurturing (Outing, 2008). Now, as part of a larger chain, the staff has access to a more easily updated main Web site and it seems possible the newsroom will cast HVTD further adrift, even though staff members acknowledge it has broadened their reporting and the newspaper's reach. HVTD was purposely set up as a site separate from the newspaper, partly for technical reasons. But it also was hoped a new nameplate would also add a

different dimension to the newsroom and to the *Messenger's* relationship with the community, broadening the newspaper's offerings with a separate title while also allowing it to provide news to the community between its regular publishing cycles. However, that also means it risks being relegated to a "citizen-journalism ghetto" (Outing, 2005b).

The content dominance of replies in 2008, compared with 2006, could indicate such a shift is under way. However, it also can signal the vibrancy of dynamic conversations – a site where almost every post gets some feedback and discussion. HVTD's archive calendar rarely shows a day without at least one post and some comments.

We are analyzing registrations, as we did in 2006, to provide more longitudinal information. One thing that does seem apparent is that HVTD still has not connected far into the area's minority community, and more research needs to be done on that. We also are working on a survey of HVTD members that will cover some of the same areas as the community survey so we can test for significant differences, but also will follow up on earlier work (Fedak, 2007; Bentley et al., 2006) on the formation of online community on such sites.

Similar research needs to be done with other citizen-journalism sites. For those with a mainstream media partner, additional work should be done on the challenges of integrating digital thinking into newsrooms through sites such as this. The challenges are many, including finding the technical resources so that an online site does not become a build-it-and-leave-it affair. Because of each site's uniqueness, the specific information may not be generalizable, but we can build an empirical framework to help future journalists become guides for those formerly known as the audience.

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Figure 1 Hartsville Today Contributor "Power Curves"

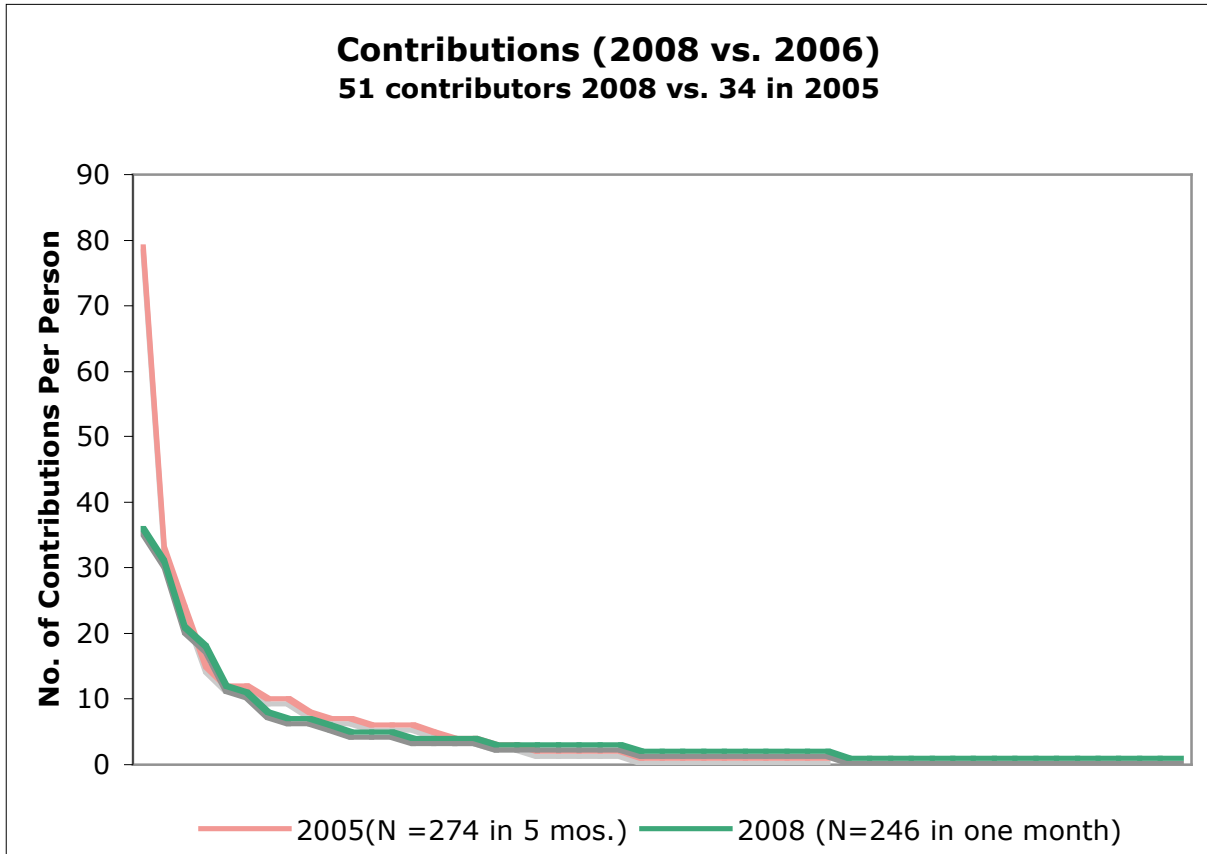


Table 1 Proportion of Hartsville Today posts by type, 2008 vs. 2006

	News	Sports	Community Conversation	Review	Event Calendar	Misc. Or Poll	Reply	Photo only
2008 (N=246)	7.7%	3.3%	11.4%	0	4.9%	3.3%	51.6%	17.5%
2006 (N=274)	13.1%	7.7%	14.6%	2.9%	10.2%	7.3%	14.2%	29.6%

(In both years, one item was of undetermined type.)

Table 2 Porportion of Hartsville Today posts by section (top five sections)

2008	Arts, Entertain.	Polls, Calendar	Sports, HS/College	Image Gall. Happenin'	Hobbies	Proportion of all posts (N=246)
	15.5%	12.6%	11.4%	10.9%	7.3%	57.7%
2006	Arts, Entertain.	Polls, Calendar	Image Gall. Happenin'	Governing, Safety	Sports, HS/Coll	Proportion of all posts (N=274)
	17.9%	13.9%	13.1%	9.9%	9.1%	63.9%

The sections are (IG=image gallery):

Stories: Polls/calendar items, arts/entertainment, business, education, faith, governing/safety, health, hobbies, home/gardening, neighbors, pets, sports-high school/college, sports-recreation, Hartsvegas (2008 only), IG-places, IG-bloomin', IG-people, IG-happenin', IG-news, IG-historic, IG-birthdays, IG-holidays, IG-sports/adult, IG-sports/school, IG-sports/youth.

HVTD Staff Questions 2007 exit interviews

1) What do you think has worked with Hartsville Today? Kind of rank it for me with the best thing first.

2) What do you think has worked the least? Again, rank it for me with the worst thing first.

3) How often in a week or a day do you look at Hartsville Today?

3a) Any particular categories you look at – or do you go to most recent posts or use an RSS feed?

3b) Have you ever gotten any story ideas from it, or been tipped off to something?

4) When we started this, I sat with most everyone on staff and got their sense of things. One thing that came through several times was a concern that "we will shoot ourselves in the foot" and hurt circulation. Do you think that happened?

4a) Do you think the site has hurt the Messenger in any way?

5) At the beginning, there was a feeling that the News and Press was the Messenger's greatest competitor, followed by the daily papers? Do you think that's still true. If so, has Hartsville Today helped at all?

6) Another thing expressed in several ways at the beginning was the hope that Hartsville Today could help broaden the Messenger's reach in the community. Do you think that has happened?

7) Should reporters be "ambassadors" for a site like Hartsville Today? (If so – can they be "effective" and how. If not – what might be the best way, then, to recruit people?)

8) If we were starting Hartsville Today anew today, what would you suggest we do differently? Or would you just say don't do it?