

Frontiers of Innovation in Community Engagement:

News Organizations Forge New Relationships with Communities

A Report from the [Center for Citizen Media](#)

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Introduction

The gates are opening, and it's about time.

News organizations are recognizing that their audiences are more than empty receptacles waiting to be filled with information selected an editorial priesthood -- more than consumers whose only interaction with the media is to buy what is sold, or not. Traditional media companies are beginning to understand that the audience can, and should, become part of the editorial process.

Consider several events in one week in February 2007:

- Reuters, the global news agency, announced the launch of Reuters Africa, a comprehensive news and information site. One key element, as noted by Rebecca MacKinnon, co-founder of the [Global Voices Online](#) blogging community, was the *"news agency's commitment to build synergies between the work of Reuters reporters and the work of bloggers from around Africa, who paint a much more diverse and vibrant picture of the continent than mainstream news reporting tends to do."*
- The New York Times took a baby step, but an important one for that august organization, into participatory journalism. It invited couples with wedding announcements to send in videos by the couples, in which they recall met and decided to make the relationships permanent and said it would publish those videos as part of its Weddings & Celebrations coverage.

These moves followed an even more significant corporate decision. Late last year, Gannett, publisher of *USA Today* and dozens of other American newspapers, revealed plans to re-create its newsrooms in profoundly new ways. The initiative had four major goals, including the publication of more material created by readers, and use of so-called "crowdsourcing" -- asking the audience to help with the reporting -- to produce watchdog and investigative journalism.

On March 5, 2007, USA Today launched a massive redesign, saying, "Our ambition is to help readers quickly and easily make sense of the world around them by giving them a wider view of the news of the day and connecting them with other readers who can contribute to their understanding of events."

What made all of these moves especially noteworthy were the organizations involved. Their actions were an endorsement of a trend that has been slow to take off, but which can no longer be denied.

The news organizations' motives are financial in part: a suspicion or hope that what some

call "user-generated content" can save money and build online audiences. But while any number of journalistic, legal and ethical issues remain, there's also recognition of the journalistic value of including the audience -- and that is the best reason of all.

Executive Summary

As traditional journalism organizations move onto the Web, they are learning to do more than re-publish the work they've printed or broadcast. The first forays into conversational journalism were blogs written by staff members, a genre now so widespread that it's getting difficult to find a news organization without staff blogs.

Less common, but becoming more so, is giving the audience an opportunity to comment on the journalism on the organization's own website. Newspapers, magazines and broadcasters using this technique have done so gingerly, for the most part, because they've worried that comments could (and some have) turn into a free-for-all that annoys readers instead of generating useful conversations.

A very few have tried experiments such as wikis, web pages that anyone can edit. (In one famous debacle, the Los Angeles Times abandoned a wiki editorial that collapsed largely due to the newspaper's mismanagement of the experiment.)

This report looks at the first generation of traditional-media innovators in the arena of community engagement: bringing the community into the journalism itself, beyond blogs and comments.

What They're Doing

There appear to be four primary approaches to opening the newsgathering process to "The People Formerly Known as the Audience."¹

- **"User generated content" (UGC):** People are encouraged to post their own material, such as stories, photos and event listings.
- **Blog hub:** Participants are able to submit stories, photos, and event listings, but they get their own weblog with a unique Web address on the news organization's site.
- **Community hub:** Often incorporating the elements above, these sites also offer social networking -- connecting participants to each other.
- **Newsroom transparency:** The news organization opens a window into its news-production process, helping the audience to understand -- and weigh in on -- what the editorial staff is doing.

¹ See "[The Former Audience Joins The Party](#)," We the Media, Dan Gillmor, O'Reilly, 2004, and "[The People Formerly Known as the Audience](#)," PressThink, Jay Rosen, June 27, 2006

Why They're Doing It

News organizations have many motives for these moves. Some are mostly financial. But there are valid journalistic reasons as well.

- As traditional news organizations lose audience and advertising, growing an online audience is essential, and audience participation is essential.
- News organizations believe they can save money through user-generated content. (We consider this more wishful thinking than anything else.)
- Bringing the audience -- the community -- into the process has enormous value for the journalism itself. In particular, the community will be better informed, and the news organization's ties to the community will be reinforced.

What Works:

- Success is not highly correlated with large technology expenditures or major shifts in staffing. It takes patience, follow-through, and iterative experimentation
- Sites that blend the contributions of professionals and community members were more successful than those that didn't, in part because having new content, consistently and from day one, was so important.
- Formal and informal social networking – through profiles, comments, and unique pages featuring the contributions of a single user – helped communities thrive by rewarding peer-to-peer interaction and enabling users to develop a track record of contributions visible to staffers and other community members.

Recommendations:

- Experiment and take risks. Make risk-taking part of the newsroom and business cultures of the organization.
- Make technological flexibility a priority. Favor experimentation and iteration over roadmaps and grand strategy.
- Approach community building with confidence, teamwork, and appropriate expectations.

1. Building News Communities Online

This section provides an overview of user-generated content strategies. We look at a number of different approaches to building communities, and analyze how contribution rates can shape the strategies of local media organizations looking to build online communities based on user-generated content.

One of the key questions for news organizations is why they should bother. We believe that there are sound journalistic reasons beyond the obvious commercial ones. (The latter, which we discuss later, include more site visits and a chance to monetize new kinds of content.)

Regaining a place at the center of the civic conversation:

- In many cases, news organizations are no longer at the center of the civic conversation in the community they serve. A wide array of social changes, including regional mobility and two-career families, has created a decline in participation in civic organizations and civic life. A news organization that creates a forum for civic conversation and neighbor-to-neighbor connection that meets the needs of today's citizens has the opportunity to create a new civic institution with lasting impact.

Enhancing institutional memory

- Current conditions at many papers – whether major metro dailies or suburban weeklies – make it difficult to maintain the kind of institutional memory that's required to approach each day's new issues with a full appreciation of the history. Lifelong residents and longtime readers can serve as keepers of an "extended memory" of a news organization's coverage and a region's history.

Reducing bunker mentality

- The artificially high barriers to reader feedback that exist at many news organizations tends to result in a pool of feedback that's skewed towards the highly motivated individual. Typically, that level of motivation is fueled by anger. As a result, many newsroom employees are left with a distorted picture of the readership as angry and irrational. The ideal reader, by contrast, is distant and vague, creating a situation where a journalist's colleagues seem more real than the readership their organization serves. Creating opportunities for more informal, and less highly charged discourse can give newsroom staffers a more accurate picture of their readership, which can then inform their news judgment.

New stories, new ways

- Access to an online community offers journalists new approaches to stories. Stories that once were illustrated with an anecdote gain power when backed by data gathered by dozens or hundreds of readers.

1.1 What They're Betting On: The World of User-Generated Content

Why are investors enthusiastic about news organizations wrapping an online community around their web presence? Investors and management at news companies are attempting to import an idea from the wider web: adding what has become known as "user-generated content"² -- material created not by the professionals but by members of that former audience.

Sites featuring user-generated content, such as [YouTube](#), [MySpace](#), and [Facebook](#) have been the biggest winners for their backers in the post-dot-com bubble era:

- MySpace: This social-networking site was acquired in October 2005 for \$580 million by News Corp.
- YouTube: This site, which features video clips uploaded by users, was acquired in October 2006 by Google for \$1.65 billion in Google stock.
- Facebook: The management of this social-networking site turned down a \$750 million dollar acquisition offer by Yahoo in early 2006; Facebook's management hoped to get an offer as high as \$2 billion.³

These valuations have prompted some observers to wonder if a new investment bubble is forming, but, bubble or no, news organizations and their backers see the many reports of surging traffic followed by huge valuations and wonder if some of that luster can rub off on news organizations. Indicators are good: local newspaper paper chain GateHouse Media went public with an IPO in October, 2006 and recorded huge gains in stock price on the first day. Investors weren't treating GateHouse like a newspaper stock: they were treating it as an internet stock. Investors bought GateHouse's strategy, which involved redeveloping the many newspaper sites they own into sites that feature user generated content.

Some user-generated content initiatives call to mind the most famous incident in Mark Twain's 1876 novel Tom Sawyer is the one where Tom manages to avoid the boring chore of whitewashing his aunt Polly's fence by marketing it as the most fun thing on earth to do to other local boys.

² I share Derek Powazek's aversion to the phrase "user generated content," about which he says: "They're words that creepy marketers use. They imply something to be commodified, harvested, taken advantage of. They're words I used to hear a lot while doing community consulting, and always by people who wanted to make, or save, a buck." [["Death To User Generated Content,"](#) Derek Powazek, Powazek.com, April 4, 2006.]

³ See "[Facebook's On The Block,](#)" Steve Rosenberg, BusinessWeek Online, March 28, 2006.

By creating a pretense -- that only special people could possibly whitewash the fence -- he actually gets the boys to pay him in the currency of kid-treasure:

"He had had a nice, good, idle time all the while – plenty of company – and the fence had three coats of whitewash on it! If he hadn't run out of whitewash he would have bankrupted every boy in the village."

[["Whitewashing the Fence."](#) Tom Sawyer.]

More than a few user generated content schemes bear a resemblance to Tom's scheme: *blogging is such a chore, let's get others to do it!* And sometimes it's accompanied by an unflattering eagerness to profit on the volunteerism of people who they consider not quite as smart as themselves --"If we get lots of people to blog on our site, maybe we can make a lot of money advertising against their content!"

What these latter-day Tom Sawyers don't realize is that Tom still had the hardest job: namely, the art of making people feel good about themselves by spending their time and money in a way that benefits you or your organization.

1.2. Online Engagement Strategies: Four Approaches and One Bad Idea

The term “citizen journalism” is applied to such a wide variety of media creation – from one moment’s configuration of headlines, ranked by user recommendation, on Digg’s front page, to user weblogs on news organization sites (whose entries may not pass anyone’s standard of news judgment) to videos of police brutality on YouTube, among many other efforts. We focus here, as noted, on the situations in which members of the audience are engaging with the professionals to create more journalism.

Any sane approach to engaging the community surrounding a news organization must begin with the fact that think about using their spare time to become part of the journalism process. This explains why much of the criticism of news sites that have successfully converted a pool of news consumers into participants in an online community have been so brutal.⁴ Nicholas Lemann dean of the Columbia School of Journalism, writing in the New Yorker, says:

“Citizen journalists bear a heavy theoretical load. They ought to be fanning out like a great army, covering not just what professional journalists cover, as well or better, but also much that they ignore. Great citizen journalism is like the imagined Northwest Passage—

⁴ See [“Amateur Hour: Journalism Without Journalists,”](#) Nicholas Lemann, The New Yorker, August 8, 2007

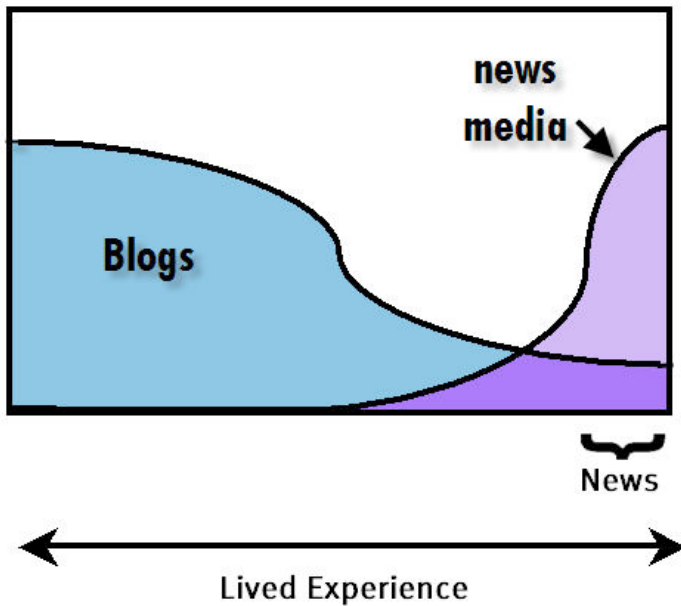
[“Citizen journalism: Actual Content vs. Shining Ideal,”](#) Tom Grubisch, USC Annenberg Online Journalism Review, November 5, 2005

it has to exist in order to prove that citizens can learn about public life without the mediation of professionals. But when one reads it, after having been exposed to the buildup, it is nearly impossible not to think, "This is what all the fuss is about?"

Lemann asserts that it's difficult to criticize citizen journalism "because many of the truest believers are very good at making life unpleasant for doubters, through relentless sneering." Yet it's difficult not to hear reciprocal sneers as others characterize the contributions of non-journalists as "swapping recipes and posting photos of their dog."

A strategy for wrapping an online community around the website of a news organization won't succeed if it starts out with wrongheaded notions (people will flock to cover zoning meetings!) or prejudices (people have nothing to say worth hearing).

The good news is that an examination of what's working in the online communities fostered by news organizations is also a recipe for détente between the citizen journalists and the journalist citizens. Sometimes the effort is as simple as giving people a place to post their own local information; sometimes it goes considerably deeper.



Broadly speaking, the most successful sites are most effective at translating the lived experience of their community onto the web. But only a tiny fraction of lived experience is news. One way of looking at the process of wrapping an online community around a news organization is that it's an effort to dramatically broaden the range of lived experience represented by the news organization's output – output that now includes content supplied by nonjournalists.

In fact, expanding the range of lived experience may be an effective response to some of the challenges to news organizations created by the demographic shifts of the past 50 years. In essence, as America became more prosperous, Americans moved away from news centers into suburbs. This is reflected by the distribution of independent local blogs or "placeblogs," which are much more likely to appear in suburbs that share a border with a major metropolitan area than they are in those metro areas or in rural areas.

The rise of placeblogs in these communities may be driven by economic factors – the nearby regional daily attracts most of the advertisers, but offers little coverage, while the local weekly may have difficulty competing for advertisers with the larger daily, and as a result has fewer resources to cover the community with. Many of these suburbs, dubbed “First Suburbs” by Robert Puentes and David Warren of the Brookings Institution⁵, exist in a kind of “news shadow” – with a much lower level of service from the local paper than they had decades ago, and intermittent service from the regional daily. Add free tools to this environment and placeblogs spring up.

Publication	Stories	Photos	Events	Video	Open Weblogs	"Guest hosts"	Aggregation	F2F Gatherings	Profiles	Groups	Open Meetings	Reverse Publishing	Moderation /Trust
Bakotopia	■	■	■	■					■	■			
Bakersfield Californian													
Northwest Voice, Southwest Voice	■	■	■									■	
BBC Actiop Network									■	■			
Bluffton Today	■	■	■		■				■			■	
DC Examiner/WECAN													
Greensboro News & Record	■	■											
Knox News	■		■		■							■	
LeMonde	■	■	■		■								
LJWorld & Lawrence.com	■	■	■	■					■			■	
MPR Public Insight Journalism											■		
MyMissourian	■	■	■										
MyTown.Dailycamera	■	■	■										
Nashvilleistalking.com						■	■	■					
Seaside-Sun	■	■	■										
Spokesman Review	■	■	■								■		
Concord Insider	■	■	■										
WickedLocal.com	■	■	■			■							
YourHub.com	■	■	■		■							■	

Items about lived experience form the backbone of the most popular placeblogs, and are the crystallization point for the neighbor-to-neighbor interactions that they thrive on. But that lived experience is, on occasion, news, and this is reflected in items where nonjournalists use placeblogs to forward information to the rest of the community that they witnessed or know about. This can take the form of spot news – documenting an accident or fire the person witnessed; analysis and “inside baseball” provided by local political junkies; or coverage of meetings, events, and businesses the local paper does not routinely cover.

In essence, the news organizations profiled here are attempting to combine the “lived experience,” spot news, and deep local expertise that successful placeblogs display, and combine that with their traditional strengths: access to political figures, a paid staff of professional journalists, photojournalists, and reach into segments of the populace for whom the web isn’t a primary way of getting information.

⁵ [“One Fifth of America: A Comprehensive Guide to America’s First Suburbs,”](#) Metropolitan Policy Program, Brookings Institution, February, 2006

When we mapped the basic features of the online community sites developed by news organizations, it became clear that there were four common approaches to creating a new online community:

1. **User generated content (UGC).** This is the most common approach. The news organization's website is revamped (or a new, standalone website is established) that allows participants to post "stories," photos, and event listings. Individual users don't have their own unique presence on the site but are contributing content to the site bearing the news organization's brand.
2. **Blog hub:** Like the UGC strategy, participants are able to submit stories, photos, and event listings, but they get their own weblog with a unique URL on the site that displays all the material posted by that participant. Often the weblogs have comments, and this allows participants to spark conversation with other visitors and establish an ongoing presence, in a sense, a personal brand within the news organization's website.
3. **Community hub:** These sites emphasize social networking. Generally, they allow many of the same things that the UGC and blog hub sites do, but the sharing of content is treated as a means to an end, namely, connecting participants to each other. These sites have much more highly developed user profiles, personal pages that a participant can use to tell other participants about themselves and their interests, and some allow the ad-hoc creation of invite-only groups with shared interests and "friend lists" for individual participants composed of links to other users' profile pages who have accepted invitations to be on a participant's friend list.
4. **Newsroom transparency:** While UGC, blog hubs, and community hubs can be seen as part of a continuum, the newspaper transparency strategy is actually quite different. Organizations like the Spokesman-Review of Spokane, Washington, take a different route to breaking down the barriers between newspeople and the communities they cover. At the Spokesman, editorial meetings are both open to the public, and [webcast](#) over the internet.

One Bad Idea: Building a community, keeping the walls

Sites with all the latest features, a reasonable degree of user-friendliness, and significant traffic can and do fail to gain traction. Two hallmarks of these sites that haven't caught on yet:

- They allow user content but the staff of the newspaper ignores it and never interacts with the visitors who have become participants.
- They allow user content but users have to conform to some version of existing journalistic norms.

These two mistakes are basically the same: they represent the desire to build a community without having to make any changes in philosophy or work practice on the

part of people at the news organization.⁶ In the first scenario, some number of participants start displaying antisocial behavior – such as name-calling, demeaning other participants. The initiative does nothing to change the daily lives of newsroom staffers and does nothing to increase the level of interaction between staffers and readers – because reporters and editors don’t use it. Soon the small group of hostile users drives off all other participants who find the online community unfriendly and boring as the same arguments are recycled. In the second scenario, only a few people feel that they fit the bill for this new journalistic endeavor, and the result is anemic and produced so inconsistently that few readers begin to look forward to the next installment.

1.3 Who’s Doing Well and Why? Who’s Still Working On It?

What do we mean by “doing well?” We have four criteria:

1. Conversion: How successful are news organizations at converting visitors to their sites into participants?
2. Traffic: Do the new community sites draw enough visitors to justify the expense of developing and running the sites?
3. Revenue: Have the sites attracted enough attention from visitors and from local advertisers to begin to build a stream of revenue?
4. Quality: If the site has attracted a significant number of participants, has that created new avenues for distributed journalism that have had an impact on the news organization as a whole?

All of the organizations profiled in this report have been selected because they are leaders in the movement to engage nonjournalists from the community in the newsgathering process. Often, this involves creating an online community whose topical areas may contain newsworthy items and ideas amid a larger conversation about the lived experience of members of the community. Sometimes it goes deeper.

Some are notably successful or unique even within this context:

- [Bakotopia](#): This site, created under the auspices of the Bakersfield Californian, is to our knowledge the most advanced social networking site currently offered by a newspaper in the US. Bakotopia.com has been described by VP of Interactive Mary Lou Fulton as “a MySpace for Bakersfield.”
- [Lawrence.com](#) and LJWorld.com: Created with the input of news/web luminaries Adrian Holovaty and Rob Curley, Lawrence.com managed to blow the lid off of the tightly sealed 18-24 market by employing conversational, two-way technology; the progress filtered over to LJWorld.com, where features like Game

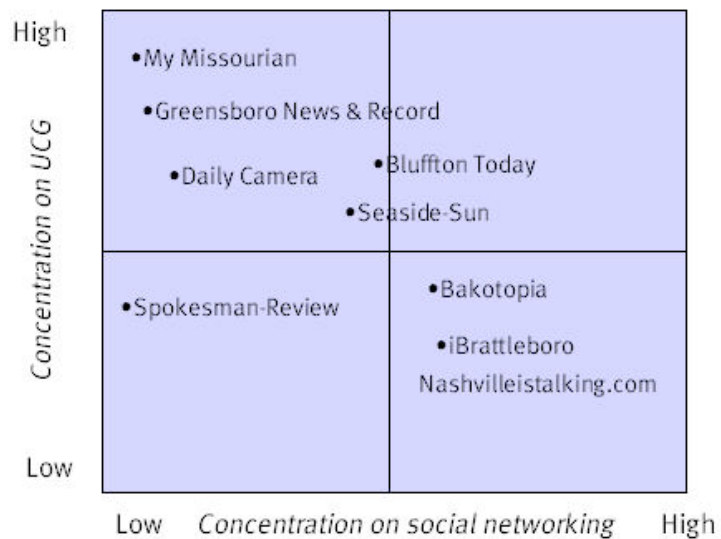
⁶ Except for the system administrators whose job changes quite a bit when there’s a wholesale change in the organization’s web platform.

covered youth sports in depth by engaging parents and coaches to file reports and photos.

- [Bluffton Today](#): Bluffton Today manages to pull off what so many are trying to do: gather a bustling community on the site that turns over content, making the site fresh to all viewers whenever they might visit. Not only that, the reverse publishing experiment is going well too.
- [YourHub](#) [Colorado]: Travis Henry of YourHub.com reports \$5M in revenue from YourHub operations in the first year. In a market where most online operations are struggling to show significant revenue, that’s a signal achievement.

We’d classify sites like WickedLocal.com and Hartsville Today as “still working on it.” Some of these sites simply haven’t had time to grow a thriving community yet – an organic process that can’t be rushed. Others, like the Greensboro News & Record, are moving on to the next stage of their experimentation.

The News & Record has demoted its “Town Square” feature, where readers could submit stories, from its front page, shifting emphasis to where they’ve had success – an interactive Letters to the Editor section and staff blogs, which attract substantial numbers of comments. John Robinson, editor of the Greensboro News & Record comments: “We haven’t been all that successful with the contributions, but the conversations on blogs, letters and stories have been compelling and dynamic.” (See additional comments from Robinson in the profile of the Greensboro News & Record in the Profiles section of this report).



Report and Rapport: Content vs. Social Networking

1.4. The Math of Online Engagement: Can It Succeed in a Local Context?

Are newspapers betting on numbers of online participants that are unlikely to materialize? An analysis of popular sites built around user-generated content shows that news organizations may need to try new strategies – and form realistic expectations – about the number of visitors they can convince to become contributors and participants in a new, local online community.

In a survey, the most frequently cited examples of user-generated content, chosen by people who are enthusiastic about the future prospects for the genre, were Wikipedia and Digg. As of October 8, 2006, Wikipedia reports 1,473,418 articles in its English language edition alone⁷, created by volunteers. An analysis of Wikipedia's statistics shows the number of articles has doubled once every 345 days from October 2002 to October 2006.⁸

Digg doesn't feature original content. Digg asks users – over 500,000 of them, say representatives of the company – to submit stories to be voted on, and then to vote stories up or down. The front page of the site reflects the relative popularity of submitted articles.

How Community Sites Succeed With Fewer Contributors Than You Might Think

Looking at the success of sites like Wikipedia and Digg, both of whom are among the top 20 most visited sites on the internet⁹, feature rapid growth of visitors and contributors -- and, notably, which have a very small number of people on payroll¹⁰ -- it's easy to see why traditional media companies are excited: could this approach be the lifeboat they've been hoping for? Those traditional media companies are looking for ways to simultaneously grow and lower costs. Building an audience off of content created for free sounds like it fits the bill.

But will it work?

Aside from any considerations regarding quality or journalistic norms, whether or not a traditional media company can get the user-generated-content model to work for them isn't a qualitative question, it's a quantitative one.

Digg and Wikipedia require huge numbers of visitors in order to attract the tiny fraction of those visitors that are inclined to become contributors. Without sufficient contributors, Wikipedia and Digg wouldn't be able to provide a site that featured consistently fresh information day after day with such a small staff.

In a talk by Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales at Cornell University in June 2005, he cited a remarkable statistic. On a daily basis, 50% of edits to Wikipedia are performed by only .0072 of the users.¹¹ He continued using these statistics in several subsequent

⁷ See "[Statistics, Wikipedia](#)," for an automatically updated count of the number of articles on Wikipedia.

⁸ See "[Modeling Wikipedia's Growth](#)."

⁹ As of this writing, Digg is #19 on Alexa's ranking of the most visited sites on the net; Wikipedia is #6. [See Alexa: Most Visited Sites](#)

¹⁰ As of this writing, the Wikimedia Foundation, which is Wikipedia's parent organization, has five full time employees. Not a typo: five. Digg has fewer than twenty.

¹¹ See "[Bias, Sabotage Haunt Wikipedia's Free World](#)," David Mehegan, Boston Globe, February 12, 2006 and "[Wikipedia: Social Innovation on the Web](#)," Jimmy Wales, conference presentation, "Web Designs for Interactive Learning," Cornell University, June, 2005

presentations and interviews throughout 2006. Digg is also dependent on a small number of active, consistent users out of the much larger pool of visitors the site attracts. Digg is reported to have 500,000 visitors on a daily basis, but 50% of the front page is determined by an even smaller fragment of the site's visitor pool than Wikipedia. Rand Fish, analyzing Digg's own top user data, found that Digg's top 100 users are responsible for 56% of the content on the front page:

“A logical extension shows that the top 100 Digg Users have contributed 14,249 stories to the homepage, or 56.41%. At Digg, a very select group of users is dominating the popular homepage content. Far from being a mass of opinion, Digg is instead showing, primarily, the content opinions of just a few, select folks.

There's certainly nothing wrong with this - it's not a secret or a problem and it isn't hurting Digg's popularity, reputation or importance. But, it is something that many folks who use the site don't realize and many marketers or folks attempting to use it to promote their content should be aware of.”

Rand Fish, “Top 100 Digg Users Control 56% of Digg's HomePage Content,” SEOMoz Blog, 7/20/2006¹²

Let's try and apply this concept in a local setting. New Haven is blessed to have the [New Haven Independent](#), a high-quality local news weblog started by veteran journalist Paul Bass in 2005.

New Haven, Connecticut, has a population of 130,000. Let's imagine for a moment that Bass had a spectacularly successful year and ended 2007 with an average of 13,000 visitors per day.

If Bass were as successful as Wikipedia in converting visitors to contributors, he'd have accumulated fewer than 100 consistent contributors; if he were as successful as Digg in reader to contributor conversion, he'd have even fewer. There are a number of lessons that news organizations can draw from this:

- *Committed Contributors, Casual Contributors*: Successful sites driven by user generated content have a core group of committed users who contribute consistently. Their efforts keep the site fresh, which in turn drives traffic and creates the flow of visitors that generates contributions from casual contributors. Casual contributors contribute infrequently, or even only once, but their contributions in the aggregate may make up a substantial percentage of the total contributions.

¹² “[Top 100 Digg Users Control 56% of Digg's Home Page Content](#),” Rand Fish, SEOMoz blog, July 20, 2006

- *Have appropriate expectations for community contributions.* Expecting large numbers of contributors and a fast-growing number of new contributors may not be realistic.
- *A little goes a long way.* Sites like Wikipedia and Digg have made a significant impact with fewer committed contributors than many think. A community wrapped around a traditional newspaper may not need many committed contributors to make a significant impact on the paper and the community it serves.

Many have said that the reason so few site visitors become contributors to citizen journalism is because it's unreasonable to expect more than a tiny fraction to be interested. We should be wary of this explanation; after all, in the modern history of computing we heard now-discredited predictions that only a tiny number of people would ever have computers or, later, ever use the Internet, or (still later) ever publish online.

Aaron Swartz, Wikipedian and cofounder of [Reddit](#), a competitor of Digg's, presented an alternative analysis to Wales' regarding the relationship between committed and casual contributors on Wikipedia¹³. Counting volume of text – as opposed to edits – he came to the conclusion that casual users have a much larger impact on Wikipedia than the statistics presented by Wales implies. He writes: “This fact does have enormous policy implications. If Wikipedia is written by occasional contributors, then growing it requires making it easier and more rewarding to contribute occasionally. Instead of trying to squeeze more work out of those who spend their life on Wikipedia, we need to broaden the base of those who contribute just a little bit.” Swartz is, in our view, correct about the primacy of casual users in development considerations. Even while a small number of committed participants may have a central role in an online community's stability and consistency, the features they want may be confusing or hostile to newer users.

It's impossible to tell, from our early vantage point, if in fact there is pent-up demand that could be released by some not-yet-developed technology that would make such interactions so simple and pleasurable that rates of participation would rise dramatically. But to rule it out strikes us as a mistake.

¹³ “[Who Writes Wikipedia?](#)” Aaron Swartz, Raw Thought, September 9, 2006

2. Investing In The Future: Shaping a Technology and Business Strategy for News Communities

This section addresses several factors shaping investments in news organizations' strategies to build online communities.

- Creation of online communities is something that many news organizations pursue in order to explore the journalistic outcomes of such an experiment. However, online community strategies are also gaining favor with investors who believe that such initiatives may result in new and sustainable sources of income for media companies.
- Levels of investment and implementation strategy varied widely among the organizations we profiled. Levels of investment did not correlate strongly with success, but implementation strategy did.

The business reasons for these sites are plain enough.

First, as more and more readers move online, with circulation dropping and advertisers leaving the print and broadcast products, the Internet is the growth market. Consumer Internet businesses make revenues in several ways, including advertising, an arena traditional media organizations know well.

Second, we have a sense that some if not most of the players in the user-generated content arena see it in part as free labor. We strongly discourage this thinking, but the successes of sites such as YouTube, Flickr and Digg have given too many in the traditional media the idea that people will work for nothing indefinitely. This is a mistake; business models -- patterned after existing "offline" ones -- are already springing up to meet this emerging marketplace.

Perhaps the best business reason for creating these sites is the hardest to quantify in the short run. The media organization that becomes the key hub of community conversation, helping the community to have the conversation with itself that all communities need to have, stands to be a survivor in the new digital world.

The technological hurdles are not trivial, meanwhile. They bedevil even the smartest organizations. We found a variety of approaches.

2.1. Big Investments, Uncertain Returns: Why Are News Organizations Taking Big Risks Online?

Most news organizations today are either publicly traded firms, or bankrolled by private equity firms. Both public and private capital demand significant returns on their investment. Analysts inside and outside the newspaper business have observed that newspapers, even many of those with sagging stocks, are still profitable, and some even have enviable profit margins north of 20 percent. So why aren't investors happy? Why have they been sending newspaper stock prices down, down, down?

As the breakup of Knight Ridder and investor pressure on the Tribune Co. show, profits aren't enough. Investors want growth, not just profitability. Some risk-tolerant investors seek out companies that are growing but not yet profitable, in hope that the higher risk investment will pay off with higher returns. Newspapers are a legacy business, or have been.

Wall Street is surprisingly sanguine about the prospect of newspaper companies dropping millions to develop or buy online services – even when the company is in a negative growth spiral and even when nobody seems to know quite how those online services will create the kind of revenue stream the company enjoyed in the past from its traditional products. Why? Because these are seen as bids to regain their former status as growth stocks.

Private equity firms, for their part, may be even more eager to see their charges make aggressive moves in the online. These firms see their biggest return when the private companies they invest in go public, and the path to the IPO is paved with web pages. Some private equity players, however, may be in the

What's Private Equity?

From Wikipedia: "Private equity is a broad term that refers to any type of [equity](#) investment in an asset in which the equity is not freely tradable on a public [stock market](#). Passive institutional investors may invest in private equity funds, which are in turn used by private equity firms for investment in target companies. Categories of private equity investment include [leveraged buyout](#), [venture capital](#), [growth capital](#), [angel investing](#), [mezzanine capital](#) and others. Private equity funds typically control management of the companies in which they invest, and often bring in new management teams that focus on making the company more valuable."

In the case of media companies, private equity firms will often bankroll the owner of a family-owned media company, encouraging them to go out and buy other media properties to create a chain. The private equity investor then encourages the management to make the new chain as valuable as possible, usually through a combination of "efficiencies," [read: cuts] and an online strategy for the new group. Ultimately, the private equity firm must get its money back – and they aim for large returns on their investment. The purpose of making the chain attractive is either to sell it to another group of investors at a profit, or to take the company public via a public stock offering, and make money off their equity position in the company.

hunt mainly for high-cash flow businesses they can use to pay themselves huge bonuses - and newspapers clearly qualify. We'll know if this is happening only in retrospect.

Widespread encouragement to invest in something solely because of potential future value, without a clear idea of who will profit or how, is a recipe for a stock bubble. The prospect of being a good investment for any company, including media companies, is a double-edged sword. The company that makes a good argument for future growth online attracts aggressive investors, who pile on money – and big expectations.

Only a small minority of companies will achieve the home-run status that those aggressive investors are looking for, and no company can exceed expectations forever. When the honeymoon is over and reality sets in, investors yank their support for the company, following an exuberant rise with an equally rapid collapse. The fate of Knight Ridder is a good example of what happens to a company after a collapse in investor trust: investors with controlling interests in the company demand the breakup of the company, in hopes that the parts of a company will be more valuable than the discredited whole.

Intriguingly, GateHouse Media's recent public offering and rising stock price, as well as Gannett's current favor on Wall Street (at least relative to its industry cousins), may reflect -- at least in part -- investors' willingness to support online moves. GateHouse and Gannett, we note, still have the bulk of their print properties in communities where print margins remain quite high. They are far from being Internet plays, but we have no doubt that the Internet component has been a plus in the Wall Street thinking.¹⁴

What's driving many news organizations towards community engagement is the prospect of profitability combined with growth – or the promise of growth – that their backers require.

¹⁴ Business Week 's Jon Fine, in a [recent column](#) on Gannett's "New Lease on News," a Merrill Lynch analyst as praising the company's moves, citing the likely incremental revenue and profit.

2.2 Technology Strategies

It sometimes seems that there are as many technology strategies as players. Strategies include:

- **Build:** Hiring a web design firm to build a one-off custom developed platform was the most common solution. Usually employing widely used scripting languages and toolkits known as “[web frameworks](#),” these sites were sometimes built in conjunction with an in-house team, but more often designed as standalone sites by outside teams.
- **Buy:** A few went the commercial route and bought a commercial CMS (content management system). GateHouse Media, the current owner of WickedLocal.com, bought the Prospero content management system, and combined it with a commercial web directory/search package and a user-submitted photo gallery system developed and sold by Morris Digital (mdSpotted; see below). However, GateHouse ultimately opted for the open-source Zope framework when rolling out the WickedLocal feature set across its newspapers in eastern Massachusetts (see “Extend Open Source”).
- **Embed:** Some embedded free or low-cost tools into their existing websites, usually without much integration with their existing CMS, but done in such a way that the look and feel of the site was preserved. Typically, this involved using free or low cost blogging platforms such as Wordpress or [Movable Type](#) to create weblogs on their sites. A few went further with the embedding strategy, establishing a higher-level business relationship with Automattic or Movable Type to create multiuser blog functionality that allowed visitors to sign up for their own blog on their site. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is Le Monde, backed by [WordPress MU](#) (multi-user) system customized for the Le Monde site.
- **New Platform:** A number of the news organizations that have been the most successful at converting readers into participants have something in common: they created their own new CMS from the ground up. Much more than a one-off site, several of these companies aimed to create commercial grade software that they could use for their own operations and resell to other news operations.
- **Extend Open Source** -- GateHouse Media chose the open-source web framework Zope when extending the Wicked Local Plymouth community feature set across its eastern Massachusetts papers – a change from the original platform, which contained community and blog features from a commercial vendor with proprietary source code. GateHouse did, however, keep mdSpotted, the user-driven photo gallery application created by Morris Digital. Choosing Zope

doesn't preclude GateHouse from creating its own proprietary software; while Zope itself is both free and open-source, the Zope Public License (ZPL) does not prohibit commercial use of software developed on top of the Zope framework. Given that frameworks are toolsets and not finished products, this gives users of Zope quite a bit of room to develop commercial products if they wish. Morris Digital Works has taken a similar approach, using open source CMS Drupal as the engine for some of their community sites, while building commercial modules such as mdSpotted that integrate with Drupal and other CMS platforms.

2.3. News Organizations Become Software Companies: The Bakersfield Californian, The Denver News Agency, Morris Digital

Successful sites like Bakotopia, Bluffton Today, YourHub.com, and LJWorld/Lawrence.com have this notable aspect in common: Their parent organizations funded the creation of new platforms to run these sites, and now those platforms are for sale. These news organizations have become software companies in their own right -- with all the risk and reward that implies.

That news organizations are developing their own software speaks to the relative weakness of commercial products aimed at news/community sites. This, in turn, reflects the economics of the software industry, where most large and well-established companies aim fully completed, packaged software at consumer markets and manufacturing industries, or around functions common across many customers. These markets have either many customers or customers with large budgets, and processes that are largely the same from customer to customer, requiring less expensive and time consuming customization per customer (a cutting edge, totally unique accounting system, for example, is frightening to contemplate).

News organizations are not like many others, and require software for specific processes that don't map well outside the industry. Such businesses attract smaller software companies, and we'd speculate that small software companies have something in common with new restaurants: a sky-high failure rate. If a company's selected vendor goes under, that may mean no upgrades no upgrades from the company, no way to make upgrades on your own if the source code is proprietary; and limited (at best) ongoing tech support.¹⁵

So while building things from scratch seems to be a strategy of last resort, when contemplating the alternatives, it looks better all the time. One of the major reasons for this is the advent of open-source software, as noted below.

¹⁵ The crisis caused by lack of customer access to source code if a software company fails has been countered by some attempts at "technology escrow," contract provisions where customers get access to source code in the event that the business fails or discontinues development of a product. However, transfer of code and the related code management systems are nontrivial operations, even when escrow is in place.

2.4. New Community Platforms Developed by News Organizations for News Organizations

Among the innovators, four news organizations in this survey have added software development and sales to their business portfolios. Not finding what they envisioned on the shelf, and unsatisfied with the idea of building a site that would be difficult or impossible to extend once consultants left, they designed content management systems from the ground up that were built around core community concepts.

- **Ellington:** [Ellington](#) is the system that's behind the Lawrence Journal-World's Lawrence.com. A CMS built using the Django open-source framework¹⁶, Ellington is now resold to other news organizations with an entry price of \$15k. For now, Ellington is used mostly at organizations that have a direct or indirect connection to the Lawrence Journal-World's parent company; in addition to World Company sites such as LJWorld, Lawrence.com, KUSports, it's in use at the Naples Daily News of Naples, FL, and its sister paper the Bonita Daily News, where a number of former LJWorld/Lawrence.com staff migrated to. Outside of the World Company family, Ellington is in use at Steamboat Pilot, a community site for Steamboat Springs, Colorado sponsored by The Steamboat Pilot Newspaper, and at TexasGigs.com, a music community site founded by Mike Orren, whose other notable online journalism site is PegasusNews.com.
- **Morris Digital Works Suite:** Many of MDW's new signature sites, such as Bluffton Today, are built on the open-source CMS Drupal. But MDW has, in addition, [a product line of its own](#). Some of the products are integrated with their Drupal sites, and others, like Siteweaver, are complete online publishing management systems in their own right. Particularly notable is MDSpotted, a photo gallery package that enables readers to upload photos. MDSpotted is in use at a number of sites owned by Morris Communications, MDW's parent, but its gained traction well beyond that at sites like WickedLocal.com.
- **Bakomatic:** [Bakomatic](#) was developed as a social networking platform for [Bakotopia.com](#), a youth-oriented site founded and operated by the Bakersfield Californian. The Californian also runs the Northwest Voice and the Southwest Voice. Participata, the software spinoff of the Californian, markets Bakomatic on a per site basis with pricing linked to the circulation size of the newspaper who's building a new social networking site for their audience. Pricing starts at \$30k for 1-3 sites for newspapers with a circulation of less than 50,000. Customers include the Arizona Republic.
- **YourHub:** The [YourHub](#) platform, designed in partnership with web development firm [Indigio](#) for the Denver News Agency, creates a turnkey system for a blog community to wrap around an existing media site – and it also provides a platform for self-service classified advertising. It's sold on what Yourhub.com

¹⁶ A “framework” is a programmer's toolkit with pre-built modules. Django is a CMS framework that contains prebuilt CMS elements so that coders don't have to start from scratch, but can configure and extend Django's elements into a CMS that suits their needs.

describes as a “syndicated” model – that is, there’s an initial fee coupled with monthly fees based on circulation; in addition, YourHub’s customers can join an online ad network that shares revenue based on per-click advertising placed on the YourHub sites. In addition to the Denver News Agency flagships of the Denver Post and the Rocky Mountain News, customers include: The Knoxville News-Sentinel, Ventura County-Star, Scripps Treasure Coast Newspaper Group, Los Angeles News Group, The Anderson Independent-Mail, The Wichita Falls Times Record News, and The Colorado Springs Gazette.

2.5. A Modest Proposal for Technological Innovation

Journalism is too important to leave to the hands of the market alone. We can't change the market, but what can we do to change the context?

For starters, we can reduce the risk of experimentation for news organizations looking to engage their communities online by reducing the cost of the tools to free or nearly free. How? Make those tools -- or the basic kernel of those tools -- open-source products to encourage low cost, low risk experimentation by individual news organizations.

To the extent that journalism is becoming a high-tech profession, the strategy should note the ways other industries have pursued innovation through partnerships and collaboration.

For example, high-level technical universities across the globe make significant revenue from technology transfer – licensing technologies developed at university laboratories. A smart j-school or j-school associated institute will take the initiative to get the funding to develop a simple but robust content management system and make it available for free to news organizations (perhaps with some small membership cost to help defray the costs of future development and encourage a sense of shared mission).

Such an initiative need not be very expensive. [Drupal](#), the widely-used open source content management system, was brought to 1.0 levels of development by two students in a dorm room with no formal budget whatsoever. Since then it has emerged as the leading open-source content management system, with a growing and thriving community of developers to enhance and support it.

(Note: The Center for Citizen Media, working with a technology partner, is seeking a foundation grant to pursue precisely this kind of media platform.)

3: Recommendations

We have one recommendation above all others for organizations that want to bring their audiences/communities into the journalism process:

Take risks.

In the Internet Age, it's easy -- and relatively inexpensive -- to try new ideas. The cost of failure is low for any individual experiment.

Don't merely tolerate risk-taking in the newsroom and on the business side of the operation. Embrace it, and the fact that failure is part of risk-taking.

With that, some specifics:

Make technological flexibility a priority. Favor experimentation and iteration over roadmaps and grand strategy.

- Don't settle for a site that is "frozen" when outside consultants leave.
- Avoid building one-off technology platforms. Especially avoid letting consultants build a one-off website based on a requirements document. It's worth the time and effort to investigate the solutions that already exist.
- When evaluating technology solutions, consider the size of the developer community. How many people are available to make changes or create new features for your site? Some open-source software tools have large developer communities that will be available for hire inexpensively on a contract basis, enabling you to make changes rapidly and inexpensively.
- Future-proof your site by learning about formats and standards. A site that incorporates standards such as RSS, and is extensible using popular and widely-known scripting languages such as Perl or PHP, will be easier to extend.
- An iterative approach -- trying things and fixing what doesn't work -- is more appropriate to the Web than a Grand Strategy that takes forever to launch. Try out new features; watch how community members use them; and use these as inspiration for additions and changes.

Approach community building with confidence, teamwork, and appropriate expectations.

- Confidence: Building an online community requires a different tone and approach than a traditional news site: personality, humor, and authenticity are key.
- Teamwork: Community sites have a better chance of success if staffers throughout the newsroom and the organization use them rather than being the

province of a small "community team" that has little or no contact with the newsroom.

- Expand your team beyond your staff, and even beyond your site. For example, reward local bloggers who link to your site just as much as you reward readers who contribute to your site directly. Consider growing the "ecosystem" of local sites that link to yours as part of your mission.
- Expectations of Contributors: Don't expect nonjournalists to feel comfortable taking on the role of journalist. While some contributors may be eager to write a "story," others will want to share lived experiences. Finding ways to accommodate, encourage, and learn from contributors is key to success.
- Expectations About Growth: Communities are organic. They grow through the web-equivalent of word of mouth. Expect a significant period of time – as much as six months, maybe much more – before a community gains a life of its own. (If things aren't working a year after you start, however, it's definitely time to reconsider your approach.)

Profiles

[BBC's Action Network](#)

Sponsoring news organization: The [BBC](#)

Founded: 1922

Location: London, UK

Owned by: The BBC

Community engagement initiative launched: 2003

Leader of community engagement initiative: Amber Rose

Software used: Custom-developed web platform

The screenshot shows the BBC Action Network website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Home, TV, Radio, Talk, Where I Live, A-Z Index, and a search box. Below the navigation bar, there's a header with the Action Network logo and the tagline "Change the world around you". There are three main icons: "Share your concerns", "Find people near you", and "Make a difference in your neighbourhood". Below the header, there's a section titled "What is Action Network?" with a brief description and a "Find out how to get started" link. To the right, there's a search box with a "Search" button and a link to "browse our Issues or Places". Below this, there's a "Latest events and features" section with three articles: "Putting dentists on the map", "Who cares?", and "Drink a pint, donate a pint". To the right of this section, there's a "What Action Network users are doing" section with "Campaign news" and "New and updated articles". At the bottom, there's a "Newsletter" sign-up form and a "FAQ and help forum" link.

When it was launched in 2003 as BBC iCan, the site – now known as the BBC Action Network – was designed as the future home of thousands of intensely local online communities, where residents would coalesce around issues of concern. The geographical taxonomy of the site, then and now, allows discussions that are nationwide down to the most ultra-local of local levels: a single Welsh county, Gwynedd, pop. 11,6843, has a [page](#) listing 71 options of places within the county that a visitor could designate as the locale of his or her discussion.

Today, Rose reports that the site has just over 34,000 members. But even with time and a growing user base, some of the pages devoted to a particular geographical area, particularly less-populous and remote areas, await their first post. Other geographical areas, such as Greater London, thrive. Most popular, it seems, are cross-geographical

“issues,” topical posts offered by registered users of the site. These range from the mundane and pragmatic – members sharing experiences and commiserating on experiences with dentists who coerce patients into agreements to pay extra fees in excess of what the UK’s National Health Service lists as the cost for a dental procedure – to discussions of human rights, the environment, and government reform.

“The main lesson we've learnt,” says Amber Rose of the BBC Action Network, “is that you really need to think about how you can develop a real sense of community online, otherwise a website can be a lonely place. People on our site may share the same issues, but they also need to see that there are other people on the site. I think Flickr is an excellent example of a site that also has a real community spirit.” When asked about the Action Network team’s influences, Rose also mentioned [TheyWorkForYou](#), a site that makes it simple for citizens of the UK to keep tabs on the activities and votes of the Members of Parliament serving their area.

Issues raised on the site do, on occasion, achieve crossover into news coverage and other programming, says Rose. “Whenever we've spotted a great campaign or story, we will follow it up with a first-person interview. We also launched [Action Week](#) on News Interactive where we showcased some of our really active users. Our users have also been put in touch with Five Live, Newsnight and Radio 4.”

Unlike many of the news/community sites profiled in this report, the BBC Action Network is explicitly activist in nature. When asked to point out a few members who were notable for their use of the site, Rose responded, “These are users who are really passionate about their issues and they reflect this by not only using the web to be seen and heard, but to engage in active campaigning in the real world.” (We include a few links to the public profiles of members whose involvement with the site Rose believes exemplify unique and powerful uses of the platform.)

The BBC Action Network is unique among the organizations we profiled in its frank declaration of support for activism. Most news organizations we profiled stopped short of embracing activism, even when the joint endeavor between citizens and reporters resulted directly in real-world changes, as they did at the Ft. Myers News-Press, where a combination of online community and reporter effort resulted in a major investigation of a public utility. Most expressed vague goals for the readership – that they would become “more involved” or “more informed.”

Expressing opinions about what the community should do in their newly informed and connected state could chip away at the readers’ perception of the paper as an objective and neutral observer of local events. Another source of organizational discomfort comes from the conflict between a news organization’s commitment to freedom of speech and the desire to avoid having their site, with their name on it, be used to distribute widely objectionable material. Having a healthy community where a few members don’t drive off many others brings the news organization – people in the business of freedom of speech – will have to be censors. The volume of response from a successful site makes it difficult to pay the same level of attention to individual comments or posts as a newspaper editor might in selecting which Letters to the Editor to publish. In response to this issue, the Action Network has a remarkably short and lucid set of community guidelines, called [The Action Network Rules](#), to govern behavior on the site. Members are expected to help police the site, and each comment and post is accompanied by a link: “Breaks the Action Network Rules? Complain” that allows users to flag content.

The rules include an injunction to avoid personal attacks: “We don’t want contributions that are abusive...don’t make accusations against private individuals.” This has led one critic, Martyn Perks to [respond](#) to the site’s launch this way: “The faith some have in iCan avoids tackling real issues head-on and belittles us with a safe, comfortable idyll. By playing village politics we will lose sight of how to better society through considered debate and, when necessary, confrontation.”

A sample of notable users of the BBC Action Network:

[Simon Birkett](#) uses the site to advocate pollution controls and public transit.

[Tim Hothershall](#) counterbalances Birkett, using his page on the site “[Get our] government to admit that climate change is a naturally occurring phenomenon and is not in any way preventable.”

[Max Calo](#) chronicled the effort to prevent the closure of a community center along with its public swimming pool. The effort ultimately succeeded.

Bluffton Today

Sponsoring news organization: [Bluffton Today](#)

Founded: April 2005

Location: Bluffton, SC

Owned by: [Morris Publishing Group](#)

Community engagement initiative launched: April of 2005

Publisher, Bluffton Today: Tim Anderson

Executive Editor, Bluffton Today: Kyle Poplin

Software used: Custom-developed Web platform created by [Morris Digital Works](#), the software arm of [Morris Communications](#). Parts of the [Morris Digital](#) suite, such as the [mdSpotted](#) photo sharing application, have been licensed for use at other news organizations.

Of the organizations we've profiled, Bluffton Today is the one that has the highest degree of integration between citizen-submitted content and staff-created content. We suspect that's because Bluffton Today had the luxury of starting from scratch, rather than being

grafted on to an existing news organization. The site, notable for its busy, forum-like feel, predates the launch of the free daily paper of the same name that's delivered to residences in Bluffton, SC.



Bluffton Today is what we might call a "Web first" publication. Unlike the average newspaper Website, where material is posted to the site only after the paper copy hits the street, Bluffton Today operates in reverse: the paper is a selection of items that generally appear on the site first. Both the site and the newspaper contain a mix of staff content and content created by local residents; the newspaper contains a higher

proportion of staff content to citizen content than the site does.

Further Reading:

- [A message from the Bluffton Today editor posted on Cyberjournalist.net, under the heading "Grassroots Media Efforts"](#)
- [Another article on Cyberjournalist.net -- this one describing Bluffton Today and its connection with Morris Digital Works](#)
- [The Wikipedia entry on Bluffton Today](#)
- [Two USC Annenberg Online Journalism Review articles](#)

[DC Examiner/WECAN](#)

Sponsoring news organization: Washington Examiner

Location: Washington, DC

Owned by: Clarity Media Group

Founded: 1865; consolidated and changed name to Washington Examiner in 2004

Community engagement initiative launched: late 2004/early 2005

Editor: Nicholas Horrock

Editorial Page Editor and head of WECAN project: Mark Tapscott

Software used: Custom-developed web platform

Mark Tapscott of the DC Examiner describes WECAN as an experiment in bringing the central notion of James Surowiecki's book *The Wisdom of Crowds* to journalism. In a post introducing the effort on the MediaShift weblog, he wrote:

The heart of WECAN is seen in a little book, [“The Wisdom of Crowds”](#) by New Yorker business writer James Surowiecki who focuses on a key principle underlying the immense power of the Internet: No one of us is as smart, experienced or skillful as all of us together. The Internet lets us focus collective talent and knowledge on a particular problem simultaneously.

Here's how a recent Examiner editorial announcing the posting of two new databases, employee compensation for Washington's Metro system and the City of Alexandria, explained WECAN:

“By putting databases and other resources on the Internet, WECAN makes it possible to focus hundreds or even thousands of pairs of eyes and brains on key government activities or services.”

Tapscott wrote that in October of 2006. By January, when we interviewed him, data on salaries for government workers in the city of Alexandria, VA, the DC Metro authority, Montgomery County, MD, and Fredrick County, MD had been posted online. While the effort was technologically modest – the data was provided as links to Excel spreadsheets – Tapscott says that the goals were ambitious. In January, we asked him to reflect on his experiences with WECAN:

Center for Citizen Media: What do you expect citizens who want to get involved with WECAN to do with the data you're making available?

Tapscott: Our readers include hundreds, if not thousands, of people who are accountants, government auditors, personnel experts, program managers, etc. etc. We want them to look at the databases we post because they will see things as a result of their expertise

Frontiers of Innovation in Community Engagement
Center for Citizen Media
<http://citmedia.org/frontiers/>

that a working journalist typically would miss. We also want them to suggest to us additional databases they would like to see posted and if they are filing FOIAs or other requests, tell us about their progress, so we can post that on the WECAN web site, too. Then, these folks also tend to be quite knowledgeable about parts of governments we are covering, so they are likely going to be sources for possible stories that wouldn't necessarily come from the data. I also harbor a hope that WECAN will encourage more awareness among the public of how difficult it can be to get basic information out of local, state and federal governments and of how important it is that they take advantage of resources like WECAN. The whole idea here is to combine forces in an effort to bring a much greater level of transparency to government and public examination of their governments' operations. Doing that is why we have a First Amendment that is meant to insure an independent, free press.

Center for Citizen Media: So far you're collecting payroll data for municipalities and counties. Why start there?

Tapscott: The Examiner's primary reporting focus is on local and regional news, though as the institution matures, national and international news will undoubtedly become more important. But the local and regional focus is our bread and butter, so WECAN's logical focus is there. I am quite aware that the principle underlying WECAN works just as logically in the context of Congress, the White House, etc. I also think the WECAN concept can work for civic groups, non-profits, etc. Frankly, I am surprised, and a little disappointed as well, that the Blogosphere has not done more to cover Congress in a more systematic manner, but I think that will change for the better in the next five years as a result of the credentialing efforts of the Media Bloggers Association, which just recently secured an agreement from the federal courts to establish seats for bloggers covering the Scooter Libby trial.

Center for Citizen Media: Has the WECAN effort resulted in stories in the Examiner (outside of op-ed pieces?) How do you think WECAN could result in innovative journalism or just good pieces in the future?

Tapscott: I have not made a systematic attempt yet to cultivate news stories out of WECAN, primarily because we had a long delay in getting a web site up and available. But as I've talked with people in the newsroom and outside it in the various communities we cover, I have frequently seen possible stories, and based on my knowledge of the data we have posted to date. A number of our editorials on local topics were directly the result of things we found in the data and could as easily have been springboards for news stories if the Examiner had a larger reporting staff. I will be talking to the reporting staff and demonstrating WECAN to them in the next few weeks and my expectation is that 2007 will see a number of news stories coming out of the effort.

Center for Citizen Media: What ideas interest you in terms of technology that could be used with WECAN? Right now you're making data available online in the form

of Excel spreadsheets. Do you think you'll move into visualization of that data (maps, live graphs)? What about ways for people to interact with and annotate that data beyond downloading it, looking at it, and sending the Examiner email?

Tapscott: I was in San Francisco back in October at a conference of activists, programmers and developers talking about Internet-based products that can be used to enhance transparency and accountability in government. I believe any tool that helps citizens gain more information and understanding about the performance of their public officials probably has an application with WECAN. Just to cite one obvious example, I would like to have a widget that pulls relevant campaign contributions, family connections, calendar entries, etc. for local and state legislators, much as a widget I saw in San Francisco does for the federal level. I really do believe the Internet makes possible transparency and accountability that the Founders could only dream about. Actually, I guess they couldn't even dream about it!

Center for Citizen Media: You had a successful blog -- Mark Tapscott's Copy Desk -- for five years before moving your blog to the Examiner. How do you feel this shapes how you do your job at the Examiner?

Tapscott: Actually, my first blog post - asking if the Internet could do for government what it had already done for the mainstream media - went up Nov. 16 2004. It never attracted a consistently large readership, much to my chagrin, but Tapscott's Copy Desk in its first iteration put me into contacts and relationships that would simply have not been possible beforehand. That's the great thing about collaborative network via the Internet; it can extend all of us to each of us as we choose. In the context of media and government, there is incredible power in that possibility.

Since moving TCD to Examiner.com, those relationships have if anything been strengthened and I have been enabled as a resource to the newsroom as a result with tips, leads and resources. I am impatient for the restoration of some basic functionality that I had before but overall I am very happy with the move. I did like my quill pen masthead much better though!

[Fort Myers News-Press, Fort Myers, Florida](#)

Sponsoring news organization: Fort Myers News-Press

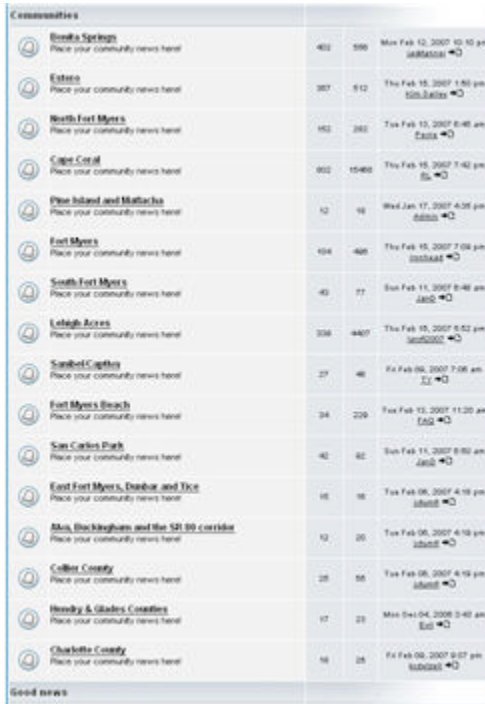
Location: Fort Myers, Florida

Owned by: Gannett

Founded: 1884

Community engagement initiative launched: 2005

Software used: [phpBB](#) for forums and user-submitted photos; custom-developed web platform



Community	Members	Topics	Last Post
Bonita Springs Place your community news here!	402	599	Mon Feb 12, 2007 10:40 pm JARRISON
Estero Place your community news here!	307	512	Thu Feb 15, 2007 1:50 pm Sibylla
North Fort Myers Place your community news here!	162	282	Tue Feb 13, 2007 9:40 am EUSA
Cape Coral Place your community news here!	802	15480	Thu Feb 15, 2007 7:42 pm EJ
Pine Island and Matlacha Place your community news here!	12	16	Wed Jan 17, 2007 4:05 pm EUSA
Fort Myers Place your community news here!	434	486	Thu Feb 15, 2007 7:08 pm JARRISON
South Fort Myers Place your community news here!	40	77	Sun Feb 11, 2007 9:40 am JARRISON
Lehigh Acres Place your community news here!	328	447	Thu Feb 15, 2007 5:52 pm JARRISON
Sandlot/Captiva Place your community news here!	27	46	Fri Feb 09, 2007 7:06 am EJ
Fort Myers Beach Place your community news here!	34	229	Tue Feb 13, 2007 11:20 am EUSA
San Carlos Park Place your community news here!	40	82	Sun Feb 11, 2007 9:50 am JARRISON
East Fort Myers, Dondar and Dixie Place your community news here!	16	16	Tue Feb 06, 2007 4:10 pm JARRISON
Man, Beechdam and the SR 99 corridor Place your community news here!	12	20	Tue Feb 06, 2007 4:10 pm JARRISON
Collier County Place your community news here!	25	55	Tue Feb 06, 2007 4:10 pm JARRISON
Hendry & Glades Counties Place your community news here!	17	23	Mon Dec 04, 2006 3:40 am EUSA
Charlotte County Place your community news here!	16	25	Fri Feb 09, 2007 8:07 pm JARRISON

Sparsely populated or dominated by harsh invective, forums sponsored by newspapers haven't notably changed the landscape of online newspapers. In fact, a number of representatives of news organizations cited bad experiences with forums as something that limited enthusiasm for more public input on the organization's site.

At the Fort Myers News-Press, something different happened: Forum use thrived, among both staffers and readers. When we asked executive editor Kate Marymont about reporters' involvement in the forum, she said, "Reporters and editors will jump into a forum discussion to share information. We don't encourage them to share opinions, but they are welcome to share information." In May of 2006, they became the platform for readers and journalists to collaborate on what turned into a major story: mismanagement, and perhaps even fraud, at

Cape Coral's public water utility. Ten months later, the paper and readers are still actively digging, and their work triggered an investigation by the Department of Justice and the prospect of significant reforms.

The News-Press's piecemeal approach – adding forums, adding interactivity to some features, like the newspaper's consumer reporter column, didn't seem to be a case of grand strategy with a similarly grand payoff. Instead, it exemplified exceptionally good use of simple, and often inexpensive tools, such as the open-source forum software installed by the newspaper, which now shows over 15,000 posts in its Cape Coral area alone. This strategy of using off-the-shelf tools in innovative ways also shows in what editor Kate Marymont calls the paper's mojos (mobile journalists), who are equipped with laptops and digital cameras and spend far less time in the paper's offices and far more time in the field interacting directly with readers and the subjects of stories. In the

Cape Coral story, this showed in liveblogged accounts of council meetings held to address the public utility's crisis. Says Marymont, "We are working to get all of our reporters outfitted with wireless laptops so that meetings are routinely liveblogged. That's one of our goals for 2007. As we build toward that, our reporting staff is becoming adept at covering events for multiple audiences. By that, I mean a journalist will cover a meeting, fire rapid-fire live reports to our Web site, and produce a story for the daily newspaper. In some cases that person might also produce a third piece for a weekly newspaper or one of our magazines." Technology has changed how the paper approaches assigning stories, says Marymont. "We do still have assignments, but they are not assignments specific to the printed newspaper. They are assignments to cover an event and produce the right kinds of content for the different audiences of our different mediums."

Marymont's discussion returned several times to one of the central issues for many news organizations when they opt to host an online community: how involved should staffers get? Marymont indicates that the News-Press is working it out in practice and has achieved a level of comfort with interacting with readers online.

This has paid off in the paper's presence in the blogosphere as well. The paper has an impressive Technorati rank of #209, meaning many bloggers are pointing to stories in the paper from their own weblogs. When we asked Marymont how the paper will approach what might be called the extended conversation surrounding the paper on the web, she replied: "I have not jumped into the middle of the online conversation surrounding news-press.com and The News-Press, but probably should. I believe that our job here is to stoke conversation. How can I say that I should remain separate?"

Not all of the paper's geographically-focused forums and new "microsites" devoted to communities that the News-Press covers have been equally successful in attracting participants. Marymont points out that some are newer, and that the communities also vary dramatically in population size, which leads to disparities in participation on the newspaper's site.

Further Reading:

["The Rise of Crowdsourcing,"](#) Jeff Howe, Wired, June 2006

["Looking to Crowdfund? Better Have a Dog In the Race,"](#) Jeff Fox, NewAssignment.net, November 9, 2006

Live updated page and archive of the Cape Coral rate investigation story which the News-Press delivered with significant partnership from the readers: [Cape Coral Water & Sewer Assessments](#)

[Greensboro News & Record -- Greensboro, NC](#)

Sponsoring news organization: [Greensboro News & Record](#)

Location: Greensboro, NC

Owned by: [Landmark Communications](#)

Founded: 1890

Community engagement initiative launched: late 2004/early 2005

Editor: John Robinson

Software used: Custom-developed web platform; Movable Type for staff blogs

The News & Record's method of engaging the community online is interestingly multi-faceted:



- The N&R [has a page that's updated with notable entries from local blogs that are linking to articles in the paper](#), creating an at-a-glance view of the conversation between the paper and local bloggers writing on their own sites separate from the N&R.
- The N&R also maintains 15 staff blogs on subjects ranging from news and commentary to food, and events in the local religious community. In addition, N&R editor John Robinson maintains a blog.
- The N&R maintains a "Town Square" module that allows readers to submit their own stories, event notices, and photos;

- The paper's [Letters to the Editor](#) section has, in its online incarnation, been transformed into a sort of blog, where each letter is treated like a post with its own accompanying comments section. The resulting conversation can be quite robust, with letters like [this one](#) concerning the separation of church and state garnering over 60 comments.

Greensboro is widely regarded as a successful -- perhaps the most successful -- example of a city using blogs to encourage participation in the civic and intellectual life of a place.

Notably, this was not accomplished exclusively by creating a hub where local residents could add content to the newspaper's Web site. The News & Record's approach, instead, was to encourage conversation by linking to existing local bloggers on their own Web sites. The result was an unusually powerful ecosystem of local voices -- bloggers whose profile had been raised by the fact that the paper linked to them, bringing readers to their blog who might never have discovered their blog via other means. In return, bloggers who had already been writing about issues of civic interest in their blogs linked to the paper to cite articles about those issues.

In fact, in a recent conversation with N&R editor John Robinson, he discussed a shift in emphasis -- away from user-submitted content and toward comments and conversation -- as the basis for building the N&R's online community.

“... We have shifted the strategy slightly. While we still want to create a Town Square, we found it was more difficult to generate citizen journalism than we thought. Given that, and given that we thought we could make some faster inroad in multi-media, she took a step back from citizen journalism to learn and to experiment with audio and video.

... We still believe in reader participation and interaction. We've finally cobbled together a comment feature attached to most of our local stories. We're also going to add some blogs from members of the community. (We are one of the fortunate communities that has a good blog aggregator -- run by a private citizen, not the paper -- so that niche is being filled and we don't feel a huge need to compete with them.)”

Commenting on our exchange in his own blog, he writes: “We haven't been all that successful with the contributions, but the conversations on blogs, letters and stories have been compelling and dynamic. I told her that commenters and citizen journalists occasionally are one and the same, but more often are different animals. Commenters are more inclined to discuss and challenge. Their response tends to be a shot from the hip. Citizen journalists have a specific story to tell and take more thought and time -- it's harder to write original work than to respond to someone else's work. For some reason, while it seems as if everyone thinks they can write poetry, many are hesitant to write journalism. And then there is the issue of pay.”

In an online world driven by search engine traffic, it may be more valuable to have readers interacting with the news by writing about it on their own Weblogs and linking to it than it would be for them to log on to a newspaper's own site and add content to it. Why? A site's ranking on search engines -- and thus traffic driven to it by search engines -- is highly influenced by how many other sites are linking to it. The News & Record's approach has the benefit -- intentional or unintentional -- of creating a link economy that's beneficial to the newspaper, particularly since bloggers are often linking to

individual stories, rather than the front page of the site, thus driving more visitors to more areas of the site, and to content deeper within the site.

Such a strategy also has another advantage. Many working at newspapers have concerns about what members of the public might write or contribute if they were allowed to add content to the website of a news organization. The Los Angeles Times' "[wikitorial debacle](#)" is a case in point. However, managing, grooming, or otherwise censoring community contributions often doesn't sit well with people who are in the first amendment business, either. An interventionist approach to online communities may also be time-consuming.

So what's the advantage of the arm's length approach Greensboro has taken to blogging? For one thing, it allows all the participants in the conversation to have the maximum degree of freedom and control. Bloggers have the freedom to say what they wish on their own blogs, and control what gets said on their own Weblog or Weblog comment section, if they wish to; and the paper also enjoys the same freedom and control. The end result is a blogging community with a great deal of vibrancy and little of the hesitancy that comes from two groups of people who are still working out an uncertain set of rules.

The News & Record wasn't the only power source in the local blogosphere, however; a second initiative, [Greensboro101](#), created a live-aggregated page of headlines from local Weblogs and allowed users to create accounts to add content to Greensboro101 directly, whether or not that user had a separate Weblog of their own. Entrepreneur Roch Smith, Jr, created Greensboro101, and the site has become a place where the Greensboro News & Record's coverage is discussed alongside the many blog entries on life, food, music, and politics. One notable interaction between Greensboro101, the News & Record, and local bloggers occurred within a week of this writing (October 23, 2006) -- Smith opted to publish a confidential report compiled by a consulting firm that detailed controversial allegations against Greensboro's police chief. The newspaper had reported on the report, and it had been widely discussed in the local blogosphere, but the report itself had not been published anywhere -- until Smith posted it on Greensboro101. Several of Greensboro101's board members resigned in protest in the aftermath, and local blogger and News & Record columnist Ed Cone wrote about it in his most recent piece for the paper.

It's precisely this kind of intensity, cooperation, and competition that has created such a vital civic and news community in Greensboro. It's hard to imagine such vitality out of any "walled garden" community on a canned platform hosted by either a news organization or a Web startup. Having many independently controlled sites has led to a uniquely robust local blogosphere with dramatically different points of view, dense interlinking, and vivid, fast-moving conversation that in cases such as this one, actually changes the course of events. And by doing so, changes the news.

Further Reading:

- [An audio interview with Lex Alexander, on the Echo Chamber Project Web site](#)
- [A July, 2005, New York Times article about the News & Record's citizen journalism experiment](#)
- [A Webcam video of an June 6, 2006 open meeting hosted by Lex Alexander, posted on YouTube](#)
- [A blog entry about the N&R's effort, on Tapscott's Copy Desk \("tracking the Internet Revolution in Media and Government"\) blog](#)
- [Jay Rosen's January, 2005, in-depth look at Lex Alexander's plan for the N&R](#)

LJWorld.com and Lawrence.com -- Lawrence, KS

Sponsoring news organization: Lawrence Journal-World

Founded: 1892

Location: Lawrence, KS

Owned by: The Lawrence-Journal World is a family owned business, owned by the Simons family; the umbrella organization, The World Company, also owns a number of other newspapers and a television station.

Community engagement initiative launched: Lawrence.com was launched in February of 2002. The newspaper has been on the Web since 1995 and also operates

KUSports.com.

Director of New Media: Dan Cox

Software used: Content Management: The Lawrence Journal-World wrote its own content management system, called Ellington, using the open-source [Django web](http://Django web framework)

framework. Ellington is for sale commercially and is used by a number of other news and online community sites, including the Naples News of Naples, Florida; SteamboatPilot.com, a community site for Steamboat Springs, Colorado; and TexasGigs.com, an online music community site founded by Mike Orren, who also founded another notable citizen-journalism venture, PegasusNews.com.



With most organizations, it's easy to draw a box around efforts to engage the community they serve online: here's the site we've set up to allow community contributions; here's our blog hub.

With the Lawrence Journal-World, that's nearly impossible. In addition to the two standalone sites that they run -- Lawrence.com and KUSports.com -- interactivity has been woven into so many parts of the Lawrence Journal-World's main Web presence that it's become a core building block of the site.

The Lawrence Journal-World has also ventured into an area that not all newspapers have been willing to enter: putting comments sections below nearly every story; they've struck gold by turning the police blotter into a blog, where readers thoroughly enjoy themselves commenting on the actions of people -- often logic-challenged people -- who have fallen

afoul of Lawrence's law enforcement. Sections like "[Game](#)" are produced through a partnership between the Journal-World's staff and the parents and coaches of youth sports athletes, who contribute photos, stories, and information about schedule changes. Game has become a commercial success, attracting advertisers to the weekly section distributed along with the newspaper.

The site bristles with other interactive features such as [interactive maps](#), chats with local newsmakers, blogs, and polls.

How has the Journal-World managed to launch and maintain so many online features and sites? The company made a significant investment in technology, building a new content management system from the ground up. This, more than anything else, exemplifies the possibilities and the challenge of renewing a news organization's relationship to its community online. Building an elaborate and robust content management system from the ground up is an expensive and risky proposition -- it's an effort that could have failed. Most news organizations are in a tough spot: their legacy systems aren't flexible enough to allow them to innovate and experiment with new ways of talking to the community, but buying or developing new ones is expensive and may take months or more than a year to fully implement.

In an era of shrinking circulation, how many news organizations have the capital -- and the tolerance for risk -- to really do what it takes to enable their own staff and their community online? Perhaps the differences between news organizations in community engagement boil down to a simple calculus of risk.

Further reading:

- [The Newspaper of the Future](#), New York Times, June 2005; article on Lawrence Journal-World's online efforts.
- [Lawrence boldly goes...](#), News and Technology, September, 2003
- [A May 27, 2005 entry](#) on the Citizen Paine-Citizen Journalism blog, about a presentation Rob Curley made at UC Berkeley. Curley's presentation was titled, "Let's Stop Building Crappy Newspaper Sites," and there's a link within the blog entry to the Webcast of his presentation.

[Minnesota Public Radio's Public Insight Journalism -- Minneapolis, MN](#)

Sponsoring news organization: [Minnesota Public Radio](#)

Location: Minneapolis, MN

Operated by: [American Public Media](#)

Founded: 1967

Community engagement initiative launched: June of 2003

Online Engagement Leader: Andrew Haeg

Software used: Custom developed platform now distributed by American Public Media's Center for Innovation in Journalism; has also used [QuestionPro](#) for surveys and public participation in some projects

On one level, radio is has been the most successful medium for "news-as-conversation" --

it's called talk radio. But when it came to Public Insight Journalism, MPR reached out online, in essence using the Net to radically enlarge the Rolodex of MPR's reporters and producers.

MPR's Public Insight Journalism initiative, unlike many of the print news organizations profiled here, is reaching out to listeners as sources rather than as producers of content. While the Public Insight Journalism initiative also invites listeners to submit commentaries (see MPR's [Commentaries](#) page to read what listeners have submitted) and has started a wiki to create a resource on Minnesota's music scene (see [Minnewiki](#)), the major results of the Public Insight Journalism project have come in the form of the many radio stories that have resulted from collaboration between MPR reporters, producers, and their new sources. This collaboration has resulted in

stories about [economic insecurity among Minnesota residents](#), [how personal choices affect global warming](#), and [shootings in Minneapolis](#).



Further Reading:

- [Minnesota Public Radio sues Gore-founded Internet TV network](#), AP, February 2006
- ["Will MPR's "Public Insight Journalism" Save News Integrity?"](#) -- Leonard Witt, PJNet Today
- ["Fear, Loathing, and the Promise of Public Insight Journalism,"](#) Michael Skoler, Nieman Reports, Winter 2005
- A [press release](#) about the creation of the Center for Innovation in Journalism, April 26, 2006
- [Beyond Broadcast, 2006](#), a May 12 & 13 panel discussion with, among others, Bill Buzenberg, Senior Vice President of News, American Public Media/ Minnesota Public Radio.

[MyMissourian](#)

[MyMissourian](#) was launched as a living laboratory for "open source journalism" by the journalism school of the University of Missouri - Columbia.

Sponsoring news organization: [Columbia-Missourian](#), published by the University of Missouri-Columbia

Location: Columbia, MO

Owned by: University of Missouri-Columbia

Founded: 1908

Community engagement initiative launched: October, 2004

Software used: [Mambo](#)

The primary challenge in citizen journalism -- at least when the opportunity is being handed out by news organizations -- is getting citizens to, well, do some journalism.

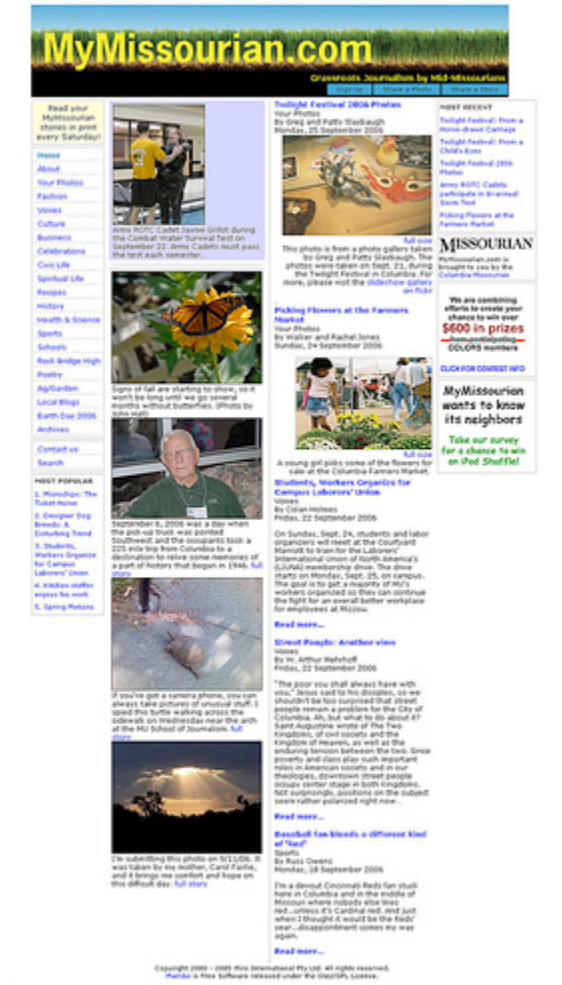
The folks running MyMissourian, a citizen-journalism site run by faculty and students of the journalism school at the University of Missouri-Columbia, are facing that challenge head-on: students with laptops gone out into the community, asking people if they'll write for MyMissourian. Here's j-school student Eugene Phua [proving why it's often easier to do something yourself than get someone else to do it](#):

The idea was very simple. Knock on their doors, ask em as politely as i can if i can speak to them about MyMissourian.com, tell them it'll only take 5 minutes of their time. I'd bring along my laptop, so that i can look like a snazzy salesmen with a snazzy presentation.

It must've been so strange for the people i visited. I remember some of them having that puzzled look, some of them amazed at my audacity, some of them clearly annoyed but too polite to express it. Thankfully, none of them declined me entry into their abode.

The reactions i got were basically the same as previous adventures. Some seemed enthusiastic, some listened just to be polite, some listened and forgot all about me the next day.

That's from Eugene's blog. The flipside of the "whitewashing the fence" issues brought up by sites that are banking on user-generated content is this: Tom Sawyer is one in a million. Very few people, and very few projects, have the charisma that makes attracting people to participate seem easy.



That's a lot of ifs -- if readership growth is great, if the readers are ready and able to join in. Maybe the lesson we should take is that every success is important, like the story that resulted from Eugene's door-to-door salesmanship -- a story on the end of Ramadan from the perspective of a Muslim woman living in Columbia.

Perhaps one of the major risk factors for citizen engagement online come from an erroneous perception that anything less than a site that's bubbling over with fresh, relevant content without any paid staff help at all is a failure. Sites like Wikipedia, [Digg](#), and [Slashdot](#), can draw on global pools of readers who may become contributors. Comparing sites aimed at a pool of readers that's circumscribed by geography, we may find that local sites aren't doing so bad after all when compared on the basis of participation percentages -- it's just that getting participation isn't easy for any site,

anywhere.

Further Reading:

- [Another J-School Tries 'Open Source Journalism'](#), Rich Gordon, Poynter E-Media Tidbits, October 12, 2004
- [Smudged Ink podcast](#) -- Open Source Journalism with Brian Haman, graduate student and, at the time, one of MyMissourian's editors
- [Online Journalism Review October, 2004, analysis of "hyper-local" citizen journalism](#)

Nashvilleistalking.com -- Nashville, TN

[WKRN](#) engages the local blogosphere with [Nashville Is Talking](#) -- a human-edited aggregation of what's new and interesting in Nashville's blogs. The blog also has a sidebar that shows a live feed of headlines from local blogs.

Sponsoring news organization: <http://www.news2wkrn.com/> WKRN/News 2 (WKRN is Nashville's ABC affiliate).

Location: Nashville, TN

Owned by: [Young Broadcasting](#)

Founded: 1953

Community engagement initiative launched: April of 2004

WKRN General Manager: Michael Sechrist

Nashville Is Talking Blogger: Britney Gilbert

Software used: [Movable Type](#)

The signature aspect of WKRN's project -- Nashville is Talking -- is the way in which it recognizes and avoids the worst pitfalls of what we might call "Tom Sawyer Syndrome." The difference shows in where the money is spent: a Tom Sawyer strategy is often linked with a big investment in software, either to create or license a community platform. WKRN, by contrast, spent its money on people, hiring a longtime Nashville-area blogger to work full-time at Nashville Is Talking (Britney Gilbert, pictured at left). The technological underpinnings of WKRN's project are notably modest -- the site uses one of the most widely available blog tools -- MovableType -- which is available for \$49.95 -- or free if you're willing to provide your own tech support.



WKRN also has a smart way of distributing the effort (and social capital) of the blog by selecting a local blogger for weekend duty. Bloggers see such invitations as an honor, and WKRN pays for the privilege; weekend bloggers get \$100 in exchange for keeping Nashville Is Talking ticking over the weekend. On the weekend of September 2nd, 2006, the guest blogger was Kevin Barbieux. Barbieux writes "[The Homeless Guy](#)," and since starting his blog has been in and out of shelters and transitional housing. He started -- and maintains -- his weblog using the internet access provided at public libraries.

Further Reading:

- Business Week's Cutting Edge Podcast with Terry Heaton, a television & new media consultant who helped shape Nashville Is Talking. [March 2006] [Terry Heaton's blog](#).

- "Can we please bury the term "consumer-generated content" and never let it see the light of day again?" Terry
- Center for Citizen Media Podcast: Conversation with Britney Gilbert, Nashville Is Talking blogger. [July 2006]
- [Flickr photoset](#) documenting the shooting of a promo for Nashville Is Talking. Photos by Paul Chenoweth.
- "Blog, sponsored by local TV news station, becomes a central voice for Nashville-area bloggers," Elizabeth Held, OJR, December 2005. [[Link.](#)]

[Seaside-Sun, Seaside, Oregon](#)

The Daily Astorian's decision to launch [Seaside-Sun.com](#) may make Seaside, Oregon the best-covered small town in the United States. With a population of 5,000, Seaside, a tourist destination for locals seeking a quaint beachside village, has not one, but two local community websites dedicated to the town.

Sponsoring news organization: [The Daily Astorian](#)

Location: Astoria, OR

Owned by: [East Oregonian Publishing Company](#)

Founded: 1873.

Community engagement initiative launched: January of 2006

Online Editor: Laura Sellers

Software used: Custom-developed Web platform developed by Oregon web developer [Going1Up](#).

How can a news organization provide coverage of smaller communities in an era where national retailers and hollowed-out downtowns reduce the advertiser base that once paid for local coverage?



At first glance, Seaside-Sun.com, a site created by the East Oregonian Publishing Company to provide a spotlight on an area that's covered in print by EOPC's Daily Astorian, is a classic citizen journalism initiative, with a banner featuring what's become the basic triad of community engagement online -- click here to submit photos, stories, and events.

But a closer look at the front page reveals something more interesting: the Seaside-Sun is a new "front door" for the Daily Astorian's coverage of Seaside. The main column is mostly items from the Astorian's staff -- but items that probably get lost amid the other items seen by visitors to the Daily Astorian's main site.

The Boston Globe has recently adopted a similar tactic, creating topical and regional blogs on their site that don't link out to the wider web but instead link only to stories published in The Globe. In

effect, these blogs provide quick, one-stop shopping for web visitors interested in a particular coverage area.

This strategy of segmenting the Web presence for smaller communities that might not be able to support a standalone print publication also yields benefits on the Web: small communities may not generate the number of online visitors that would create a critical mass of participants posting photos, blog posts, and events that would keep a site fresh and engaging. Blogs on the site, and submitted stories, don't appear to be coming in at a great enough rate to sustain the site's freshness, though a look at the photo gallery shows regular daily contributions from a variety of users.

(For example, the [Hartsville Today project](#), funded by a Knight Citizen Media grant, attracted only 278 registered users in its first year.)

Experiences like these seem to disprove the idea that citizen journalism will be most popular and effective in small and/or rural communities that aren't being served directly by a local news organization.

However, it would be a mistake to consider such efforts failures due to low numbers of participants -- especially when low participation numbers are in fact a hallmark of cooperative creation on the web.

For a town like Seaside with a population of 5,000, having 50 regular contributors would mean doing almost twice as well at attracting regular contributors than Wikipedia.

In the end, sites like Seaside-Sun.com may enable traditional news organizations to restore and expand service to smaller communities in a way that's cost-effective, even profitable, and to have a way to experiment with a true two-way relationship with readers at a lower risk than they might if they started such an experiment at their flagship news site.

Further Reading:

- [Web site designed to guarantee sun in Seaside year-round](#), " Sarah Burgess, Seaside Correspondent, Daily Astorian; article announces the launch of Seaside-Sun.com and discusses the Astorian's aspirations for the site.

[SpokesmanReview -- Spokane, WA](#)

Sponsoring news organization: The Spokesman-Review
Founded: 1893
Location: Spokane, WA
Owned by: Cowles Co.
Publisher, SpokesmanReview: William Stacey Cowles
Editor, SpokesmanReview: Steve Smith
Online Publisher: Ken Sands
Software used: In-house developed blogging tool

It's all *glasnost*, all the time at [The Spokesman-Review](#) of Spokane, WA, where they've pushed the boundaries of newsroom openness. Editor Steve Smith calls it the "transparent newsroom," a departure from "Fortress Newsroom, the walled enclave where journalists practiced their craft in a "just the facts" environment, using selective notions of objectivity and artificial forms of balance to shield themselves from the consequences of their work."



How much do they believe in it? They put a webcam in their own editorial meetings.

But can this kind of openness coexist with the control a news organization needs to operate and survive?

"We tend to forget that journalists always have control over what they publish, and with courage they can always say "no" to citizen-generated coverage that just won't work," said Smith in an [essay he penned for Pressthink](#) on the transparent newsroom at the Spokesman.

The challenges and responsibilities of that control were lighter, at first, or so it seems in an interview with Ken Sands, online editor at the Spokesman, who talked about the paper's efforts to build a database of readers' email addresses of readers. The readers were

Frontiers of Innovation in Community Engagement
Center for Citizen Media
<http://citmedia.org/frontiers/>

asked to accept email from the paper that would ask for their input on developing stories and features.

The response they got seemed relatively easy to sift: what was publishable and what wasn't was relatively clear, and the payoff was good, [as Sands relates here](#): "Sometimes it's difficult to find people who are affected by a touchy, controversial subject, or to get them to talk on the record. In Spokane, racial profiling by police is accepted as fact in the small minority population, and greeted with skepticism by the vast white majority.... When the issue surfaced in 2001 a reporter spent a great deal of time and energy -- without success-- trying to find someone to go on the record with complaints...So the initial stories didn't have the "RH" (real human) factor. I stumbled upon an email list of about 200 members of the minority community and sent them a message asking for their personal experiences with racial profiling...the quantity of the response was low, but the quality was outstanding."

If editorial decisions on the net's informational gifts to the paper started out easily enough, it got more difficult in a hurry, when the paper hired a forensics expert to investigate rumors about Spokane mayor Jim West's double life -- by day, a socially conservative Republican politician and mayor of Spokane, and by night seeking encounters with young men he met online (read the [investigative series](#)). The Spokesman's investigation proved how difficult it could be to use information gained online, since the net and many of the people on it weren't providing information in ways that conformed to journalistic standards about getting the facts. Case in point was the West investigation, where the only way to begin tracking the mayor's behavior was to interact with him online -- which meant using an online forensics expert to pose as a young man in a chatroom.

By the time the West report was published in June of 2005, the paper was already deeply linked to the community online, via email and increasingly via weblogs. In 2004, Ken Sands started collecting local blogs, and created a page linking to around 50 of them, featuring 11 of the blogs as exceptionally interesting and quoting what the bloggers had to say. The list is still online and being updated. See [Blogging in the Inland NW](#).

Only weeks before the paper broke the West story, the paper began [the Daily Briefing](#) blog, which billed itself as a sort of reader's guide to the twice-daily editorial meetings, which were open to the public and webcast online. Simultaneously, the paper launched its [News Is a Conversation blog](#), where a selection of readers -- eight men and five women -- wrote about and asked questions about the paper's coverage.

The paper's challenges about information coming through the net now extends to how to treat information coming to the paper from the wider blogosphere of which the paper is now a part. The paper recently ran a story on

Further Reading:

- [Ken Sands on using email to cast a wider net for community input and sources](#)
- [An article on citizen journalism by two University of Wisconsin-Madison professors](#), giving particular praise to the SpokesmanReview
- The SpokesmanReview is a finalist for General Excellence in Online Journalism, in The Online News Association's [2006 Online Journalism Awards](#)

[The Concord Insider/blogsNH - Concord, NH](#)

Sponsoring news organization: [Concord Monitor](#)

Founded: 1864

Location: Concord, N.H.

Owned by: Concord Monitor

Community engagement initiative launched: The Concord Insider - October, 2006,
BlogsNH - Summer, 2006

Publisher, The Concord Insider: Geordie Wilson

Editors, The Concord Insider: Mark Travis, Danielle Kronk

Blog Wrangler: Clay McCuiston

Software used: The Concord Insider - [Drupal](#) for reader-posted content and [Saxotech](#) for staff-generated content; BlogsNH - Drupal

[The Concord Insider](#) is only the latest venture into community engagement for the New Hampshire daily Concord Monitor.



Early spring 2006 saw the launch of [blogsNH](#), which was an attempt by Monitor staff to provide a space where citizens could create their own community for sharing information and matters of daily life. The result was both beyond and different to what Monitor staff expected.

“We just started putting notices online and in the paper,” co-editor Mark Travis said, “and people responded right away – but it wasn’t the usual suspects. It wasn’t the usual print letter writers or public officials. It was just regular folks, like a registered nurse and a single mom. They jumped right in and began posting about everything from health care issues to just what’s going on in their lives – and they created a remarkable community that’s just as strong today.”

Just like a regular individual Weblog, blogsNH has categories such as “health care,” “family life,” “Concord and around,” “sports,” “life’s challenges” that individual bloggers can use to tag their posts. Readers can then browse by category or click on one of the links under

the headings, “Recent blog posts,” “Popular content” or “Most commented posts.” An entry titled [“Where have all the manners gone”](#) is currently leading the pack with 33 comments.

The approach when creating the Insider was a little different. Launched simultaneously in print and online, the Insider is a weekly newspaper with an online community portal.

The Insider’s [Web site](#) has been designed to engage readers and solicit their submissions. No actual news is posted on the site in this, its month-old incarnation; rather, the emphasis is on fun elements that its creators hope will inspire community contribution.

The site includes interactive features such as a [bulletin board page](#) where readers can post community news items, recipes, photos and amusing sights or overheard snatches of conversation, and a feature called [The Instigator](#), where Insider staff pose a “discussion starter” to which readers submit responses.

“We wanted the Web site to serve as a portal where people can post things of interest to them, and each week we’ll pull out the best for the paper,” Travis said. “It’s still very much a work in progress, but traffic and awareness are starting to build.”

As of the one-month anniversary (Nov. 14, 2006) of the launch of the Insider, most of the effort has been put into the print product, and most citizen postings on the Web site have come in response to a prompt or request published in the newspaper (e.g. “post your jack o’lantern photos!”), but Travis, co-editor Danielle Kronk, and the high school students who constitute most of the rest of the staff, hope to turn the Insider Web site into as vibrant a community as blogsNH has become.

To monitor or not to monitor

One of the questions all managers of Web sites that allow user-posted submissions have to grapple with is whether and how much to monitor or even edit or delete those submissions.

Concord Monitor editors have established different rules and varied levels of editorial control for their two different community-engagement ventures.

With blogsNH.com, the rules were established at the beginning: No profanity, no posting of anything that’s not true and no pictures. Additionally, there are three levels of monitoring: Anybody can read, those wishing to comment must register, and bloggers must be approved by Monitor staff.

With the Insider, the initial approach was to be “wide open,” with no registration to comment and voluntary registration if users wished to edit their own posts, Travis said, but that policy eventually backfired.

“We found that, one, nobody’s wanting to register, and two, there’ve been several comments that we’ve considered inappropriate or we’ve been concerned they might be libelous,” Travis said. The inappropriate/libelous comments were removed and now registration is required. Besides being educational, the experience was disappointing for Monitor staff.

“As much as possible we’d like to get out of the way and let people talk to each other,” Travis said, “because it’s a good complement to the more highly edited content of the newspaper. But when people post mean-spirited comments it may be off-putting—that’s not the kind of community we want to create. We’re a community weekly so we want a Web site that’s consistent with that community.”

The lesson drawn from the two different experiments is that if the terms of the community are defined, especially if they’re defined early on, people will abide by them and still participate.

Everyone loves pictures

Monitor staff have engaged their community in one other wildly successful way.

Some time ago, a [photo reprint service](#) was launched on the Concord Monitor Web site using [myCapture](#) software. At first, only staff photos were posted and available for purchase, but then the service was expanded to allow citizens to post their own photos, either in existing albums (e.g. recreational adult sports, election 2006, scenic and weather) or in albums they created themselves. User-posted photos are not available for purchase, but are very popular viewing, as Travis found out when Concord flooded in spring 2006.

“The flooding happened on Sunday,” he said. “On Monday morning I went into the office and the first thing I did was create a “flood” album on myCapture. I turned away from the computer to take a phone call, which lasted maybe five minutes, and when I turned back three people had already posted photos.”

Altogether, [flood photos submitted by members of the community](#) generated more than 80,000 pages views, vastly more than were received by staff photos displayed in the same way and available for purchase.

Newspaper editors have long known that photos help sell papers, and the maxim holds true online.

One hand feeds the other

Monitor staff are using all three of their online ventures to enhance the print version of both the Monitor and the Insider—and vice versa. Blog posts, Insider Online comments and photos are all fair game to be snagged and printed in black and white (or color) ink.

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Also, feeds to blogsNH entries are posted on the Monitor Web site, and bloggers will link to staff-written articles, giving both citizens and journalists the best of both worlds, with each world enriching the other.

Future

Looking into the future, Travis said the “inclination” (he was reluctant to give it so definitive a name as “goal”) is to “create a kind of ‘Concordapedia’ – a site where people can write their own story of the community.”

Journalistically, Travis is excited about the opportunity to blend staff-generated content moderated by editorial judgment and selection with vibrant, citizen-created content. “We’re trying to build a forum online so that print and online reinforce each other and make each other better,” he said.

What hasn’t yet evolved is a forum where there is an active discussion of community issues, with vibrant, varied and consistent contribution from both citizens and reporters/editors – but this seems to be the aspect of “citizen journalism” that even the best and most successful community-engagement newspaper Web sites have not been able to successfully foster.

For the Monitor staff, as for all involved in creating the new world of citizen-newspaper online engagement, the name of the game is dabble in everything and learn as you go.

“We’re trying to do a variety of things under a number of different umbrellas to open ourselves to community content, and we’re trying to do it in an ever-expanding and ever more integrated way,” Travis said, before uttering the dilemma faced by so many of his fellow editors:

“We’ve created this online portal, now how do we develop it?”

[Wickedlocal.com -- Plymouth, MA](http://Wickedlocal.com)

WickedLocal.com is an ambitious effort to wrap a full-fledged online community around a traditional news organization -- the Old Colony Memorial newspaper of Plymouth, MA.

Sponsoring news organization: Old Colony Memorial, Plymouth, MA

Founded: 1822

Location: Plymouth, MA

Owned by: GateHouse Media

Community engagement initiative launched: April of 2006

Wicked Local Online Editor: Courtney Hollands

Software used: Blogs: Prospero CommunityCM; Search: PlanetDiscover; Photo

Galleries using mdSpotted by Morris Digital

Center for Citizen Media Podcast: Conversation with Courtney Hollands, Online Editor of WickedLocal.com



They didn't know it when they started, but WickedLocal.com is about to become a test case of what happens to innovative online local community initiatives in the era of the media buyout.

Spearheaded by online VP Bob Kempf, WickedLocal put together three commercially available enterprise-level software products -- one for search and to produce an online business directory; one for online community; and a third for a social photo uploading and gallery application. A month later, the Old Colony Memorial, along with its corporate parent Enterprise NewsMedia, was swept up in a major buyout by Liberty Publications of Illinois.

Liberty also bought Community Newspaper Company, a chain of 80+ newspapers in Eastern Massachusetts. Once together, the chain changed its name to GateHouse Media, and it now controls

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virtually every local daily and weekly in Eastern Massachusetts apart from the major dailies in Boston and a few scattered others. In August, Kempf jumped to Boston.com.

So what will GateHouse do with the experiment it has inherited? We don't know. But what happens to WickedLocal.com may be a bellwether for citizen journalism. Many pundits believe that contributions from nonjournalists will be most useful and most common at the ultra-local level. But will technological innovation be able to survive the wave after wave of buyouts that has been the default setting for the very local weeklies and dailies that some say are destined to be the home of citizen journalism?

We'll see. In the meantime, the people behind WickedLocal.com have continued to pursue their experiment in online community, producing regular videoblog segments, attracting a small number of community correspondents, and providing a place for newspaper staffers to [blog](#) about things that might not find a home in the paper.

One of the most distinctive aspects of WickedLocal.com is the videoblog created by the site's online editor, Courtney Hollands. The online version of this report provides a live-updated view of the most recent videoblog entry posted to Wicked Local Plymouth.

YourHub.com

YourHub.com, launched by the Denver News Agency in May of 2005, is an online community with 43 hyperlocal "hubs" in the flagship Colorado YourHub site. Material from YourHub is reverse-published into zoned editions. The YourHub platform is now licensed in other markets, notably Florida and Knoxville, TN.

Sponsoring news organization: Denver News Agency

Location: Denver, CO

Owned by: Denver News Agency

Founded: 1983

Community engagement initiative launched: May of 2005

Yourhub.com Editor: Travis Henry

Software used: Custom developed by Indigio; the software is now licensed to other newspapers across the country including The Knoxville News-Sentinel, Ventura County-Star, Scripps Treasure Coast Newspaper Group, Los Angeles News Group, The Anderson Independent-Mail, The Wichita Falls Times Record News, and The Colorado Springs Gazette.

YourHub.com is one of the most high-profile experiments in wrapping an online



community around a traditional news organization. It's also one of the few reporting significant revenues: the Denver News Agency reports \$5 million in its first year of operation.

Like a handful of other news organizations moving into the online community space, the Denver News Agency has discovered one of the time-honored success strategies in high tech: the safest place to be is not attempting to discover a gold mine, but selling picks and shovels to those who do. YourHub.com's platform has been licensed to ten other news organizations and is live in Florida and Knoxville, TN. YourHub.com

is based on a recurring business model: the company sells the product for a fairly low setup fee -- \$2k to \$10k -- and then charges a recurring license fee from a few hundred dollars up to \$5k based on the size of the market.

In addition to the online community, the flagship YourHub.com community in Colorado also does reverse-publishing -- creating zoned editions created with material that originated on the site.

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YourHub.com may be one of the biggest citizen-journalism initiatives, and may be one of the most successful in terms of revenue and audience, but it has attracted a few high profile critics, notably Tom Grubisch of OJR, who was [underwhelmed by the quality of the content submitted by users](#), and [highly critical of incidences of content from public relations people being featured on the site](#) without the kind of attribution that would make it clear to readers that the person submitting the article worked for the organization the article was about. The latter article prompted [a response](#) from Rocky Mountain News publisher John Temple.

Further Reading:

- [YourHub editor Travis Henry's blog](#)
- [Businessweek podcast discussion with Travis Henry](#)
- Rocky Mountain News publisher John Temple discusses the effort to launch YourHub.com: [Behind the Scenes at YourHub.com](#)
- [The YourHub of Wichita Falls, Texas](#)
- [Center for Citizen Media Interview: YourHub.com with Travis Henry](#)

About the Authors

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