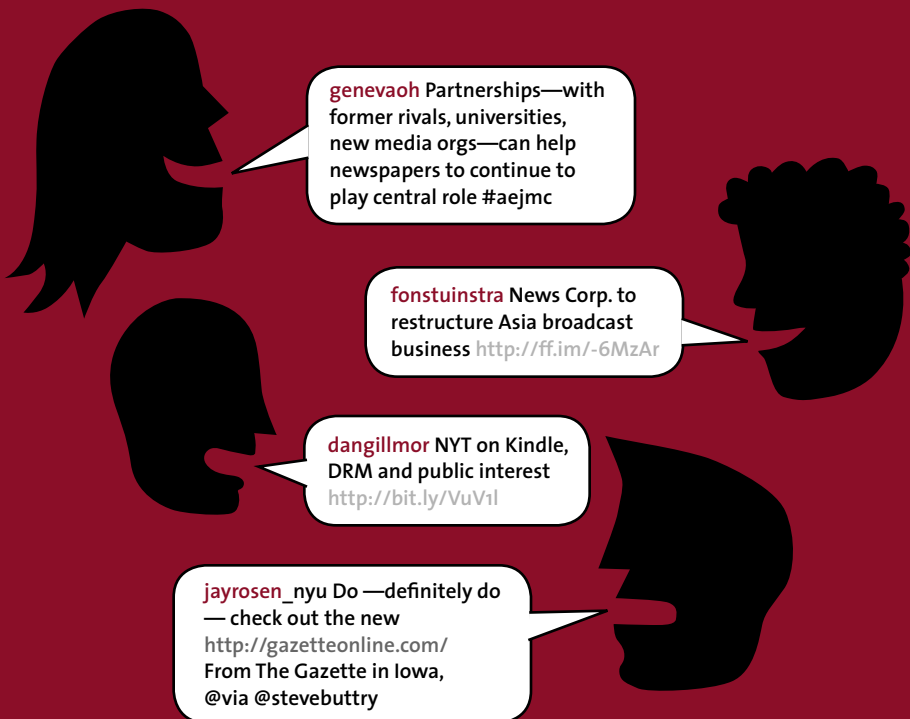


# Nieman Reports

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

DIGITAL NEWSBOOK

## Let's Talk: Journalism and Social Media



**genevaoh** Partnerships—with former rivals, universities, new media orgs—can help newspapers to continue to play central role #aejmc

**fonstuinstra** News Corp. to restructure Asia broadcast business <http://ff.im/-6MzAr>

**dangillmor** NYT on Kindle, DRM and public interest <http://bit.ly/VuV1l>

**jayrosen\_nyu** Do —definitely do — check out the new <http://gazetteonline.com/>  
From The Gazette in Iowa,  
@via @stevebuttry

**‘to promote and elevate  
the standards of journalism’**

Agnes Wahl Nieman  
the benefactor of the Nieman Foundation

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DIGITAL NEWSBOOK

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# Let's Talk: Journalism and Social Media

There are times when technological change catches up with an idea. Now is such a moment, as social media transform how people receive and share news and information. Just a few years back the notion of journalism being a conversation, not a lecture, wasn't embraced widely in an industry content to transmit what reporters learned to audiences expected to consume it. Comfort with that notion grew as online comments and live chats assumed a role that Letters to the Editor once held on their own, albeit with greater anonymity and often less civility. Then, from the "audience" spilled forth blogs and photos, videos and tweets. Soon, the words "citizen" and "journalist" were joined in a marriage brokered by technology and nurtured by convenience as news organizations shed staff yet still needed to produce "content."

With talking and sharing so much a part of the Web's ethos, it's the job of journalists to adapt. This means using these social media tools in ways that add value to what they do. In some newsrooms, it's a try-everything-see-what-works approach. In others, there's a more deliberate strategy: Specific tools are employed to reach different goals. With each method, the most effective schooling usually comes from outside the newsroom. In recounting the social media learning curve at NewWest.Net, Editor Courtney Lowery writes: "When we turned off the Twitter link to the Facebook page, one of our readers wrote: 'tweets are not fb status posts. glad you got it.' Loud and clear."

Examples abound in our collection of stories about ways journalists are using social media to interact with sources and consumers. Cautionary flags get raised in our multifaceted exploration of emerging ethical issues and how credibility is earned on the Web. As he illuminates key principles for digital media literacy, "We the Media" author Dan Gillmor asserts that "we'll need to transform ourselves from passive consumers of media into active users. And to accomplish that, we'll have to instill

throughout our society principles that add up to critical thinking and honorable behavior.”

Social media can bring greater depth and breadth to journalists’ work. What’s curious, however, is how seldom the word “journalism” seems to surface in the numerous forums about digital media. In her Nieman Reports’ essay, Geneva Overholser, director of the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Journalism, observed this dynamic at her school’s “Beyond Broadcast 09” conference in June. “Never in the three days we were together did I once hear the word ‘journalism’ mentioned,” she writes. [While its] “values and practices might be evident, the term itself is absent.” In this issue, the term is present, experiences are shared, and intersections of social media and journalism emerge. ■—Melissa Ludtke

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**Cover:** Words in the speech boxes are from tweets by or about contributors to this issue.  
*Graphic by Diane Novetsky/  
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# What Is Journalism's Place in Social Media?

‘Bringing our journalistic values to these environments that have captured the imagination of millions is one of the most promising ways we have of serving that interest.’

BY GENEVA OVERHOLSER



**Geneva Overholser's Facebook page.**

If our focus on social media is primarily about how to use them as “tools” for journalism, we risk getting it backward. Social media are not so much mere tools as they are the ocean we’re going to be swimming in—at least until the next chapter of the digital revolution comes along. What needs our attention is how we’re going to play roles that bring journalistic values into this vast social media territory.

It is essential to begin by understanding various social media sites and the ways they can enhance the work journalists do. A regular perusal of sites like 10000words.net and savethemedia.com is a great way to do this. But how do we move beyond acquainting ourselves with this world and actually figure out how to “use” it for journalism, which requires understanding its nature and impact on participants and on public life?

What does it mean to journalists, for example, that people are in large measure obtaining, and shaping, their information so differently than they have in the past? In June, as I got on the plane to fly back from the National Association of Hispanic Journalists convention, a young woman cried out: “Michael Jackson died!” Using my iPhone, I Googled “Michael Jackson died.” Several reports showed up—all from years long-gone. His was a much-rumored death. So I checked Twitter, and found the TMZ report—couched in some skepticism from my tweeps. On to the Los Angeles Times, where Jackson was still in a coma. Now the flight was leaving. Not until I landed did I get the confirmation I itched for: the Times, quoting the coroner.

But what if TMZ had quoted the coroner? Would I have stopped there?

This raises questions about what verification means in this age of social media. And what is journalism’s role in making sure information is verified? It strikes me that most people don’t care as much about who publishes news (or what are often rumors) first these days as they do about whether the sites they rely

on have it right when they want it. Now, as we all know, news and information need to be on the platform we’re checking, wherever we are.

Being there and being accurate are how journalistic credibility is brought to the social media ocean. Yet many legacy media have fallen behind in delivering this one-two punch combination. While it’s a given that there will always be a need for reliable verification, what must be better understood is how people seek out news and information and how they learn through their use of social media.

Recently, the MacArthur Foundation’s John Bracken and I talked about the process by which an online community or group digests an event and comes to an understanding of it in real time. This happens among Facebook friends or people whose tweets we follow or folks who create new records of events on Wikipedia. The question well worth asking is where journalism fits in this fast-emerging and ever-changing social media and digital ecosystem.

During a June conference, “Beyond Broadcast 09,”<sup>1</sup> held at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Journalism,

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<sup>1</sup> See the conference agenda at [http://bb2009.uscannenberg.org/images/uploads/agenda\\_print.pdf](http://bb2009.uscannenberg.org/images/uploads/agenda_print.pdf).

conversations ranged from the information needs of communities to democratizing the language of online storytelling, from maintaining editorial quality to enabling dialogue and the future of public service media. Each topic discussed was central to the future of journalism. Yet, never in the three days we were together did I once hear the word “journalism” mentioned. From there I went to a conference at MIT, where the organizing theme was “civic media.” In many of these situations, I find myself using the term “information in the public interest.” In all these cases, however much journalistic values and practices might be evident, the term itself is absent.

## Journalism: The Missing Ingredient

I’m not suggesting that journalism—as a word, a concept, and a craft—has gone away or is no longer important. I’m saying that those of us who ground ourselves in what we know to be an ethically sound and civically essential mode of information gathering and information dissemination have to find a way to be in these conversations—whatever we call the conversations or ourselves. Our job is to keep an eye on the public inter-

est. Bringing our journalistic values to these environments that have captured the imagination of millions is one of the most promising ways we have of serving that interest.

Too often, it seems, those of us who’ve been about building community through our journalism seem to assume a kind of “how dare they?” attitude toward those who construct communities through social media. We’ve got to get over that. People are vastly more powerful now as consumers and shapers of news. The less loudly journalists applaud this development, the further behind we’ll be left until we fade to irrelevance.

Accuracy, proportionality and fairness, as time-honored journalistic values, are well worth adoption by those conversing through social networks. Useful, too, would be journalism’s (albeit imperfect) emphasis on including a broad range of voices. Cool as a lot of these social networks are, they can be extremely cliquish. Witness the prevailing Twitter discussions about whither journalism, often filled with more strut than substance, lacking both historical and international context and begging the question: If the Web is all about democratization, how come everybody in the debate sounds like a 19-year-old privileged male?

## In the Classroom

Finally, how do we bring social media into the academy? So far, we at Annenberg have done it patchily by bringing in folks to do series of workshops for students and faculty. We've had regular discussions with digital media innovators throughout the year. One challenge, of course, is that people's level of understanding and comfort is all over the place. Moreover, when the students learning about social media are 18-year-olds, most are already swimming comfortably in these waters. Yet, they do need to ponder—and practice—the new sensibilities required of them now that they will swim there as journalists.

Integrating the questions and issues and tools into everyday classroom discussion is critical. When the focus is on journalistic ethics, the geopolitical implications of social networks' role belong in that discussion. In lessons revolving around entrepreneurial journalism, there needs to be woven into the conversation the issue of how journalists handle their personal engagement in social networks. Along with this would come discussion of how they "brand" themselves for a future that is likely to include a lot of independent activity.

At Annenberg, we've now hired digital innovators and observers—Andrew Lih, author of "The Wikipedia Revolution," Robert Hernandez, who executed the vision for The Seattle Times' Web site, and Henry Jenkins, who directed MIT's Comparative Media Studies program. Using their ability to weave experiences and knowledge into our curricula, we know that social media will become integral to what is taught in our journalism classes. Timely discussions of emerging examples of social media's influence on journalism and vice versa must continue, as well.

The journalism academy has another important role to play. It's the natural home for substantial analysis and research exploring the impact of social media on learning, on the processing of information, and on the civic dialogue. As journalists come to understand the nature and value of information being gathered and conveyed through various social networks, they will not only act more effectively in this new and vital world. They will also enhance the prospects for journalism's long-term survival. ■

*Geneva Overholser, a 1986 Nieman Fellow, is the director of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Journalism.*

# Social Media: The Ground Shifts

Social networks serving as Web services, not sites, ‘create new challenges for journalists, news organizations, and media companies that are only now starting to embrace social media.’

BY RICHARD GORDON

**W**hen the history of online journalism is written, it will be hard to ignore the biggest mistake made by news organizations and media companies: thinking of the World Wide Web as primarily a one-way broadcasting or publishing medium.

Back in 1996, when I was the first online director for The Miami Herald Publishing Company, I was as guilty of this misperception as anyone. Our team created discussion boards but hoped they'd require no attention from our staff. We didn't think that cultivating community or moderating discussions were appropriate or necessary roles for a journalist. And we ignored evidence right in front of us—our own behavior as online users—that the most powerful and persistent driver of Internet usage was the value of connecting with other people.

Today, with commenting oppor-

tunities available on almost any kind of content Web site, and with Facebook and Twitter empowering new forms of interpersonal communication online, it's hard to find a news organization that's not trying to tap into what we once would have called “online communities” and now more typically refer to as “social media.”

So this may not be the ideal time to suggest that the social media landscape is continuing to be transformed in ways that journalists and news organizations will find confounding. Online communities and social networks, which historically have been formed on Web sites, are instead becoming Web services that shape people's digital lives across many sites and many communication channels. As online users and consumers, we will likely welcome and appreciate this transformation, but it will create new challenges for

journalists, news organizations, and media companies that are only now starting to embrace social media.

## Facebook and Twitter

The two forces driving the latest evolution of interpersonal communication online are now well known: Facebook and Twitter. Savvy journalists and media leaders recognize how important these sites are, but many have not noticed what I think are their most significant attributes:

**Facebook**, through a service called Facebook Connect, now allows any other Web site to log in users with their Facebook ID instead of a site-specific login. Beyond that, Facebook Connect allows other sites to shape users' experiences through profile information, such as their list of Facebook friends.

**Twitter**, because it makes tweets available through an easily available Application Programming Interface (API), has enabled the creation of an enormous variety of applications that tap into its ever-growing database of 140-character snippets without requiring the user to visit Twitter.com.



Last year, Forrester Research analyst Charlene Li predicted: "... in the

future, social networks will be like air." It will seem "archaic and quaint," Li wrote, that we had to go to a Web site to "be social." At the time, it wasn't easy to find the evidence that Li's prediction would come true any time soon. But now, changes at Facebook and Twitter are bringing the future more clearly into focus.

Facebook officially launched Facebook Connect in December, after several months in which a few sites were invited to test it. Today, Facebook says more than 15,000 sites have implemented the service, including YouTube, CNN, Digg and Microsoft's Xbox Live service for gamers. While this means online users are becoming accustomed to being offered the option of logging in with their Facebook ID, they might not grasp just how novel this service is by the standards of traditional media thinking.


The revolutionary idea behind Facebook Connect is this: Facebook is encouraging other sites to create more engaging user experiences by leveraging the Facebook "social graph"—without needing to visit Facebook.com. This approach is completely counter to the thinking of traditional news organizations, which have been reluctant even to link to other sites for fear that users will click away and not come back.

Login | Facebook

 [http://www.facebook.com/login.php?return\\_session=1&noct](http://www.facebook.com/login.php?return_session=1&noct) 


facebook

Connect [News Mixer](#) with Facebook to interact with your friends on this site and to share on Facebook through your Wall and friends' News Feeds. This site will also be able to automatically post recent activity back to Facebook.



Bring your friends and info

Publish content to your Wall



Email:

Password:

By proceeding, you are allowing News Mixer to access your information and you are agreeing to the [Facebook Terms of Use](#) in your use of News Mixer. By using News Mixer, you also agree to the [News Mixer Terms of Service](#).

Sign up for Facebook

Connect

Cancel

Done

Using Facebook Connect, anyone with a Facebook account can log onto [newsmixer.us](#) and post questions, answers, quips and letters to the editor.

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Meanwhile, Twitter has become a widely recognized (and sometimes ridiculed) phenomenon not because of Twitter.com, a site experienced through a Web browser, but because of add-ons such as Twhirl and Tweetdeck. This software for personal computers manages people's Twitter experience, with comparable tools such as Twitterific for users of mobile phones. As with Facebook Connect, Twitter is enabling people to connect without visiting its Web site.

There are other services trying to capitalize on the same basic concepts—such as OpenID, a service enabling log-ins to multiple sites using the same ID, and Friend Connect, Google's effort to compete with Facebook Connect. Google is also a force in the OpenSocial consortium, which is trying to develop a commonly accepted toolkit for connecting the social Web.

## News Mixer

I can't pretend to know how all this will evolve, which social interaction tools will become the most popular, and whether social networks will ever really become "like air" online. But some of the implications are becoming clear:

- Web sites that have built their audiences by enabling user participation have new opportunities to do so by leveraging social networks people have established elsewhere.
- Social network IDs—typically based on real names—might enable higher-quality interaction than we've seen on news sites where the identity of those who comment is often shielded by anonymity.
- Content sites may find themselves challenged in growing audience engagement because their users are interacting mostly through their social networks instead of on separate Web sites.
- An increasing amount of content shared on Facebook and Twitter consists of Web links that search engines cannot see or index. This poses for Google the most serious threat yet to achieving its corporate mission: "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."
- As Facebook and Twitter increase their ability to understand users and their behavior, they could become formidable advertising platforms—competing with original-content sites but also potentially becoming useful

partners in selling and delivering targeted advertising on news and media Web sites.

To illustrate some of the opportunities that are presented by the new social landscape, I can point to News Mixer, a Web site prototype devel-

oped by a class that I codirected last year (with my colleague Jeremy Gilbert) in the journalism master's program at the Medill School at Northwestern University. (News Mixer can be explored at [newsmixer.us](http://newsmixer.us).)

The six students in the class—including two software develop-

The screenshot shows the NewsMixer website. At the top, the logo "newsmixer" is in a stylized font with "STIR IT UP" in smaller letters to its right. To the right of the logo is a link "To join the conversation, log in with Facebook Connect!" and a button "Connect with Facebook". Below the logo is a navigation bar with four links: "Home" (Follow the latest news), "About" (Learn about the site), "Feedback" (Tell us what you think), and "Letters" (Be heard! Write to the editor). The main content area is titled "Letters to the Editor" with a sub-header "Add your voice to the marketplace of ideas. Offer a thoughtful point of view in 250 words or less." Below this is a "Log in to write a letter to the Editor:" link and another "Connect with Facebook" button. The "Editor Highlights" section features two articles. The first, "Let the acquisition happen in reply to: VeraSun should resist the temptation of acquisition" by Brian Boyer, includes a small profile picture and a paragraph of text. The second, "VeraSun should resist the temptation of acquisition" by Ryan Mark, also includes a small profile picture and a paragraph of text. Both articles have a timestamp of "7 months, 3 weeks ago".

newsmixer STIR IT UP

To join the conversation, log in with Facebook Connect!  
f Connect with Facebook

Home Follow the latest news About Learn about the site Feedback Tell us what you think Letters Be heard! Write to the editor

**Letters to the Editor**

Add your voice to the marketplace of ideas. Offer a thoughtful point of view in 250 words or less.

Log in to write a letter to the Editor:  
f Connect with Facebook

**Editor Highlights**

Let the acquisition happen in reply to: VeraSun should resist the temptation of acquisition  
by Brian Boyer  
Most Program Managers hold a rainy day fund, and it would be great to hedge against all bets, but the best of option theory will not forecast or protect against uncertainties such as labor unrest, subcontractor bankruptcy, acts of God ...  
7 months, 3 weeks ago

VeraSun should resist the temptation of acquisition  
by Ryan Mark  
The authors make the following statement in their article. "But the processes, methods and tools for developing flexible strategic plans and adapting to changes have not been operationalized adequately to be applied to management of dynamic project uncertainty. Project planning, ...  
7 months, 3 weeks ago

NewsMixer.us was created by graduate students at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University to test new ways for users to comment on news stories. The students—Brian Boyer, Ryan Mark, Angela Nitzke, Joshua Pollock, Stuart Tiffen, and Kayla Webley—documented their experience and findings in a blog and a comprehensive report available at [www.crunchberry.org](http://www.crunchberry.org).

ers who were earning their master's in journalism through a "programmer-journalist" scholarship program funded by the Knight News Challenge—were asked to come up with approaches to "conversations around news." They concluded that news site comments often didn't work well. The quality of conversation was poor, and the vast majority of users rarely participated. They also noted that news sites have applied little creative thinking to the challenge of building user participation. All they've done is offer an "open-ended comment box."

The students designed News Mixer to improve the user experience. First, it uses Facebook Connect, which, of course, means people can log in with their Facebook ID. Beyond that, the site highlights comments from each user's social network, meaning that

every user has a different—and personalized—experience. Also, every time people post to News Mixer,

## What are people saying right now?



(Private) **WONDERS** if quips too should be related to an article block

re: [Museum returning to Czech Vil](#)

1 day, 21 hours ago



[Claudio Luís Vera](#) **AGREES** with himself, most of the time.

re: [Museum returning to Czech Vil](#)

3 weeks, 1 day ago



[Claudio Luís Vera](#) **WONDERS** if quips are related to an individual story.

re: [Museum returning to Czech Vil](#)

3 weeks, 1 day ago



(Private) **FEELS** fortunate to stumble upon this excellent site

re: [Museum returning to Czech Vil](#)

1 month, 1 week ago

**Users write Twitter-style quips and comments, which appear alongside the main story.**

they are given the option of cross-posting that comment to their Facebook feed, exposing it to friends who are not using News Mixer, thereby potentially drawing them to participate as well.

In place of the open-ended comment box, News Mixer offers three ways of commenting:

**Questions and Answers:** Displayed like annotations in the margin of an article, readers can ask a question about any paragraph of the article—or respond to questions left behind by other people.

**Quips:** Visible as a small talk-bubble in a live feed on the home page and on article pages, quips are short-form comments that allow people to leave feedback in a quick, to-the-point form. They're modeled after Twitter and instant messaging.

**Letters to the Editor:** A very old idea, but with a few new twists. News Mixer calls on letter writers to “add your voice to the marketplace of ideas. Offer a thoughtful point of view in 250 words or less.” Once written, letters are treated equivalently to articles in News Mixer. Each letter gets its own page, and people are allowed to write letters

in response. When a letter is particularly insightful, an editor can use the News Mixer content management system to designate it as an “editor highlight.” These then appear on the home page, intermingled with news articles. The idea is to encourage and reward the most thoughtful responses.

News Mixer has been widely praised, described as “an innovative community news framework” (by the influential blog Read/Write Web), a “cool new project” (Editor & Publisher), and “a great piece of innovation” (blogger/consultant Mark Potts). The software code that powers News Mixer has been made available on an open-source basis, and several companies are experimenting with it.

Whatever happens with News Mixer, social media are changing in fundamental ways. Journalists, newsrooms and media companies ignore these changes at their peril. ■

*Richard Gordon is an associate professor and director of digital innovation at Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University.*

# Blogs, Tweets, Social Media, and the News Business

‘Merely because a technology is popular with some users and journalists does not mean that its use will be beneficial to the news enterprise as a whole.’

BY ROBERT G. PICARD

Judging from their widespread adoption, it's hard to find a technology that news organizations don't embrace. Read the Los Angeles Times on Kindle. Watch ABC News on YouTube. Leave a comment on a blog about media and marketing from the Chicago Sun-Times. Listen to a podcast of "On Science" from National Public Radio. Participate in a discussion board hosted by The Washington Post about college admissions. Receive SMS news about the Dallas Cowboys from The Dallas Morning News. Get features from Time on a PDA and tweets of breaking news from CNN.

The mantra for news organizations is to be anywhere, anytime, on any platform. But is this strategy really a good idea? In an era when the business models for news are stressed, hard thinking should be

done in assessing the opportunities that various technologies present. It isn't the time merely to be copying what others are doing.

Tough questions must be asked to figure out which of the new technologies is beneficial for journalism and the business of journalism. Is each one equally useful? What are the real costs in staff time and the operating costs to be on the various platforms? What is actually achieved for the news organization in being there? Does every news organization need to be active on all of the platforms? Finally, how can a news organization achieve optimal benefit across platforms?

The answers we find might lead to deciding which of these technologies to employ. Most importantly, the decisions reached will vary for different news enterprises based on their circumstances and needs.

## Determining Technology's Value

News organizations are operating with constrained budgets in highly dynamic markets.<sup>1</sup> Clear strategies must govern all uses of journalistic, financial and human resources allocated for these technologies. Merely because a technology is popular with some users and journalists does not mean that its use will be beneficial to the news enterprise as a whole.

Here's a sensible first question to raise: How will the use of a given technology generate money?

And if its uses don't generate money—or, at the very least, pay for their full costs—one needs to have an exceptionally clear answer as to why it is being used at all. Reasons can be found to use some without full cost recovery, but those should be based on strategic thinking and informed choice, not on technological hype and exuberance.

In the decade and a half since

the Internet emerged as a viable medium, and the decade since mobile communications became practicable, questions of how content providers can effectively earn money from either have remained prominent. The lack of truly effective revenue models to support the gathering and distribution of news has led many to argue that providing this serves other purposes, especially in creating interactions that strengthen the brand and form and maintain relationships that bond users of various platforms to news organizations. If these are the primary benefits of contemporary technologies, news organizations must become much more sophisticated in their thinking about them and how to achieve those benefits.

Each platform requires clear and distinct strategies, as does the overall use of multiple platforms. If interactions are the goal, the reason for each interaction needs to be clearly delineated. And what should it accomplish? What mes-

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<sup>1</sup> In the Winter 2006 issue of Nieman Reports, Picard wrote an article entitled "Capital Crisis in the Profitable Newspaper Industry," in which he observed that this crisis had arrived "at a time when the newspaper industry is struggling, too, to respond to changes in technologies, society and in how consumers use media." His article can be read at [www.niemanreports.org](http://www.niemanreports.org).

sages and images should it project of the news organization? How are the benefits of those interactions to be measured?

Even if the value turns out not to be measured in financial terms, clear goals ought to be set forth in terms of return on the investment—such as the effect on brand equity, number of unique users served, and the movement of nonusers to paid products. These goals should be articulated and pursued, and performance in reaching them measured. When forming stronger relationships is the goal, clear strategies need to be stated. How personalizing communications across platforms will happen also needs to be considered.

Methods for measuring and evaluating performance have to be developed. These should be used to track the effectiveness of any of these new approaches to determine whether the money spent and other resources used were warranted and whether the technology was effectively used. What are the effects on the print product? With online content? With the news organization, as a whole? Have existing products been supported or harmed? Have beneficial business opportunities emerged?

Such managerial challenges posed by these technologies should not deter their use. There are, of course, risks also associated with a decision not to engage in some or all of these technologies. This is the time for neither inertia nor indecisiveness when it comes to making such decisions.

## Understanding the Benefits

Clearly, there is benefit to a news organization in interactive communication with users. By using online tools, journalists get information, ideas and feedback. And if they do interact consistently with readers and viewers, they develop a different type of relationship than the arms-length connection that traditional mass communication created.

For users, social media and blogs offer anyone the opportunity to express themselves and to connect with persons of like mind or interests. These digital tools provide an easy (little to no cost) way for members of the public to take part in discussion with larger groups of people and draw attention to issues and topics that traditional news media might have overlooked.

For news organizations, how-

## Technology Diminishes Journalists' Value

In May, Robert Picard wrote a piece in *The Christian Science Monitor* titled "Why journalists deserve low pay." The crux of his argument was that the social value created by journalism isn't enough to pay journalists' salaries and keep news organizations solvent. In arguing his case, Picard points out that economic value for journalists' work arose out of "the exclusivity of their access to information and sources, and their ability to provide immediacy in conveying information." That value, he contends, "has been stripped away by contemporary communication developments." Here is how he began his piece:

Journalists like to think of their work in moral or even sacred terms. With each

new layoff or paper closing, they tell themselves that no business model could adequately compensate the holy work of enriching democratic society, speaking truth to power, and comforting the afflicted. Actually, journalists deserve low pay. Wages are compensation for value creation. And journalists simply aren't creating much value these days. Until they come to grips with that issue, no amount of blogging, Twittering, or micropayments is going to solve their failing business models. ■

*To read Picard's article, go to [www.csmonitor.com/2009/0519/p09s02-coop.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0519/p09s02-coop.html).*

ever, this is a two-edged sword. In many instances, the content that news organizations produce (at a cost) is distributed by others, thus removing the need or desire for many people to seek out the original sources of the information. This

circumstance, of course, threatens the commercial model because of its deleterious effects on revenue and cost recovery.

Millions of people use new technologies, yet in this time of exploration and experimentation, the users

of these digital tools react to them in different ways. Some find them highly useful and satisfying; others find them worthless and disappointing. Some find them a worthy pastime; others conclude they are a waste of time. They are more important to some people than to others. Not everyone wants to be or will be equally wired, communicating, or sharing their opinions and the details of their lives. Some persons find the communications technologies more rewarding in business; others emphasize personal benefits. Consequently, many of these technologies serve only a fraction of the entire digital audience, in most cases from five to 20 percent. This, too, must be factored in as media enterprises realistically assess the potential of the opportunities they seek to create.

The ability to create relationships with and among users is among the widely touted benefits of social media tools. Even so, achieving this goal has yet to be shown to be very effective at maintaining or producing better overall use of the news products, which is the primary revenue source for news enterprises. In short, relationships don't necessarily translate into greater economic value.

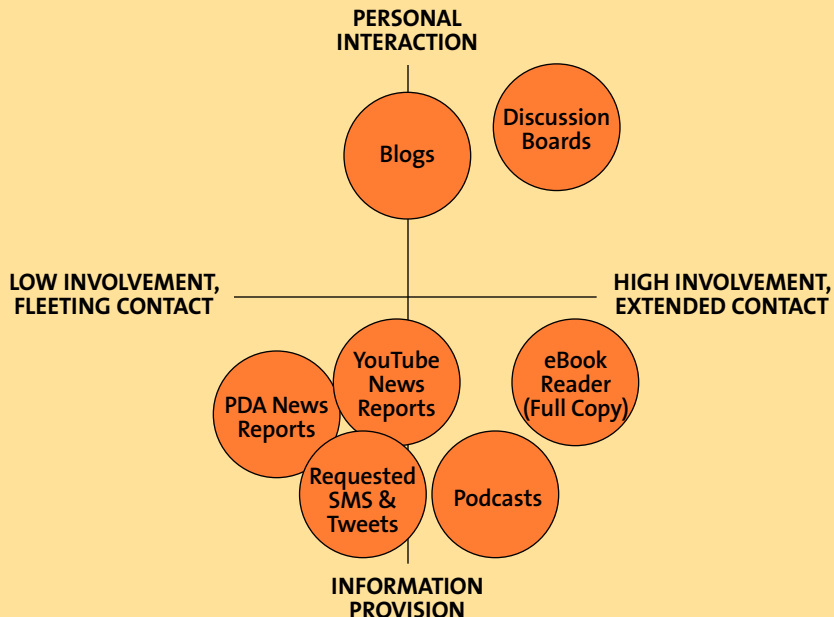
Understanding the function and use of social media is critical in making business decisions. In general, the functions range from information provision to personal interaction and, when they are used, the result can be low involvement and fleeting contact or high involvement, which can lead to extended contact. [See diagram on next page.]

It is still early when it comes to the use of these technologies by news organizations. Already, however, we can find some indications of the effectiveness of these interactive, social and instant messaging technologies.

They tend to be more beneficial for national and large metropolitan news organizations than they are for smaller local ones. This is because they offer the competitive advantages of making the brand omnipresent in the face of the myriad of competing alternative sources of news and information.

When their use is more targeted on building effective personal relationships with readers, listeners and viewers, they appear to be more useful for smaller local news organizations. There, the contacts can be more individual and intimate, and the volume of contact is generally not as overwhelming as for large organizations.

# At the Crossroads of Technology and People



The factors shown in this diagram have important business implications. For a news organization to earn money from using these social media tools, the activities related to the high involvement with extended contact (visible in the lower right) are more likely to generate greater payments from audiences and advertisers than those in other quadrants. They also affect the extent to which relationship development and branding benefits can be obtained. Relationships are established and maintained best through highly involved personal interactions (upper-right quadrant). Some branding benefits occur through ubiquitous contacts of all kinds, but the most beneficial ones are obtained through regular contact that tends to result from uses in the quadrants on the right. Image and text by Robert Picard.

There is a clear and growing body of evidence that news organizations' Web sites produce some benefits from various activities. Less evidence has been found to show that social media activities do likewise, especially for newspapers. It is perhaps too early to judge given that experimentation with social media is in its infancy. It behooves all of us, however, to carefully observe and evaluate their development and effects. Then, we need to use what is learned to gauge whether and how a particular tool

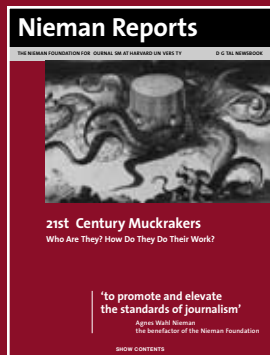
provides real benefit to a news organization or if it is depleting resources—financial and human—that could be used more effectively in other ways. ■

*Robert G. Picard is a fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. He is editor of the Journal of Media Business Studies and author of 23 books on media economics and management topics. His blog can be found at [www.themediabusiness.blogspot.com](http://www.themediabusiness.blogspot.com).*

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# An Antidote for Web Overload

With a hunger for explanatory guidance amid the raging storm of Web news flashes, a journalist stresses context to attract digital users.

BY MATT THOMPSON

For the longest time, whenever I read the news, I've often felt the depressing sensation of lacking the background I need to understand the stories that seem truly important. Day after day would bring front pages with headlines trumpeting new developments out of city hall, and day after day I'd fruitlessly comb through the stories for an explanation of their relevance, history or import. Nut grafs seemed to provide only enough information for me to realize the story was out of my depth.

I came to think of following the news as requiring a decoder ring, attainable only through years of reading news stories and looking for patterns, accumulating knowledge like so many cereal box tops I

could someday cash in for the prize of basic understanding. Meanwhile, though, with the advancements of the Web and cable news, the pace of new headlines was accelerating—from daily to minute-by-minute—and I had no idea how I'd ever begin to catch up.

In 2008, I encountered a study describing others from my generation who seemed to share my dilemma. The Associated Press had commissioned professional anthropologists to track and analyze the behavior of a group of young media consumers. Their key conclusion: "The subjects were overloaded with facts and updates and were having trouble moving more deeply into the background and resolution of news stories."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "A New Model for News: Studying the Deep Structure of Young Adult News Consumption" can be read at [www.ap.org/newmodel.pdf](http://www.ap.org/newmodel.pdf). Jim Kennedy, director of strategic planning at The Associated Press, wrote about this study in the Winter 2008 issue of Nieman Reports, [www.niemanreports.org](http://www.niemanreports.org).

The study's participants seemed to respond to this ever-deepening ocean of news much like I had. We would shy away from stories that seemed to require a years-long familiarity with the news and incline instead toward ephemeral stories that didn't take much background to understand—crime news, sports updates, celebrity gossip. This approach gave us plenty to talk about with friends, but I sensed it left us deprived of a broader understanding of a range of important issues that affect us without our knowing.

After years of working in online newsrooms, though, I had hit upon a secret—talking to journalists was like having the decoder ring without having to do the work. If I didn't understand a story or why it was important, I could ask a metro editor about it. Without fail, she'd lay out the history and context in lush narrative detail, often with entertaining depictions of the players involved and fun asides with snippets of political trivia. Ten minutes of conversation with a good reporter could unlock the fundamentals of a beat so thoroughly I'd walk away feeling like an expert on the topic.

I started to realize that “getting” the news didn't require a decoder ring or years of work. All it took was

access to the key pieces of information that newsrooms possessed in abundance. Yet news organizations never really shared that information in an accessible or engaging form. Instead, they cut it up into snippets that they buried within oodles of inscrutable news reports. Once in a while, they'd publish an explainer story, aiming to lay out the bigger picture of a topic. But such stories always got sidelined, quickly hidden in the archives of our news sites and forgotten.

Meanwhile, young news consumers like me were flocking to another Web site—a place structured around context, but which was quickly becoming a go-to destination for news as well.

## The Wikipedia Epiphany

In 2007, The New York Times noted that something weird was going on with Wikipedia. This “free encyclopedia that anyone can edit” had taken on a function few could have expected an encyclopedia to perform.

As Jonathan Dee wrote in The New York Times Magazine, “For centuries, an encyclopedia was synonymous with a fixed, archival idea about the retrievability of information from the past. But Wikipedia's

notion of the past has enlarged to include things that haven't even stopped happening yet. Increasingly, it has become a go-to source not just for reference material but for real-time breaking news—to the point where, following the mass murder at Virginia Tech, one newspaper in Virginia praised Wikipedia as a crucial source of detailed information.”<sup>2</sup>

The following year Martin Nisenholtz, senior vice president of digital operations for The New York Times Company, would play a part in revealing Wikipedia's strength not just as a breaking news source, but as the place to read about a news story long after the headlines have subsided.

Five years prior, in 2002, blogger Dave Winer had made a bet with Nisenholtz that for most of the top five news stories of 2007, blogs would outrank The New York Times on Google. When Winer and Nisenholtz reconvened to settle the bet in 2008, they unearthed a surprise. By the terms of the bet, Winer had won, but the real news was the site that trounced both the Times and the blogosphere—Wikipedia.

What is it about this site, I wondered, that made it the people's choice

not only for news over time, but for real-time news updates as well? Sure, the site's ability to instantly marshal an army of amateur editors was a big part of the story. But there was also something quite remarkable about how stories are structured on the site, how breaking news gets folded into an elegant, cohesive record, enabling site visitors to quickly catch up on a topic without having to sort through a torrent of disparate articles and headlines.

If you're looking for a way to combat information overload, to distill the universe of topics covered by the local newspaper into a manageable stream, it's difficult to find a more perfect invention than the format Wikipedia has pioneered.

But I saw opportunity for journalists to build on Wikipedia's model to make something even better. While Wikipedia does a fairly astonishing job of laying out topics of national and international import, it doesn't scale down very well to the level of local news. And hairy, complex stories such as climate change and health care reform require deft, economical storytelling that Wikipedia's cacophonous editing process is ill-suited to provide.

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<sup>2</sup> “All the News That's Fit to Print Out” can be read at [www.nytimes.com/2007/07/01/magazine/01WIKIPEDIA-t.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/01/magazine/01WIKIPEDIA-t.html).

So in September 2008, I went to the University of Missouri's Reynolds Journalism Institute (RJI) to explore how journalists might start winning at the context game, creating a new model of news to serve a generation of news consumers like me.

## Two Experiments

Among the assumptions I wanted to test during my time at RJI was the idea that news consumers really are looking for context rather than merely the latest news. After all, during years of working in online newsrooms, I'd seen plenty of deep, contextual news packages ignored by our site users in favor of weather updates and crime reports.

The financial crisis provided an early test of this assumption. At the time, news about the crisis was ubiquitous. All at once, every news organization was unearthing news about a different aspect of the meltdown—the collapse of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the role of the Community Reinvestment Act, the status of the bailout plan wending its way through Congress. Amidst all this news, would people choose context?

The answer was yes. The breakthrough news item of the year wasn't an investigation that yielded some

hot new scoop, it was a piece of on-the-record explanatory reporting by "This American Life" and National Public Radio that went wildly viral. "The Giant Pool of Money" went on to become the most downloaded episode in the history of "This American Life," garnering the award tripecta of a duPont, Peabody and Polk for its producers. Many listeners said they'd been tuning out all those crisis-related headlines until they heard the episode. For them, "The Giant Pool of Money" was like a decoder ring for this news story. And once you heard it, you wanted more.

But it could have been a fluke, revealing nothing more than a well-told story's capacity to ignite. So at the beginning of October, I spent two days culling the best links I could find laying out different aspects of the crisis into a spare, simple, one-page site called The Money Meltdown. I posted a link to the site on my blog and for the rest of the month spent a few minutes a day maintaining the page.

That month, more than 50,000 unique users visited The Money Meltdown. A small number for a big news operation, but significant traffic for two days of work by a random guy with a blog. It was enough traffic, at least, to suggest that the hunger for context was real.

The next question I wanted to tackle during my time in Missouri was how journalists might approach the task of building news sites structured around the bigger picture

rather than the latest news. Working with a team of about a dozen reporters and a pair of editors from the Missouri School of Journalism, we decided to tackle the story of growth

## The Money Meltdown

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE GLOBAL MONEY CRISIS OF 2007-9

### 1. Background

#### Behind the current panic.

**Recommended:** This American Life's Alex Blumberg and NPR's Adam Davidson joined forces to present the best introduction to the crisis. If you can't listen to the audio, read the transcript, or if you can't handle an hour-long show, listen to the abridged version.

**The narrative:** The Washington Post tells the engrossing story of the regulatory failures behind the crisis, including helpful graphics and key players.

**The shorter version:** 15 things you need to know about the panic.

**The shortest version:** Andrew Lambert gives a more succinct summary.

**The updated version:** Davidson and Blumberg revisit the crisis in a second This American Life episode.

**The ongoing version:** Davidson and Blumberg blog about the crisis.

#### Previous banking crises.

**Recommended:** Two International Monetary Fund economists give a dry but surprisingly readable comparison of the current banking crisis to 42 previous crises, including an overview of past government interventions and their effects. To skip to their conclusions about the present crisis, see pages 27 to 33.

**The short version:** The BBC walks through six previous crashes.

**The shorter version:** The Financial Times compares the proposed bailout to four previous bailouts in handy chart form.

### 2. Key Facts

#### A timeline of the crisis.

**Recommended:** Wikipedia probably has the best, most up-to-date timeline of the disaster's progress through our economy.

#### Link of the day.

10.27.08

10 by Alex Lewis  
Have been trying  
to get their money.

10.26.08

10 by 10  
What's the deal  
with the economy,  
growth,  
recession.

10.25.08

10 by 10  
What's the deal  
with capitalism,  
and  
how's it going to  
end.

10.24.08

10 by 10  
What's the deal  
with the economy,  
growth,  
recession.

10.23.08

10 by 10  
A gallery of  
financial crises  
throughout the  
history.

Earlier

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HOW YOU CAN BE INVOLVED

IMPROVING THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT

Home » [Balancing the costs and benefits of growth »](#)

## BALANCING THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF GROWTH

Whether you arrived in Columbia via I-70 or via the maternity ward, a good amount of infrastructure was probably already here. You probably didn't have to pay for the road to your house, or the water main to your sink, or the power line to your electrical outlets. Most of that expense was subsidized by your fellow residents, knowing that you would pay back your fair share during your time here — in property taxes or rent, in sales taxes, and other contributions.

But what if you buy land at the far reaches of the city, where not much infrastructure has been built? What portion should the whole community pay then? If we subsidize too much of the cost of handling new development, we risk giving new comers an incentive to locate on the cheap land around the city's fringe, promoting sprawl. But if we make new development too expensive, we risk curtailing growth and its many benefits, especially at a time



With *Columbia Tomorrow* and *The Money Meltdown* Web sites, Thompson sought to bring context to the news by bringing together vital information about development in Columbia, Missouri on one Web site and the nation's financial crisis on another.

and development in Columbia, Missouri. A college town bordered by rural land in the middle of Missouri, Columbia's population had boomed over the past two decades, leaving the city grasping for a planning model that could more elegantly handle its explosive growth. It was the type of story that played out in obscure headlines about "tax-incre-

ment financing" and "transportation development districts"; a good candidate, I thought, for a dose of context.

I assembled dossiers containing about eight years of coverage of growth and development in Columbia by the city's two daily newspapers, more than 800 pages of news stories. And I read through the dos-

siers page by page on my Kindle, attempting to ferret out the tropes that came up time and time again, the arguments the city kept having with itself over the decade. With the assistance of Columbia Missourian editors Scott Swafford and John Schneller, my team and I worked to take all that contextual information buried in the stories—the years of nut grafts, the forgotten explainers—and pull them together into an accessible, engaging package.

The outcome of this effort was a Web site called Columbia Tomorrow ([www.columbiatomorrow.com](http://www.columbiatomorrow.com)). Built in WordPress, the site so far contains about two dozen hierarchically arranged topic pages that attempt to lay out the bigger picture of growth and development in the city, as well as provide a friendly introduction to topics like storm water runoff. As new developments emerge, reporters post about them in blog entries that appear on the relevant topic pages, which are updated to reflect the latest news.

It's too early to tell whether Columbia Tomorrow will be a break-away hit with residents of the city. But it does, I think, what I hoped it would do. It points toward the possibility of a new direction for news Web sites, one that can balance the

needs of news junkies and casual news consumers alike.

For years, our assumption has been that the Web was going to require more and more news, that the way to succeed online was to generate ever more frequent updates and shovel up ever more numerous headlines, to completely saturate our users with information so they'll keep clicking. Needless to say, this is a resource-intensive endeavor. And with all signs pointing to fewer resources for employing professional journalists, it looks like a losing one.

But these experiments are prodding us toward the notion that the real value might be found not in publishing more news on increasingly less serious matters, but in distilling the news into an ever-richer contextual record. Instead of just diverting us with trivia, the Web might transform journalism into something that doesn't need to be decoded, but instead helps us make sense of what's happening in our world. ■

*Matt Thompson, a 2008-2009 Donald W. Reynolds Fellow at the Reynolds Journalism Institute, is an online journalist and coauthor of "Epic 2014/2015." He blogs at [Newsless.org](http://Newsless.org).*

# Digital Media's Key to Success: Must-Read Content

In observing what enables some content creators to draw steady and good-sized audiences, lessons emerge about the common factors that make this happen.

BY BRIAN REICH

People are willing to pay for content, but only when they find value in it or in the experience of gaining access to it. With information so widely available and accessible, the quality of the content—its depth and breadth and the context it provides—is what gives it value. In our digital era, in which “information wants to be free,” much of what is available, online or otherwise, doesn't lend itself to inspiring people to pay.

In this environment, some people have mastered how to consistently create must-read content. Even those who succeed, however, attract niche (not mass) audiences of people who are intensely interested in what they offer. There is little understanding of how to replicate their work, scale it larger, or transfer their efforts in a significant way to other projects. But there is

a lot that can be learned from observing those whose content meets this threshold and does so consistently. Figuring out what factors contribute to their success—while acknowledging that there will be ones unique to each content creator—gives us clues about what can lead to success in this hybrid environment of social media and the gathering and distribution of news and information.

Here is how three people approach this challenge:

**Robert Scoble**, a blogger, author and technologist, believes the best content begins in the community. Responding to this belief, he has built and cultivated a vast network of people throughout the world and routinely tracks and engages them online. Scoble takes a look at information flowing in from this net-

work and then promotes on his site what he believes will be popular or interesting.<sup>1</sup> The content he highlights has become must-read because it is drawn from sources that few other people have access to or have taken the time to share.

**Guy Kawasaki**, a blogger and entrepreneur, writes one of the most widely read blogs on the topics of innovation, startups and technology.<sup>2</sup> For him, aggregation and context are key factors. Everything that Kawasaki brings to his blog pulls from a variety of sources and ideas; his role is to add perspective, insight or knowledge that those who come to his blog might not get from consuming the raw information on their own. In many cases, what he does is to transform information into action. “To add value, what I write has to help change people’s minds—that’s why I am always looking to deliver ‘the art of’ or ‘how to’ information,” he told me.

**Virginia Heffernan**, who writes The Medium column for The New York Times Magazine and blogs about digital content for The New York Times,<sup>3</sup> believes that the best strategy for creating must-read content is to look where others aren’t. “Shine the spotlight over here,” she told me, “when everyone else is shining it over there.” She examines what content people are already paying for and what these consumer decisions mean to us as a society. “We assume right now that people are willing to pay zero,” she said. “What is interesting is to explore what they will pay a lot for.” Recently, she featured the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conferences as an example. Directed by TED, a small nonprofit dedicated to “Ideas Worth Spreading,” the events sell out at a hefty price even though much of the content from the conferences—live blogging, video broadcasts—are available for free online.

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<sup>1</sup> Scoble blogs at <http://scobleizer.com> and his Twitter feed is <http://twitter.com/scobleizer>.

<sup>2</sup> Kawasaki’s blog, “How to Change the World” is at <http://blog.guykawasaki.com>, and his Twitter feed is <http://twitter.com/Guykawasaki>.

<sup>3</sup> Heffernan writes for The New York Times, and her Twitter feed is <http://twitter.com/page88>.

There are many content creators who've carved out niches and created highly valued experiences for their audience. Each offers something unique. Yet, here are some threads knitting their efforts together.

**Understanding your audience is critical:**

How does your potential audience use technology to get and share information? What expectations do they have about the news and information they'll find? These questions and more along these lines are what define the individual's media experience at a time when there is more information available and more options about where to go to find it than there is time to consume it. Answering these key questions becomes essential. Having this knowledge contributes to how a story will be presented; if the potential members of an audience no longer read long articles, then explore other ways to tell the story. Knowing this influences how reporting and content creation takes place from the start. A strong editorial voice and judgment are valuable: Help in finding the way through the overload of information is essential—and that's where judgment comes into play,

while acknowledging the value users ascribe to voicing their opinions and deciding for themselves how they feel about the news and information. "It's a conversation, not a lecture," is how some frame this change. Where the old media now fails is in covering a narrow band of stories and presenting information in ways that are too similar to how others cover the same story—and doing so without conveying a strong editorial voice. Such a voice has differentiated coverage and given audiences a reason to seek out this information.

**Community is necessary:** Bringing together people with shared interests is a necessary ingredient for any successful online venture. No person can know everything about an issue or topic, so forming community creates a collaborative process of information gathering. It brings forth stories, presents a wider range of issues, adds voices, and the result is more information. Still, having the community contribute content and perspective does not mean ceding control to the mob. Without significant filtering of what comes in, quality will suffer. Value comes from providing people with the ability to interact and in finding ways to spur

more and better content in partnership with community members. As the editor in chief of Wired, Chris Anderson explained, “social filtering is the way people will consume media going forward.” It also turns out to be the way to create content successfully.<sup>4</sup>

**Aggregation is happening:** Success in the digital age revolves around recognizing that just about everything comes from other places, or at least starts somewhere else. With so many sources of content, aggregation can bring the best of related content into one place; once there, users can gain more understanding of a topic they care about and find a community with and from whom they can learn more. Still, aggregation requires more than knowing how to use the tools to make it happen. For news organizations, for example, it means a willingness to embrace the idea of featuring content produced by others, being OK with others featuring what they’ve produced, and devoting newsroom resources to guide the process so this becomes a value-added experience for their audience. As Scoble

put it: “You have to stop thinking about being the person who defines what is important all on your own. No one person can do it all, but if you are tapping into the expertise of many different sources, and making connections deep into issues, you will be able to build something that is really good. The real skill is being able to make those connections.”

**Good stewardship reaps rewards:**

In an article entitled “Can ‘Curation’ Save Media?”<sup>5</sup> Steve Rosenbaum, the CEO of Magnify.net, argued that the role of media professionals in the digital era is in “separating the wheat from the chaff, assigning editorial weight and—most importantly—giving folks who don’t want to spend their lives looking for an editorial needle in a haystack a high-quality collection of content that is contextual and coherent.” He uses the word “curation,” but stewardship seems more appropriate. Beyond the responsibility of culling good content lies the commitment to growing the relationship with the people in the audience. The possibility exists for audience members to feel valued

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<sup>4</sup> Anderson blogs at [www.thelongtail.com](http://www.thelongtail.com), and his Twitter feed is <http://twitter.com/ChrisA>.

and to provide them with ways that they find value in what you offer. Being a good steward will reap the reward of loyalty, and along with that can come revenue since strong relationships make audience members want to buy or recruit friends to join them.

It's always been this way—that content is key to the success of media companies. This has not changed in the digital age. Yet, there's been no proven way found to bring in money so that news organizations—or other content creators—can sustain their efforts over time. As this financial side of the equation continues to be talked about—and experimentation takes place—there is no doubt that must-read content, embedded in a com-

munity experience, will be a critical element for all who achieve success. People will pay for content in which they find value. News reporting and other ubiquitous information does not seem to meet that standard. When it reaches the level of must-read content, the rest will fall into place more easily. ■

*Brian Reich is the managing director of little m media, which provides organizations with strategic guidance about the Internet and technology. He is the author of "Media Rules!: Mastering Today's Technology to Connect With and Keep Your Audience," published by John Wiley & Sons in 2007. Follow him at <http://twitter.com/brianreich>.*

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Nieman Reports is online at: [www.niemanreports.org](http://www.niemanreports.org)

# Dealing With Disruption

As digital media gets ‘better, faster and cheaper. ... [there is] little time for long-established human institutions like journalism to adapt.’

BY JON PALFREMAN

Seems simple enough: Click on a link to read this article online. But behind the scenes, matters are more complicated. Your click doesn't connect to the Nieman Foundation's offices in Cambridge. In fact, the computer servers with this and other Nieman Reports articles aren't even in Massachusetts; they are in Arizona. The click breaks up tiny data packets that then travel across the Internet by different routes—down copper wires, along fibers of optically pure glass, and through air—to reach your computer in San Francisco, New York or London, where the packets are reassembled and displayed as text.

Dozens of machines are involved in every online mouse click, executed so quickly that you're completely unaware of them. Perhaps you think you don't care, but I hope my words will convince you otherwise.

Ten years ago, Nieman Reports was essentially a print-only maga-

zine. The Internet was seen as just one storm cloud among many that threatened journalism's future. In a special 1999 edition of Nieman Reports on the future of journalism, “The Business of News, The News About Business,” there is only one reference to the Internet. Lou Ureneck, now chairman of the journalism department at Boston University, perceptively warned that the Internet “threatens the pot of gold at the back of newspapers—the classifieds.” He was right. The Internet has not only disrupted the business and practice of journalism, it has changed our world in fundamental ways.

Today, American business and government conduct virtually all of their transactions via the Web. According to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, 74 percent of Americans use the Internet, and use it to accomplish a growing list of tasks. Along the way we

interact with numerous dot-com enterprises: from Web mail services like Gmail, Hotmail or Yahoo!, to data storage services like Box.net, IDrive, iDisk and Mozy. We upload pictures to Flickr, Smug-Mug and Photobucket, edit videos with Avid, Final Cut Pro and JayCut, upload our creations to YouTube and Vimeo, buy and sell items on Craigslist and eBay, exchange multimedia messages through MySpace and Facebook, talk to each other on

Twitter, compose documents with Google Docs, crunch spreadsheets with Zoho, aggregate news with Bloglines and Google Reader, and even manage projects in Basecamp. Most of these companies didn't exist in 1999. Google, founded in 1998, has become one of the most powerful and influential corporations on the globe.

## Accelerated Change

How has so much change happened so rapidly? Part of the answer can be found in the workings of the un-

derlying digital technology that so few of us bother to understand. Its ascent is unlike any in history. The IBM PC on Nieman Reports' Editor Melissa Ludtke's desk today is 30

or 40 times more powerful than the Gateway computer she had in 1999. This spectacular improvement conforms to Moore's Law, named after Intel founder Gordon Moore, who sagely predicted in 1965 that roughly every two years, electronic components would get

twice as small, twice as fast, and consume half as much electricity. He was right. If Ludtke's car had realized the same efficiency gains, her car that got 20 miles per gallon in 1999 would be getting 640 miles for every gallon today.

The relentless exponential improvement of digital technology is historically unique. Most technologies develop bounded by physical constraints. There are limits, for example, to how fast planes will travel (without burning up), or how high buildings can be built (without

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**If cloud computing takes off, changes in the next decade could eclipse those of the last in making it easy, in principle, for a tiny operation to use the same advanced IT as a large company.**

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falling down), and these physical boundaries act as a brake on progress, brakes that give human beings a chance to adapt. But digital technology, which involves bits of information, not lumps of matter, is different. It just keeps getting better, faster and cheaper.

It's exciting but very disruptive. It enables new companies like Google to emerge, grow rapidly and change the world, with little time for long-established human institutions like journalism to adapt. It follows that unless digital technology runs into some kind of major obstacle, the world of 2019—by which time Ludtke's "computer" will be some 1,000 times more powerful than her 1999 machine—will again be turned upside down, raising new transformative opportunities by enabling new digital ventures to share the stage with the powerhouses like Google and Amazon—or perhaps to push them aside.

## Cloud Computing

What happens with journalism? Newspaper editors, producers, journalism professors, and even new media gurus, given their record, aren't likely to reliably anticipate journalism's trajectory, so let's

look instead at where the technological infrastructure of the Internet is headed.

An interesting and potentially disruptive trend is "cloud computing." A decade or so ago, companies needed to set up dedicated IT departments with their own data storage. Not any more. Today, Google, Microsoft, Yahoo!, Amazon and others offer an alternative: They're building and operating vast Internet data centers offering data processing as a utility to anyone. In "cloud computing" the data, processing power, and software are stored in the Internet cloud rather than on the user's computer.

The physical demands of running cloud computing are significant: They include the construction of a series of gigantic air-conditioned Internet temples—"server farms" that house racks and racks of computer servers. And powering these farms puts environmental concerns into the mix of this technological advance. Microsoft opened a server farm in Quincy, Washington, in 2007; it is larger than 10 football fields. Google's server farm in The Dalles, Oregon, is almost as big. Apple is building one in North Carolina. According to McKinsey & Company, Internet data centers house around

44 million computers—machines that enable users to rent cars, buy books, communicate via social media with friends, and upload videos to Facebook or YouTube. On these 44 million machines everything from Wikipedia entries to YouTube videos is physically stored, and it's where Facebook's 250 million users keep more than 15 billion photos of themselves and their friends.

Almost everything needed to run a business can be outsourced to the cloud, where, the argument goes, professional data processing companies can usually do it better and more cheaply. If cloud computing takes off, changes in the next decade could eclipse those of the last in making it easy, in principle, for a tiny operation to use the same advanced IT as a large company. New or expanding companies won't need to make a huge capital investment in information technology when they can buy processing by the bit, scaling up slowly or, if they need to, rapidly.

Take, for example, the New York-based new media company,

Animoto, a service that turns customer supplied images and music into Web-based video presentations. In 2008, Animoto found that demand was skyrocketing; reportedly 750,000 people signed up in a three-day period. Instead of buying new servers, Animoto contracted with Amazon's new computing service, Elastic Compute Cloud (EC2), to add capacity for about 10 cents per server per hour, absorbing the huge spike in demand. When demand dropped, Animoto was able

to scale down easily.

If cloud computing is the next big thing, then why isn't the news media sticking its head in the cloud? So far there are only a few examples, including these:

- In late 2007, The New York Times decided to make its archive of back issues—11 million articles covering the period 1851-1922—more available to users. Rather than loading the articles onto their servers, the Times outsourced the job; now this archive is stored on Amazon

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**If cloud computing is  
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servers somewhere in the United States.

- Telegraph Media Group (TMG) in the United Kingdom, publisher of The Daily Telegraph and The Sunday Telegraph, has gone further and made arrangements with several cloud providers. Google provides TMG's 1,400 employees with the Google Apps platform, a suite of communication and document applications. TMG also outsources customer management activities such as subscription services and advertising sales to a cloud provider called Salesforce.com.

Nieman Reports, like others, outsources to distant computer servers, as does the Nieman Journalism Lab, which uses a provider in Pittsburgh. With big potential cost savings, this option is one news organizations will likely consider. But doing this is not problem free: There are a series of environmental, financial, security, legal and privacy problems that will need to be resolved along the way.

#### **Energy and environmental concerns:**

A lot of energy is required to run the Internet cloud. According to Stanford University's Jonathan

Koomey, Internet data centers use about two percent of our nation's electricity, and usage is increasing at about 15 percent a year. Growth in Internet use is thus overwhelming the efficiency gains of Moore's Law and generating a significant and growing carbon footprint.

**Financial:** Rising energy and environmental costs also reinforce worries that some dot-coms are not properly monetized. According to a report by Credit Suisse, YouTube is losing money for its owner Google at a rapid pace—roughly \$470 million in 2009 or more than a dollar for every YouTube click.

**Security:** Servers holding such data could experience power outages or get attacked by hackers. Or the cloud provider could go bankrupt. Already there have been a few embarrassing incidents: Google Docs users were shut out of their online word processor documents for about an hour on July 8, 2008, and Amazon customers (including The New York Times) lost access to data for a few hours on July 20, 2008 following a power outage.

**Privacy:** Lawyers have also raised the possibility that if an organiza-

tion, such as a newspaper or university, stores its records online on a third party's server (e-mails, for example) those documents might not have the same Fourth Amendment protections from unreasonable government search and seizure as data stored on a personal computer.

While troubling, the odds are that such knotty issues can be worked out and digital technology can be expected to continue its relentless and disruptive advance. This raises a broader question: Will there ever be a pause to give us time to adapt?

Perhaps, around 2019. That's about when Gordon Moore thinks his law might fail. The transistors, the switches that are the basis of modern computer hardware, can't in theory keep on getting smaller indefinitely. When the transistor's "gate," which controls the flow of electrons, becomes too small—fewer than five nanometers (five billionths of a meter)—then the transistor may no longer function as an effective switch and the game will be up. Until, of course, scientists and engineers invent something new.

So by 2019, or thereabouts, when Nieman Reports reflects on the state

of the news media, we might have a chance to take a breath and consider the distance we've traveled and ponder the road ahead. Until then, expect new cloud computing dot-coms to further change our media landscape. The journalist's hope is that among the next decade's big winners will be some dot-coms (or dot-orgs) that have pioneered sustainable business models for reporting and communicating news. ■

*Jon Palfreman, a 2006 Nieman Fellow, is KEZI Distinguished Professor of Broadcast Journalism at the University of Oregon. A veteran of both U.K. and U.S. television, he has made more than 40 BBC and PBS one-hour documentaries including the Peabody Award-winning series the "Machine That Changed the World," the Emmy Award-winning NOVA "Siamese Twins," and the Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Silver Baton-winner, "Harvest of Fear."*

# What's Old Can Be New Again—Assisted By Digital Media

‘It’s not a digital update of the newspaper, but it is a digital update of the community connection role I first learned about as a child in Shenandoah.’

BY STEVE BUTTRY

When I started in the newspaper business as a high school student in a small Iowa town in the early 1970s, our paper was as social as media got. The Shenandoah Evening Sentinel ran short items we called “locals,” submitted by area busybodies, telling who was visiting whom, who was ill and who had just returned from vacation. Unlike most tweeps today, our locals actually answered Twitter’s question, “What are you doing?”



**In the 1970's Buttry's local newspaper, The Shenandoah Evening Sentinel, published the announcement of his and his future wife's engagement.**

I didn't care much about that since I wanted to launch my career as an investigative reporter. But I did connect with the community through that social media newspaper. I first encountered my future wife when she called to criticize my prediction about a high school football game. (I was right.) During the next few years the Sentinel told people in and around Shenandoah about our graduations, engagement, wedding, the birth of our first son, and eventually the deaths

of my father and Mimi's parents. The newspaper connected our community like nothing else. You couldn't imagine Shenandoah without the Sentinel.

With our children grown, Mimi and I get most of our news from links on Twitter and send our love and honey-do's by txt msg while the local newspaper, The Gazette in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which provides my paycheck, piles up in the recycling bin, mostly unread.

The Sentinel died in the 1990's, about a decade after the newspaper I carried as a youth in Ohio, the Columbus Citizen-Journal, published its final edition. I was present for the final editions of the Des Moines Tribune in 1982 and the Kansas City Times in 1990. While I did manage to do lots of investigative journalism, I noticed early that newspapers have essentially been dying my whole career. So don't count me among those who blame the current turmoil in the newspaper busi-



**Though Buttry doesn't know of a newspaper Web site that handles engagement announcements and weddings in the way he envisioned in his Complete Community Connection blueprint, StlToday.com, the Web site of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, uses digital tools to gather and share this news.**

ness on Google, Facebook, Twitter or some other digital demon.

## Digital Attempts

I encountered the prospect of a newspaper's digital delivery of information before I heard of the Internet. A few proprietary services—America Online, Prodigy and CompuServe—were offering digital news to early adopters who had computer modems—all dial-up, of course. I was pondering such a purchase myself. As an assistant managing editor at The Kansas City Star, I attended meetings about a

project called StarText. We were going to provide newspaper stories (text only) by modem the night before their publication to subscribers of the service. I suggested that we sell and install modems and show people how to use them, just as cable companies provided the equipment needed to access their service. My suggestion didn't take root. Like most other newspaper managers, my peers and bosses at the Star thought we were in the newspaper business. While they were trying earnestly to innovate and dive into the digital stream, they failed to realize that we were really in the community connection business.

I saw a more discouraging view of the mindset of newspaper companies when I was at the Omaha World-Herald in the mid-1990's. The publisher dismissed the fledgling Internet as a fad and our company was slow to go online and we didn't pursue any serious innovation. When I left in 1998, I still didn't have e-mail or Web access from my desk. Most reporters still didn't when I returned two years later, but I negotiated to be one of the first.

When I worked at the American Press Institute (API) from 2005 to 2008, I became heavily involved in the Newspaper Next project, fo-

cused on helping newspaper companies develop business models for the digital age. Clayton Christensen, a Harvard business professor who has studied innovation in dozens of industries, partnered with API on the project. I had seen the newspaper companies I worked for as an employee and consultant make all of the errors that Christensen said established companies typically make when faced with the threat or opportunity of disruptive innovation.

We ignored competitors because we didn't think their product or service was good enough to worry about.

We crammed our existing model into new technology rather than imagining and exploring the possibilities.

We bogged innovation down in the culture of our hidebound organizations.

As I taught the principles of innovation in Newspaper Next, I saw newspaper companies respond with limited, narrow projects that barely, if at all, changed their cultures or their business models.

## Connecting the Community

I began to develop my own ideas to use digital tools to do some of the jobs

that were essential to connecting the community when I was cutting my teeth at the Evening Sentinel. I wrote my first drafts of a vision for a new business model. When API decided not to use my work for the second Newspaper Next report in early 2008, I started looking for a newspaper company adventurous enough to give my Complete Community Connection plan a try. At this time, I was also jumping into social media, first with Flickr and LinkedIn, then Facebook. Twitter really showed me how social media were revolutionizing how the world connected. With brief comments, questions and links, I communicate daily with thousands of people, becoming so familiar with many that when we actually “tweetup,” we greet one another like old friends.

My business model and my enthusiasm for social media appealed to the executives of Gazette Communications, and I arrived in Cedar Rapids, Iowa to start as editor last June 10th. Two days later, our nation's worst disaster since Hurricane Katrina struck my new home. Our staff has covered the flood and its recovery

with a wide range of digital tools—interactive maps and databases, social media, video, multimedia, liveblogging.<sup>1</sup> We are recognized as industry pioneers in the use of liveblogging and Twitter. Our digital editor, Jason Kristufek, launched and led a series of BarCamp NewsInnovation conferences around the country.

But the disaster delayed us from the crucial work of transforming our business model. On top of the national economic slowdown and the economic challenges facing the rest of the industry, our community is reeling from a crisis that damaged or destroyed a thousand businesses. We had to join the wave of newspaper companies cutting staffs. But, unlike most of our shrinking peers, our executives faced the music the next day in a live chat.

In April, I published my vision for the new business model on my blog, calling it “A Blueprint for the Complete Community Connection.”<sup>2</sup> I’m now “C3 Coach” at Gazette Communications, trying to turn the vision into fact. Bloggers and tweeps responded positively to the blueprint, and it

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<sup>1</sup> See ongoing flood coverage at <http://gazetteonline.com/section/flood>.

<sup>2</sup> “A Blueprint for the Complete Community Connection” is at <http://stevebuttry.wordpress.com/2009/04/27/a-blueprint-for-the-complete-community-connection>.

earned me a seat at the Poynter Institute's Big Ideas Conference in July.

It's not a digital update of the newspaper, but it is a digital update of the community connection role I first learned about as a child in Shenandoah. Yes, the model includes professional journalists who will use digital tools to tell the community's big news in new ways. More important, we will provide the platform where the community will tell those big stories in people's lives that connect the community in important and meaningful ways—stories of graduation, engagement, birth and death, and who's visiting whom and who's in the hospital. (Many days, my biggest news now arrives from CaringBridge, a customized Web site where my brother-in-law updates friends and family around the world on my nephew's recovery from a bone-marrow transplant.)

Just as important, C3 calls for us to move beyond the collapsing advertising and subscription revenue model. Many of those community moments described above are occasions for sending a gift or flowers. We need to enable businesses to conduct

those transactions and many more through C3 using credit or debit cards. We need to connect businesses with ways to target the customers they want; when a high school graduate fills in "University of Iowa" for his college choice in our Class of 2010 site, ads for campus-area restaurants and bookstores should appear, offering opportunities for grandparents to buy gift cards.

I wish I could boast of C3 accomplishments and not just the vision. Like many others, our company has spent more time and energy on reorganization than on true innovation. I get frustrated at the pace of transforming a culture focused on producing our newspaper, television broadcasts, and news Web sites. I'm going to have to pursue this as persistently as any investigative story I ever worked, with the same commitment to reaching the goal, whatever the obstacles. ■

*Steve Buttry is C3 coach at Gazette Communications. He can be followed at <http://twitter.com/stevebuttry> or on his blog, <http://stevebuttry.wordpress.com>.*

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<sup>2</sup> "A Blueprint for the Complete Community Connection" is at <http://stevebuttry.wordpress.com/2009/04/27/a-blueprint-for-the-complete-community-connection>.

# Inviting the Rise of the Entrepreneurial Journalist

True/Slant is modeling the newsroom of the future by empowering contributors to build their own digital brands—and by changing the role of the editor.

BY LEWIS DVORKIN

I love the newsroom, both in real life and the movies. I remember my wire service days, ripping copy line by line from a manual typewriter to get it quickly to the slot man. I spent many exhilarating nights at The New York Times, Newsweek and The Wall Street Journal editing breaking stories on deadline. And nothing was crazier than my stint in a tabloid TV newsroom.

An original “one sheet” movie poster of “All the President’s Men” hangs in my office. To this day, the final scene in The Washington Post newsroom makes me quiver. With power, authority and trust, a Teletype machine swiftly bangs out, one keystroke at a time: “Nixon Resigns. Gerald Ford to become 38th President at noon today.”

All those glorious newsroom days are gone—forever. The rapid transition to a digital news world chal-

lenges every journalistic structure, process and delivery system that served the public interest so well for so long. Bold ideas for news organizations once came from Henry Luce, Bill Paley, and Ted Turner. Today, the once invincible media elite appear paralyzed, left sheepishly to ask, “Who’s going to produce the news if we don’t?”

Well, everyone is—old brands, new brands, Twitter, Flickr, anyone with a digital device.

Media extinction comes slowly. Newspapers and magazines, television and radio news are here for years to come. But innovative, ambitious organizations will emerge with vastly different concepts for lower-cost newsrooms and content generation. They will dramatically redefine long-standing relationships between content creators, the audience—and marketers, too. To engage passionate

news consumers, news operations must unite the values and standards of journalism with the dynamics of the Web and the connective power of social media.

## Editing Talent, Not Words

True/Slant, an original content news network, is building the “newsroom of the future.” There are two key components: individually branded content contributors, all linked to one another but really working for themselves, and editors who focus on editing talent, not copy. The result: a news experience and publishing environment shared with the audience that upends both traditional journalism models and more recent digital news experiments.

At its core, the True/Slant news experience is built on knowledge, transparency, authenticity and intimacy. These attributes are vital in a news world that appears split in half: traditional brands on one side, struggling with notions of objectivity and monolithic voice, and upstart digital entrants on the other, careening toward passion-fueled bias in the spirit of openness. True/Slant is honest about its adherence both to truth and slant. It’s a place



**News of the moment, contributor perspective, and social media come together on the True/Slant homepage.**

for diverse multiple viewpoints and for marketers to engage in new ways with passionate news consumers.

It all begins with consumers trying to cope with the flood of news—and confused by whom and what to

trust. True/Slant believes consumers want their news created and filtered by credible individuals with topic-specific knowledge. They want a freeflowing news stream, untouched by top-down editorial decision-making. They want a

chance to be heard directly alongside those bringing them the news.

Enter the entrepreneurial journalist. These are credible content contributors who provide information, perspective and insight on targeted news topics. At True/Slant,

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## Did America Just Realize Obama Is Black?

What John McCain and the Republican machine couldn't accomplish in months of campaigning, it appears that Sergeant Jim Crowley accomplished in a little over a week. It appears that America is finally starting to realize that Barack Obama is a black man.

The meteoric rise of this President has been marked by his preternatural ability to speak about race in a way that mainstream white people understand and find acceptable. He speaks to black audiences about personal responsibility and family values: lessons that white voters who have been watching too much of *The 30* can think all black Democrats had to

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**ELIE COMMENTED** 2 days ago  
"Firefox is one of the few ways I can own a PC and take a stand against Bill 'Windows Wam'..."  
Posted by: ONE BILLION REASONS NOT TO USE INTERNET EXPLORER

As an entrepreneurial journalist, True/Slant contributor Elie Mystal publishes under his own name and brand. He, along with almost 200 other True/Slant contributors, uses social media to help build an audience around his specific area of expertise.

this person can be a journalist, blogger, author, expert or academic, and each is carefully selected by our newsroom's editors, who discuss ideas and work with them to market their content across the Web using custom-designed "playbooks." Our newsroom is not a journalism bureaucracy that assigns stories, line edits, copyedits or acts as a gatekeeper. True/Slant editors are facilitators, not gatekeepers. Free to publish information as they see fit, entrepreneurial journalists write for the audience, not the editor. Their flow of content is timely, transparent, expert and passionate.

Miles O'Brien, a former CNN anchor, brings his aviation and space expertise to his True/Slant audience. F. Paul Wilson, a best-selling author and physician, examines scientific and health-care myths for his followers. Ryan Sager, a newspaper columnist, explores neuroscience. Jennifer Kirk, a former World Junior Champion figure skater, exposes the inner workings of that elite sport.

True/Slant has nearly 200 contributors. Rather than a static employer/worker model, True/Slant contributors can determine the financial arrangement that best suits them. Options include monthly sti-

pends and incentive plans based on audience growth for their content. Some contributors have been granted equity in True/Slant.

In effect, each contributor is a brand of one, with a unique voice, strong perspective, and an audience drawn to what they publish. As the owners of their brand, they can act as CEO, publisher or content creator. It's their choice. True/Slant holds no exclusivity in what they do. In fact, our model is built on the idea that an entrepreneurial journalist has a multifaceted career. O'Brien writes and produces video for other Web sites; Wilson writes books and treats patients; Sager writes a New York Post column; Kirk is a student at UCLA.

## Creating a Digital Home

On True/Slant, contributors anchor, consolidate and build their digital home. Social media is one of its cornerstones. From this home, they produce original content on True/Slant, but they also promote and link to work they do elsewhere via the easy-to-use self-publishing and social media tools that we provide. They blend their perspective and reporting with content they curate—creating links to online words and

video—and with commentary they encourage their audience to produce. And because entrepreneurial journalists need to understand their audience and their business, when they log on to our platform they get important real-time data: unique visitors, page views, blogs and sites pointing to their content, and new user comments.

The True/Slant news user and the contributor form a bond through social media. Contributor content is followed, accepted, rejected and corrected by the audience. Those who write for True/Slant share their daily news consumption with their audience, and they manage conversations and market themselves virally online through Twitter, Facebook, reddit, Digg and ties they have with blogs and Web sites.

On our site, contributor and audience-generated content is commingled, enabling contributors and users to interact within a network—a sort of news democracy—that encourages cross-talk among contributors and readers and participation across contributor communities.

This type of collaborative dialogue opens the door to unique opportunities for advertisers looking for more effective ways to engage with news audiences. Yes, advertis-

ers can buy display advertising on True/Slant, but marketers can also speak with True/Slant consumers through the T/S Ad Slant. With this option, a marketer can publish content to their own page using the same tools as contributors. Clearly labeled as advertising, this content is contextually integrated throughout the site, enabling marketers to participate in news related to them and the social news conversation. All along the way, the integrity of the news process remains intact.

For me, True/Slant is an idea 35 years in the making. I do miss those newsrooms with all the grizzled journalists who loved what they did and who taught me so much. But news can now be so much more than it was. True/Slant brings fresh thinking to an industry that is reeling. I can't imagine anything more exciting than helping lead the news business into the future. ■

*Lewis DVorkin is the founder and CEO of True/Slant. He was a senior vice president at America Online in charge of news, sports and network programming and helped launch TMZ.com. He held top editing positions at The New York Times, Newsweek, The Wall Street Journal, and Forbes.*

# Ours, Theirs and the Bloggers' Zones: Compatible, Yet Different

Over the years, creating community on the Telegraph's Web site has come to mean a lot more than someone leaving a comment at the bottom of an article.

BY SHANE RICHMOND

In an episode of the 1980's BBC comedy series "Yes, Prime Minister," Jim Hacker described the readers of Britain's various newspapers: "The Daily Mirror is read by people who think they run the country; The Guardian is read by people who think they ought to run the country; The [London] Times is read by the people who actually do run the country; The Daily Mail is read by the wives of the people who run the country; The Financial Times is read by people who own the country; The Morning Star is read by people who think the country ought to be run by another country; and The Daily Telegraph is read by people who think it is."

His cabinet secretary asks: "Prime Minister, what about the people who read The Sun?" Before the prime minister can answer, his

private secretary, Bernard, chips in: "Sun readers don't care who runs the country, as long as she's got big tits."

Though played for laughs, Britons will hear a ring of truth in Hacker's analysis. In Britain, the newspaper people read can say a lot about their political views, social class, and background. Describing someone as a Sun reader implies certain things about them that are very different from the assumptions one would make about a Mail reader or a Guardian reader.

Those distinctions are becoming blurred online. The habit of reading a single newspaper was largely formed by practical concerns: It's expensive to buy more than one, and they must be carried around with you. On the Web, someone can read several newspapers, and we know that plenty of people do, dipping in

and out of different ones through the day. If they prefer the political coverage of the Guardian, the sports coverage of the Telegraph, and the financial coverage of The (London) Times, they can now read all three without having to buy them or carry them around.

This fragmentation has increased as news aggregators, such as Google News, make it possible for readers to click straight through to the story level. Often, after reading this one article, the person moves on. Therefore, in a short space of time we've moved from audiences gathering at title level to audiences gathering at section level and now to them gathering at story level.

## Engaging Readers Online

Audiences are booming at the Telegraph, as 27 million unique users came to the Web site in June. Within this vast audience still lurks our newspaper's original community—made up of people who we'd identify, and who would proudly identify themselves, as being Telegraph readers. They are enormously important to us, and ensuring that they become engaged with what we do online could be crucial to our success in an increasingly tough environment for

news organizations. They are the people who will, for example, join Clued Up, our crossword site, play fantasy football, and will perhaps subscribe to future niche services.

What the Telegraph needs to do is make certain these loyal readers have easy access to the tools that will enable them to participate on our site. Of course, community tools are becoming more common on other newspaper Web sites, and social media are part of the Web landscape for everyone online, so if we want our new visitors to be regulars they'll need to find these tools here, too, and an environment that welcomes them.

Five years ago there were few places for readers to contribute to our Web site. Indeed, apart from the letters page, they had few places to share their opinions with us, even in print. So we began this ongoing conversation with them by soliciting opinions on the big issue of the day. To do this, we'd write a brief article and ask readers to e-mail us their opinions. Back then, we didn't have comment boxes. Once we had the ability to add them, we did so at the end of all of our opinion pieces and to selected news stories.

Readers embraced the new tools with enthusiasm. Yet, in the newsroom the cultural shift was relatively

small. Most journalists knew of the trend for inviting reader comments to stories. And while they didn't see the harm in letting readers join in, they weren't sure of the value of reader comments, and they certainly weren't about to start replying.

Soon the Telegraph was receiving hundreds of comments each day, then thousands and, when that happened, we had to think about moderation. In handling a couple dozen reader e-mails each day, it was relatively simple to take a look and decide whether they were appropriate for publication. Now, doing so has become a full-time job. For the most part, this change has been a good thing because this kind of attention and focus allowed us to develop expertise in moderating reader comments. It also helped a small group of us get to know some of our readers better. The downside of this approach was that it also kept journalists at arm's length from comments on their articles; this meant that it remained an option for them to engage with readers.

At the same time, journalist participation was growing on the Telegraph's blogs, and our best writers quickly realized that blogging works best as a conversation. With articles and commentary, however, journalists seldom engaged with

commenters. Still, in this early stage, our plan was targeted to increasing reader participation.

## My Telegraph

By early 2007, we had created a very active community of commenters in certain areas of the site. Now we decided to go further. We noticed that many readers shared a common outlook as they expressed their feelings that the country had been led in the wrong direction by the Labour Party, which has governed Britain since 1997. Crucially, many of our readers/commenters felt that very few people shared their views. Yet, we could see by monitoring their comments across the Web site that, in fact, many people shared this view. We saw in this moment the opportunity to help them connect to one another.

We did this by inviting some of our regular commenters to come to the Telegraph offices for a tour and to meet some of our journalists. While they were there, we invited them to become beta testers on a new community site we were building called My Telegraph. By working with these community members and others, we were able to build the site very quickly, dropping features

that users didn't like and building new ones based on their feedback. My Telegraph<sup>1</sup> was completed in 17 working days and went live in May 2007. Thousands quickly signed up. Its home page was redesigned to cope with the quantity of content, some features were dropped, and new experiments, such as a mini-RSS reader, were tried.

We heard a common question from other news organizations, media observers, and bloggers about one aspect of our site: "Why would anyone want a blog with the Telegraph?" We knew that plenty of Telegraph readers wanted to identify themselves as such, and they would see value in having their words appear on the Telegraph's Web site. But the important point was not that we were giving them a blog; we were giving them an audience. Of course, they could create a blog with WordPress or Blogger but they'd then spend months building an audience. With us, they could get a dozen comments from fellow readers within minutes of writing their first post. And the comments almost certainly would come from like-minded people.

The community on My Telegraph came together very quickly,

and soon the site offered us new ways to connect with our readers. One reader wrote about his two daughters who were killed in a car accident by a drunk driver. The case was in court, and a story that would have run in brief, if at all, was expanded to half a page including excerpts from the father's blog. When Islamist terrorists attempted to bomb London, we asked one My Telegraph blogger, a Muslim, to expand on a post that she had written denouncing the attacks as being against the teachings of Islam. Her piece then ran in the newspaper.

Very soon it became clear to us that My Telegraph members saw the site as theirs. Quick to point out faults, they were equally happy to suggest improvements. We now realize there are three spaces on the Telegraph's Web site: ours—where comments on articles reside, theirs—My Telegraph, and the bloggers'—our blogs. Knowing this, we try to operate the site accordingly.

## Our Telegraph

At the moment, comments on the Telegraph's areas of the site are pre-moderated, meaning that a mod-

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<sup>1</sup> My Telegraph can be found at <http://my.telegraph.co.uk>

erator reviews them before they are published. However, readers can post their comments without registering with the site. Blogs and My Telegraph are postmoderated, though readers must be registered to comment.

Free speech is important to the Telegraph's readers so we tried to reflect that in our moderation policy. We're careful to remove material that runs afoul of Britain's racial and religious hatred laws, and we have to be careful about libelous material. In premoderation this is relatively simple, but in postmoderation we rely on our readers to bring inappropriate material to our attention. Only then does a moderator review a comment.

Our journalists are learning to engage. This effort has been helped by the growth of online social networks. With our journalists now using Facebook, Digg and Twitter, each of which is an increasingly important source of traffic, and being familiar with YouTube and Flickr, engagement doesn't seem as strange to them as it did a few years ago. Still, it is important they have guidance.

Our advice to our journalists is to "play the ball, not the man" when joining comments. By all means say

someone's argument is idiotic, but don't call them an idiot. Engage with constructive comments, even when they are negative, and ignore those who are being abusive or trying to derail debate. Of course some writers, and some readers, disregard those rules entirely and seem to enjoy it when comment threads turn into an anything-goes fight. That can work, too, as long as everyone understands the rules.

There's still plenty more to do. This year, having already relaunched our blog platform, we plan to release a new comment tool and refresh My Telegraph. We've been doing this for a long time now, so we feel like we know our readers pretty well. But the social media landscape has changed a lot in the past few years—and continues to change at a rapid pace—so we're eager to collaborate with our readers in building new community tools. ■

*Shane Richmond is the communications editor at The Daily Telegraph.*

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**AN ESSAY IN WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS**

# A Photographer's Journey: From Newspapers to Social Media

BY JIM MACMILLAN



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Philadelphia Phillies' fan celebrates on South Broad Street after his team won the World Series in October 2008. Within 24 hours, MacMillan's blog showing photos from the celebration had 35,000 page views.

**I**t used to be so simple: Whether I needed to make my way through a police roadblock or explain to curious neighbors why I was taking pictures on their block, barking just two words usually did the trick: “Daily

News!” In one breath, the transaction was complete. I had told them something about the authority behind my presence, and at the same time let them know exactly where they’d find my photos—in the next day’s paper.

I spent the better part of 17 years with the Philadelphia Daily News as a staff photographer and, eventually, the newsroom's first video journalist. Then, 10 months after taking a buy-out, I found myself unable to respond to a local deli clerk's simple question: "What do you do for a living?"

My Web site described me as a backpacking, independent, live-blogging, entrepreneurial, economically sustain-able, all-platform, multimedia, visual journalist, educator and consultant—and it wasn't entirely a joke. I was all of those and none of those, depending upon the challenges of each day.

## Schooled in Social Media

My professional identity began to splinter in 2007 when I began producing video news reports and found myself struggling to explain where anybody could find my work. The steps to locating it were these:

- Send everybody to the Philadelphia newspapers' Web site, Philly.com.
- Steer them to the Daily News tab.
- Direct them to the "Watch This" section, then the "More Multimedia" link.
- Instruct them to read through a

text list of content and click on my report.

My video news report would play right after a commercial for new cars or health insurance, both of which often were juxtaposed uncomfortably with the breaking news I often covered.

Needless to say, my videos weren't getting a lot of clicks. And my Web surfing habits led me to believe there had to be a better way to get my content seen, so—with no training money in the newsroom's budget—I laid out my own cash and burned some comp time to go to Las Vegas for my first Blog World Expo. And I promptly got schooled in the basics of online distribution and monetization.

I joined dozens of social networks and set up every account with the same user name—think branding—and I arranged to be e-mailed when a member friended, linked, followed me, or became a fan. Over time, some sites turned out to matter more, a few are defunct, and from others I never heard a peep. I also began using video distribution sites to post my work to social networks. Soon, my stories could be found on YouTube and other video sites or as iTunes podcasts. Updates would appear on my blog.



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Sisters celebrate in Center City Philadelphia on election night in November 2008, as it was becoming clear that Barack Obama would be the next President of the United States. Launching a blog—where I can post photos—permitted me to begin monetizing my traffic, as opposed to sending my audience to Twitpic or similar sites, where others collect the ad dollars.

A year later, further budget cuts were making my job ever more difficult, and I saw little multimedia progress at the office. I got the feeling that what I'd learned in Vegas might as well have stayed in Vegas. When buyouts came along, I raised my hand, intending to apply the severance toward a sabbatical year as I threw myself into learning all I could about social media, monetization,

content distribution, and their implications for journalism.

I still wanted to do this kind of work—communicating information that matters. And as I launched my own blog, I gradually came to understand that I'd always be a journalist, whether or not I carried an employer's credentials. All I needed were three things: content, an audience, and revenue.



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President-elect Barack Obama's train leaves Philadelphia for inaugural celebrations in Washington in January. Because conventional news photography prohibits shooting and publishing from the same device, I am almost certain that my photos were the first to show the train in motion after it left 30th Street Station.

I looked for guidance. At the Online News Association meeting near Washington last fall, I heard Jeff Jarvis describe his entrepreneurial journalism course at the City University of New York. Then, as my friend George Miller prepared to teach a similar course at Temple University, I watched him develop the curriculum. And I made a return visit to Blog World Expo.

On my blog, I wrote some analytical posts about social media and its impact on the coverage of breaking news, especially during the plane crashes in Buffalo, New York, and in the Hudson River off Manhattan; the swine flu panic, and the infamous Air Force One fly-over photo op over Lower Manhattan. I posted—and marketed—my photos and videos of election night celebrations and holiday fire-



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Actor and musician Steven Van Zandt, his wife, and her newly married relatives pose for photos at the gate of Elvis Presley's Graceland estate in June 2009. With my iPhone and the WordPress app, I am always prepared for live, mobile photo-blogging, including this day when a cancelled flight stranded me in Memphis.

works and much more. Among my news gathering and distribution tools are TweetDeck—a desktop Twitter client—and a number of Web sites that search Twitter posts. I use Tweetie to send my stories via my iPhone, which can post and link to photos and add live geotags.

Over time, traffic grew on my sites. Among the social media highlights of my news coverage are:

- When about 35,000 visitors came to my site after I posted celebration photos after the Phillies won the World Series. I'd sent links to several photo editors, and The Associated Press bought and distributed them.
- When Philly.com purchased and published some of my iPhone photos from the scene of a fatal fire, I was profiled by Philadel-

phia Weekly and even got blog mentions from BuzzMachine and Romenesko.

- When President-elect Obama's inauguration train pulled out from 30th Street Station in Philadelphia, news choppers had been grounded for security purposes. I feel almost certain that my iPhone TwitPics were the first photos available anywhere.

So where do these eyeballs come from? In conversations I had with bloggers they shared with me strategies about audience-building and schooled me in the importance of creating and maintaining conversations with the online community. By Christmas I had about 3,000 Twitter followers; in July I was up to more than 50,000, and with tweets I was driving them to my blog and to newspaper sites where content originated. There were many days when I had 2,000 page views on my blog.

## Building Connections

Now, I had to figure out how to monetize my work. I learned about cost-per-impression, cost-per-click and cost-per-action advertising, and opened numerous affiliate accounts. I was still making lunch money, but

by July, I was approaching the level of blog traffic estimated to be necessary to sell sponsorships.

I poured countless hours into social media distribution, combining aggregated news content with creative human editing and occasional original content. Some argue that aggregation adds nothing and that aggregators are mere parasites, regurgitating content already available at mainstream sites, but I disagree. Services like mine connect disenfranchised communities with important news, and they repay the content creators by sending my audience their way.

Intelligence Group, a market research company, interviewed a college student whose perspective seems to neatly sum up how the "social media generation" sees the world: "If the news is that important, it will find me." With young people, in particular, information today is shared, not sought.

By July, I was the second-most followed Twitter user in Philadelphia, behind only Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson of The Roots. Sometimes I'd break into the top 500 global users, ahead of some celebrities, star athletes, mainstream news outlets, and other staffed accounts.

I think it's fair to say that my editing and distribution techniques—

and my interactions with my audience—earned me this influence. In conversing online, I've gained a broader understanding of the news consumer and discovered new content. My online audience immediately let me know not only their opinions about my reporting, but also where I could go for more information—I'll never forget the day I discovered the Twitpic of the USAir plane in the Hudson.

Given my online experiences—mixed in with what I know about newspapers—I'm starting to suspect that social media might never work as well for these larger, old media outlets. Social media works well for entrepreneurs, as it does for celebrities and star athletes, because we have complete authority. We direct the endeavor and can be swift and nimble. Those aren't always attributes readily associated with traditional news organizations these days.

City University in Birmingham, England, has recognized the significance of this new age by offering a master's degree program in social media. The "Internet Famous" course at Parsons The New School for Design challenges the relationship between excellence and recognition, but applies distribution and reputation management strategies that cer-

tainly every journalist would benefit from learning.

Social media needs to be part of the curricula for training journalists, so I feel fortunate to be able to take the lessons I've learned in my life-after-my-buyout into the classroom. In August, I joined the convergence faculty at the University of Missouri School of Journalism and will teach there for at least a year. In preparing for this transition, I've refocused my blog (jimmacmillan.net) more closely around convergence journalism education and media industry matters and launched an accompanying Twitter account, writing there as @missourijim.

I don't know if I'll return to the life of a backpacking, independent, live-blogging, entrepreneurial, economically sustainable, all-platform, social media, multimedia, visual journalist, but the experience was priceless. Without walking down that road and having to find my way, I'm not sure I'd be ready to teach students who will be carving out their own roads in journalism. ■

*Jim MacMillan teaches convergence journalism at the University of Missouri School of Journalism. He worked for 17 years as a staff photographer for the Philadelphia Daily News.*

# Reporting Relies on Questions: Now They Come From Readers

At MyReporter.com, StarNews readers get the conversation going by asking about what's on their minds, and then reporters respond.

BY VAUGHN HAGERTY

All good journalism starts with a question. But, who's doing the asking?

In most newsrooms, it's not the reader. If the reader has input, it's usually a reaction to what already has been reported. Of course, some stories originate from a reader's call, but most of the time the reporter and editor drive the decisions about what gets covered and the questions asked in doing so.

MyReporter.com<sup>1</sup>, launched in mid-2009, turns that dynamic on its head. Now, readers are in control at the start of the process. It works like this: Ask a question, either on our Web site, via e-mail, or by Twitter. Within 24 hours (longer on weekends and holidays), a personal response will come from our newsroom describing how we plan

to handle the question. While we don't commit to answering questions that are too specific to a single person's situation or ones seeking to resolve disputes, we'll at least direct the person who asked to possible resources. Questions we do answer are assigned to staff reporters, who provide a timely response that we post on the site, with credit given to the person who raised the question.

This idea grew out of a discussion StarNews Executive Editor Robyn Tomlin led about how we could innovate. Like many newspapers, we use tools such as Twitter and online forums to communicate with readers. In listening to our readers, we often heard them ask questions like "What were all those sirens I just heard downtown?" or "Who can I complain to about my neighbor's

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<sup>1</sup> MyReporter can be found at [www.myreporter.com](http://www.myreporter.com)

trashy yard?” With this in mind, Tomlin challenged us: How could our newsroom provide a “help desk” for our community?

Our conversation took place on a Thursday. That weekend, the idea took form in my head. I sketched out a rough mock-up and drew up

The screenshot shows the MyReporter.com website. At the top is a blue header with the StarNews logo and the text "STARNEWS JOURNALISTS ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS". Below this is the "MyReporter.com" logo in large white letters. To the right of the logo is a button that says "Click here to ask a question." Below the header is a navigation bar with links: "About this site", "Browse topics", "New answers", "Contact us", and "StarNewsOnline". The main content area is divided into two columns. The left column has a spiral notebook graphic at the top and contains the heading "How does this site work?", a paragraph about the service, a "READ MORE" link, a search bar with the text "Search answers we've already posted" and a "SEARCH" button, the heading "I want to browse questions about ...", a list of topics (Attractions, Government, Health, Local history, People, Places, Public Safety, Shopping, Transportation, Utilities), and the heading "Newest answered questions" followed by three questions. The right column has a "SITE SPONSORS" section with the heading "ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS" and a listing for "JOE PASCAL -BUYING AND SELLING REAL ESTATE IN WILMINGTON, N.C." with a link to "Tips for Negotiating a Mortgage Deal". Below this is a text block encouraging expert sponsors to advertise on the site.

SN STARNEWS JOURNALISTS ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS

**MyReporter.com**

Click here to ask a question.

About this site Browse topics New answers Contact us StarNewsOnline

**How does this site work?**

Got a question about life in coastal North Carolina? Our staff of professional journalists are here to help you get the answer. [READ MORE](#)

**SEARCH**

**I want to browse questions about ...**

- Attractions
- Government
- Health
- Local history
- People
- Places
- Public Safety
- Shopping
- Transportation
- Utilities

**Newest answered questions**

- Who are the Kenans? You asked!
- Who are the Camerons? You asked!
- What was the Bulluck Hospital? You asked!

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In an effort to provide a sort of help desk for the community, the StarNews of Wilmington, North Carolina, launched MyReporter.com earlier this year. The site invites readers to submit questions, which are then answered by staff reporters.

a proposal for what is now MyReporter.com. During the next few months, I built the site by customizing the WordPress blog platform. We launched it with about 300 staff-originated items, followed by readers' questions and our answers. Once they are displayed on the front of the site, all of these Q & A's are then archived. This is the second function of MyReporter.com: to become a growing, eclectic, Wiki-like reference for our community.

The concept was new for us and for the community. We weren't sure how people would take to it or whether they'd even figure out how to use it. With an unexpectedly high volume of questions submitted early on, it turned out to be a positive reception. In our first two weeks, we received about 60 questions, ranging from "How do I find out who's responsible for cleaning and maintaining local roadside ditches?" to "Should I get someone to urinate on me if I have a jellyfish sting?" A number of

questions played off news coverage or led to new stories. For example, North Carolina recently strengthened public smoking laws as they apply to businesses such as restaurants. A question from one reader about how the changes applied to hookah bars resulted in a story pointing out that they likely would be shut down.

## **Paying for MyReporter.com**

Our volume of questions has grown steadily to about 75 each week, about two-thirds of which result in new answers on MyReporter.com. This development, while immensely gratifying, has weighed on the editorial staff. We've assigned the equivalent of about one and one-half full-time journalists to this site, without adding to our staff. Since

MyReporter.com is now one of our Web site's more popular features, we are committed to making it sustainable by finding ways to have it earn revenue.

MyReporter.com's success rests,

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**MyReporter.com's  
success rests, in large  
part, on the quality  
of answers that result  
from using professional  
reporters and editors.**

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in large part, on the quality of answers that result from using professional reporters and editors. We don't want to dilute that, but also we want to preserve our core function of reporting and writing the daily news along with producing enterprise and investigative pieces. Right now, we're using a variety of approaches to balance these seemingly competing priorities, including being more selective about the questions we answer and looking for new resources, such as local experts, to help in our efforts to respond.

Readers have embraced MyReporter.com. Even in its first month, MyReporter.com ranked among our site's most-viewed categories. We'd receive messages such as "No question today, but just a comment that I think this feature is excellent," and "the Web site is the greatest. My father and I spent hours last night reading it." Through questions they ask and their use of MyReporter.com, readers tell us—and the rest

of the community—what they want to know more about. With their excellent questions, they prompt us to provide content that will measure up; the information sharing that is a part of these exchanges sometimes ends up being reverse-published in the paper.

But MyReporter.com has also become a tool that we're using to shape our overall coverage. It's led us, for example, to focus more of our newsroom resources on stories about transportation and development issues. MyReporter.com provides us with a real-time window into our

community's curiosity about our region's culture, history and events. It's one we wouldn't have without them, and this might well turn out to be its greatest value. ■

*Vaughn Hagerty is the Web development manager at the StarNews in Wilmington, North Carolina, and the creator of MyReporter.com, which won the 2009 Knight-Batten Citizen Media Award.*

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# An Explosion Prompts Rethinking of Twitter and Facebook

‘... this explosion was our “aha” moment in experiencing how social media, Twitter, in particular, opens up new possibilities in journalism.’

BY COURTNEY LOWERY

When a building exploded in Bozeman, Montana, last spring, leveling half a block of downtown and throwing debris as far as 200 feet, neither NewWest.Net — a Missoula-based online network covering the Rocky Mountain West — nor any local news organization had a reporter at the scene. But there were plenty of “reporters” there, ready and willing to broadcast via Twitter what was happening.

Within moments of the explosion, Bozeman “tweeps” had posted photos, described in detail the scene, and shared vital emergency information. A few hours later, those on Twitter were offering coverage of the city’s press conference and acting as a larger reporting

team than any individual news organization in the community could have mustered.

Michael Becker, a Bozeman-based journalist who organized the explosion tweets into the now locally famous #bozexplode hashtag, wrote this on his blog:

For a long time, people have been talking about the potential of Twitter as a news source. Today, Twitter earned its stripes.<sup>2</sup>

Since that day in Bozeman, Twitter’s ability—and agility—as a tool to gather and distribute breaking news has been exhibited throughout the world, in Iran and China most notably. Here in Montana,

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<sup>1</sup> NewWest.Net can be found at [www.newwest.net](http://www.newwest.net).

<sup>2</sup> Read Becker’s blog entry that day at [www.hypercrit.net/2009/03/05/what-twitter-did-for-crisis-journalism-today](http://www.hypercrit.net/2009/03/05/what-twitter-did-for-crisis-journalism-today).

this explosion was our “aha” moment in experiencing how social media, Twitter, in particular, opens up new possibilities in journalism.

Before that day, we’d used Twit-

ter to push our stories, viewing it as another channel by which to market our content. The Bozeman explosion demonstrated that its potential is much greater.



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## The Aftermath in Bozeman: I Can Smell Main Street

**I can only wait for the stories we tell for years to come, “What were you doing when Main Street exploded?”**

By Lucia Stewart, 3-06-09

I left the house on Thursday morning in Bozeman to walk a few blocks downtown for the usual errands: meetings, bank, post office, coffee. What I found was my community has been ripped open — literally.

I live nine blocks from the site of the explosion. At 8:12am, it sounded and felt like a dump truck had rammed my house. I ran out of my bedroom naked and then frantically checked out all my windows and thought, That was strange. Didn't feel quite like an earthquake



*A firefighter works near the explosion in downtown Bozeman Thursday. Photo by Greg Lemon.*

NewWest.Net, an online-only publication based in Missoula, Montana, relied extensively on first-person news accounts when half a block of downtown Bozeman was leveled by an explosion last spring, and it had no reporters on the scene.

## Our Learning Curve

At NewWest.Net we began using Twitter and Facebook relatively early, although I can't say we saw a clear path at the beginning. We made some rookie mistakes, the first being using our personal Twitter and Facebook accounts to post NewWest.Net stories, which created a weird intermingling of the personal and professional. Our next one was to link our Twitter account to our Facebook account that, as we learned, is not the point of Facebook.

One of our worst mistakes, and one many news organizations are still making, was to automate. To alleviate the time crunch of having to continually Tweet, we thought: Automation! There must be a way to automate this. And so we created a feed from our pages that on our instruction would post scheduled headlines and links to our Twitter account. That did not go well.

If people wanted to subscribe to our headline feed, they'd do so via RSS or just go to our Web site.

Gradually we began to figure it out. First, we created and ramped up our NewWest.Net Twitter and Facebook accounts. Then, and this is no small task, our CEO and Editor in Chief Jonathan Weber and I carved out the time to use them.

We saw that Twitter is about personality—about adding value to



**The thinking about how to use Twitter at NewWest.Net has evolved over time. An automated feed of headlines was not well received. NewWest.Net's use of Twitter to provide live coverage of the ritzy Yellowstone Club's bankruptcy trial was extremely popular, except with the presiding judge.**

your stories by pulling important information, soliciting feedback and, in general, acting like a human, not like a robot. When we turned off the Twitter link to the Facebook page, one of our readers wrote: “tweets are not fb status posts. glad you got it.” Loud and clear.

We started thinking about our Twitter feed as a separate product, another platform not just to push our journalism, but to do it as well. We used Twitter to do live coverage of stories of our choice. There’s an emphasis here on “choice.” Live-tweeting school board meetings might not quite work. Live-tweeting a high-profile court case, on the other hand, might. It’s all about listening to readers and applying news judgment in deciding which stories lend themselves to which medium.

Our most popular Twitter coverage turned out to be a court case: the bankruptcy trial of the ritzy Yellowstone Club resort. It got so much attention, in fact, that the court banned Weber from tweeting in the courtroom. As it turned out, witnesses and counsel were following our Twitter feed both inside and outside the courtroom. The judge disapproved, even after Weber gave him a personal lesson on what exactly Twitter was.

We’ve also used Twitter to help

aggregate useful information for our readers by re-tweeting what others are saying, sending our followers to other interesting stories and, most importantly, making it a vehicle with which to converse with readers.

Since March, just after the Bozeman explosion, 600 people have become Twitter followers. We’re adding at least three new “friends” or fans on Facebook each day. In the past six months, traffic from Facebook to NewWest.Net has increased by more than 350 percent from the previous six months. It’s now No. 4 on our list of referring sites, up from 26. Traffic from Twitter is up by a bit more than 800 percent and is now our No. 8 means of referral, up from No. 74.

## What Happens Next?

While the traffic boost is certainly good news, the value of using any social media application is found in its ability to facilitate meaningful conversation with users. This is something traditional news entities struggle with and even we—as an online-only publication—haven’t quite figured out how to do yet.

The Bozeman explosion served as a perfect example of how social media and mass media can lean on each

other to create a new form of journalism. Throughout the coverage, I observed a fascinating symbiotic relationship forming. On-site observers used Twitter to cover the event in a way that we, as a small newsroom, could not. On the other hand, only a handful of people, especially in remote Montana, even knew at the time what Twitter was. So as good as the coverage was on Twitter, for the average Montanan, it was inaccessible until news organizations started using the information and pushing it to the broader public. The local radio station went live shortly after the explosion, took calls from people on the scene, and repeated what the anchor was finding out from Twitter.

NewWest.Net and the Bozeman Daily Chronicle both quoted from the Twitter feed, and we directed readers to those people tweeting from the site of the explosion. But we also performed another very important function: We filtered the information and confirmed facts. In most cases, the Twitter community was self-policing, but in one case, a tweet named an unconfirmed casualty and, while the Twitter community acted quickly to quash it, the name had already made the rounds. I don't think this information made it into the mass media.

Again, Becker summed it up quite well on his blog:

Will this sort of thing ever replace those journalists who went into the blast zone this morning, the ones who stood at the press conferences and asked questions? No. Not at all. But Twitter did a job that traditional journalism could not possibly do in a city of this size. It informed the people as quickly as events happened and let people know what they needed to know right away.

Just like every other news organization—online and offline—we're still assessing just how and when to use social media. There are still a lot of unanswered, even unasked, questions. But it's here to stay—and it's here to help us, if we can get past seeing it as a marketing vehicle and learn how to use it to create community by developing a relationship with our readers.

A few months ago, I was given an additional duty in my job description: "Spend meaningful time on Twitter and Facebook." That's something I never thought I'd see. ■

*Courtney Lowery is the editor of NewWest.Net.*

# The 21st Century Journalist's Creed

A former newspaper editor urges journalists to 'let go of the sense that we have control and recognize how much better public service journalism can be when we accept the public as true partners.'

BY MICHAEL R. FANCHER

**T**he whole world is watching." Demonstrators chanted those words in the streets of Chicago in 1968, and many people throughout the world did watch as the story was told through the voices of professional print and broadcast journalists.

That summer I had graduated from the University of Oregon and would spend those next 40 years in journalism, working for just two newspapers. I left The Kansas City Star as city editor in 1978 and spent the next 30 years at The Seattle Times, 20 of them as executive editor. I worked with amazingly talented journalists and for principled owners dedicated to public service journalism. When I retired in 2008, I could not have asked for a more fulfilling career.

Today, the words "the world is watching"—uttered from the streets of Iran and by President Obama—

convey a wholly different sense of the instantaneous global reach of news reports and the multitude of ways that information is collected and delivered. Consider how the world watched Neda Agha Soltan, a 26-year-old music student, die in Tehran this summer. Independent news organizations were prohibited from being in the streets, but two amateur videos—one 37 seconds long and the other 15 seconds—put a tragically beautiful face on the story of post-election protests that the Iranian government sought to suppress. Try as it might, the government couldn't block transmission of images from mobile phone cameras, e-mails, and social networking sites.

In this digital age, the world is watching all of the time, everywhere. People have nearly limitless access to information, allowing them to exercise their own news judgment. They are increasingly

serving as reporters and editors for themselves and others. Indeed, the case has been thoughtfully articulated that, “We’re all journalists now.”<sup>1</sup> And, the question has been provocatively asked, “When everyone can be a publisher, what distinguishes the journalist?”<sup>2</sup>

In considering that question, it is important to recognize that professional journalism is relatively young and has no claim to permanence. At the turn of the last century, “yellow journalism” and sensationalism prompted calls for reform. In 1908, Walter Williams founded the nation’s first journalism school at the University of Missouri, believing that journalists would earn the public’s trust only if they were trained as professionals and held themselves accountable to the highest professional and personal standards.

In 1914 Williams wrote “The Journalist’s Creed,”<sup>3</sup> which begins:

I believe in the profession of journalism. I believe that the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are, to the full measure of their responsibility, trustees for the public; that acceptance of a lesser service than the public service is betrayal of this trust.

I first read “The Journalist’s Creed” as a sophomore working for my high school newspaper, and it inspired me throughout my career. Its core principles of clarity, accuracy, fairness, truth, independence and, above all, public service, remain the heart of journalism today.

But Williams’s “Creed” was written at a time when information was scarce and access to it was limited. Journalism was mostly a one-way relationship with journalists deciding what best served the public. Today, anyone can perform the tradi-

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Gant wrote about this in his book, “We’re All Journalists Now: The Transformation of the Press and Reshaping of the Law in the Internet Age,” published by Free Press in 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur S. Hayes, Jane B. Singer, and Jerry Ceppos wrote about this in an article, “Shifting Roles, Enduring Values: The Credible Journalist in a Digital Age,” published in the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* in 2007.

<sup>3</sup> “The Journalist’s Creed” can be read at [www.journalism.missouri.edu/about/creed](http://www.journalism.missouri.edu/about/creed).

tional functions of journalism, and thus arises a serious question about whether the kind of public service journalism Williams advocated can remain viable in the digital age.

After I retired from The Seattle Times, I was offered a fellowship in

the Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism for the 2008-2009 academic year. Through public forums, research and study during my fellowship, I've come to believe that the imperatives facing journalism are

## Renewing the Journalist's Creed

### Creed Conversation with Dean Mills and Ronald Farrar

April 1, 2009

#### Citizens' Forum

If Walter Williams were alive today, how would he react to the challenges that face journalists? What might the author of "The Journalist's Creed" make of digital technology and its impact on the profession of journalism?

Dean Mills, Dean of the Missouri School of Journalism, and Dr. Ronald Farrar, author of "A Creed for My Profession," a biography of Walter Williams, explore these questions in a conversation moderated by Mike Fancher, Reynolds Journalism Institute Fellow.

#### Creed Conversation with Dean Mills and Ronald Farrar



Former Seattle Times Executive Editor Michael R. Fancher considered the question of whether "The Journalist's Creed," written in 1914 by Walter Williams, founder of the Missouri School of Journalism, remains viable in the digital age.

far more fundamental than I had appreciated. They go beyond the collapse of the business model that supported journalism in the past century.

## Restoring Public Trust

One particularly compelling explanation for what is happening comes out of Forrester Research and is captured in the book “Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies,” published by Harvard Business School Press in 2008. The authors, Forrester analysts Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, define this “groundswell” as “a social trend in which people use technologies to get the things they need from each other, rather than from traditional institutions like corporations.” They assert in “Groundswell” that this is “an important, irreversible, completely different way for people to relate to companies and to each other.”

Li and Bernoff offer this advice: This groundswell won't be stopped, but it can and should be understood. We ought not only to live with it, but thrive in it. Doing so requires new thinking—skill, knowledge, experience and, eventually, enlightenment.

I think everyone associated with journalism and journalism education appreciates the need for acquiring new skills, knowledge and experience. New business models will and are emerging. Of necessity, journalists are rethinking what they do and how they do it.

As for enlightenment, my belief is that journalism must also develop a new ethic of public trust through public engagement. This will require that journalists let go of the sense that we have control and recognize how much better public service journalism can be when we accept the public as true partners. Instead of fearing and resisting this shift, journalists must embrace and lead the way. This fundamental change in perspective isn't just necessary for journalism to survive; it is the right thing for journalists to do.

In the foreword to Charlie Beckett's book “SuperMedia: Saving Journalism So It Can Save the World,” Jeff Jarvis calls this “the natural state of media: two-way and collaborative.” As he observes, “The one-way nature of news media until now was merely a result of the limitations of production and distribution. Properly done, news should be a conversation among those who know and those who want to know,

with journalists—in their new roles as curators, enablers, organizers, educators—helping where they can.”

As the economics, architecture, tools and technology of journalism change, Jarvis writes that he hopes what changes most is the culture: “I hope journalism becomes more open, transparent, inclusive and flexible.”

For this to happen, journalists must put public trust through public engagement at the heart of everything they do. This starts with re-examining the values of journalism—what they should be and how we can live up to them. Research conducted as part of my fellowship project<sup>4</sup> suggests that the public views the core values of journalism differently than journalists do. [See sidebar on next page.]

Journalists can't regain public trust without better understanding and respecting those differences. A new ethic of public trust through public engagement would:

- See the public not as an audience but as a community, of which journalism is a vital part.
- See the Internet not just as a new medium for communication, but as a new way of networking among people, with journalism at the hub.
- Be independent without being indifferent or hostile.
- Feel a responsibility to help the public be smart consumers of news.
- Recognize that journalism isn't just on behalf of the people, but in concert with them.

Most importantly, this new ethic of public engagement can be the sustaining embodiment of Williams's belief that the supreme test of good journalism is the measure of its public service. ■

*Michael R. Fancher was until 2008 the longtime executive editor of The Seattle Times. For the past year, he has been a fellow at the Reynolds Journalism Institute at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.*

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<sup>4</sup> For more information about Fancher's project at the Reynolds Journalism Institute, go to <http://rji.missouri.edu/projects/creed-convo/index.php>.

# The Public and Journalists: They Disagree on Core Values

BY ESTHER THORSON AND MICHAEL R. FANCHER

In considering the modern relevance of Walter Williams's "Journalist's Creed," it was well documented that people who aren't journalists held increasingly negative attitudes toward news organizations. For example, The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press reported in 2004 that from 1996 to that year there was a sharp fall in the percentage of those who reported that they believed most of the news reporting in newspapers and on television.<sup>1</sup> What follows are some specific findings:

- "Your daily paper" fell in the percentage of those saying they believed what was published from 25 percent to 19 percent.
- With USA Today, the number dropped from 24 percent to 19 percent.
- "Your local TV news" experienced a fall from 34 percent to 25 percent.
- With network news, the decrease was 31 percent to 24 percent.

Pew reported this year that only 43 percent of people surveyed thought civic life in their community would be hurt "a lot" by the closing of their local newspaper.<sup>2</sup>

Given these findings, it seemed likely that American citizens and journalists might have a very different sense of what the values of journalism are and should be. To test this idea, however, required identifying

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<sup>1</sup> "News audiences increasingly politicized." Report from The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (2004) <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=838>.

<sup>2</sup> Results from this 2009 Pew study can be read at <http://people-press.org/report/497/many-would-shrug-if-local-newspaper-closed>.

two values dimensions that would capture the essence of modern journalism's code of ethics. At one end, the anchoring idea was "doing no harm"; at the other end was "valuing accuracy regardless of other considerations." The other dimension was anchored by the values of "complete independence of the journalist from all influences" and the "journalist being socially responsible."

Journalists routinely weigh these variables in deciding whether and how to report stories. We tested the application of these values dimensions in three hypothetical situations:

1. A journalist is worried that reporting crime stories involving young male African Americans might lead citizens to falsely stereotype all young African Americans as criminals.
2. Right before an election, a source reveals that a candidate has an illegitimate child.
3. A journalist worries that reporting on CIA illegal activities might tip off others about how that agency is operating to reduce the risk of terrorist attacks in the United States.

We asked college students and a national sample of adults to indicate where they thought an ideal journalist would be in dealing with these possible stories based on the two values dimensions. We then asked them where they thought real journalists would be given the same set of circumstances. We also posed the same questions to a large national sample of editors and reporters, asking them to show us where they would put themselves on the dimensions for each scenario.

Here is some of what we found:

- **Independence:** As a journalistic value, independence was more significant to reporters than to students, adults or editors, who lined up closely with each other.
- **Minimizing harm:** This value basically didn't register with any of the groups. Journalists use situational ethics in relation to minimizing harm; it's much stronger for them in political stories. Students are situational as well, but show the opposite pattern than journalists. Adults consistently favor accuracy over minimizing harm.
- **Gaps between ideal and real:** In the responses of adults and col-

lege students, significant gaps emerged between their ideal and what they thought journalists would really do. Social responsibility is a higher value for adults than for journalists or students.

- **Journalists agreed:** Editors and reporters tended to make the same basic decisions in how they would cover each story.

Here is where these findings took our thinking:

- **Independence:** Journalists need to better articulate the meaning and importance of independence as a value, while also better understanding and respecting why the public puts less emphasis on it.
- **Minimizing harm:** These results support other recent research asserting that the admonition to “minimize harm” requires clarification.
- **Misperceptions:** Students and adults have very inaccurate perceptions of the values of journalists. Their ideal journalists match real journalists better than their predictions of what journalists actually value.
- **Journalists’ values and the public:** While agreement among

editors and reporters can be regarded as shared professional values honed over time, it can also be interpreted as an inclination to make judgments through a common, narrow filter. This becomes significant when journalists’ choices are compared to the judgments preferred by the public.

It was clear that adults and college students feel that the values journalists use in making their decisions don’t match their own. This gap won’t be closed merely by journalists explaining their values, though this is an important step for them to take; they must also understand and respect the values of the public they hope to serve, just as the public can learn why journalists hold to the values they do.

These findings contributed to the conclusion—described in greater detail in the accompanying article—that journalism must also develop a new ethic of public trust through public engagement. ■

*Esther Thorson is dean of graduate studies and research at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.*

# Why the News Media Became Irrelevant—And How Social Media Can Help

‘Only the savviest of journalists are using the networks for the real value they provide in today’s culture—as ways to establish relationships and listen to others.’

BY MICHAEL SKOLER

**J**ournalists are truth-tellers. But I think most of us have been lying to ourselves. Our profession is crumbling and we blame the Web for killing our business model. Yet it's not the business model that changed on us. It's the culture.

Mainstream media were doing fine when information was hard to get and even harder to distribute. The public expected journalists to report the important stories, pull together information from sports scores to stock market results, and then deliver it all to our doorsteps, radios and TVs. People trusted journalists and, on our side, we delivered news that was relevant—it helped people connect with neighbors, be active citizens, and lead richer lives.

Advertisers, of course, footed the bill for newsgathering. They

wanted exposure and paid because people, lots of people, were reading our newspapers or listening to and watching our news programs.

But things started to change well before the Web became popular. Over the past few decades, news conglomerates took over local papers and stations. Then they cut on-the-ground reporters, included more syndicated content from news services, and focused local coverage on storms, fires, crashes and crime to pad profit margins. The news became less local and less relevant, and reporters became less connected to their communities. Surveys show a steep drop in public trust in journalism occurring during the past 25 years.

As discontent grew among the audience, the Internet arrived. Now people had choices. If the local pa-

per and stations weren't considered trustworthy and journalists seemed detached from what really mattered to them, people could find what they wanted elsewhere. What's more, they could stop being passive recipients. They could dig deeply into topics, follow their interests, and share their knowledge and passions with others who cared about similar things.

## Connecting Through Trust

The truth is the Internet didn't steal the audience. We lost it. Today fewer people are systematically reading our papers and tuning into our news programs for a simple reason—many people don't feel we serve them anymore. We are, literally, out of touch.

Today, people expect to share information, not be fed it. They expect to be listened to when they have knowledge and raise questions. They want news that connects with their lives and interests. They want control over their information. And they want connection—they give their trust to those they engage with—people who talk with them, listen and maintain a relationship.

Trust is key. Many younger people don't look for news anymore because it comes to them. They simply

assume their network of friends—those they trust—will tell them when something interesting or important happens and send them whatever their friends deem to be trustworthy sources, from articles, blogs, podcasts, Twitter feeds, or videos.

Mainstream media are low on the trust scale for many and have been slow to reach out in a genuine way to engage people. Many news organizations think interaction is giving people buttons to push on Web sites or creating a walled space where people can “comment” on the news or post their own “iReports.”

People aren't fooled by false interaction if they see that news staff don't read the comments or citizen reports, respond and pursue the best ideas and knowledge of the audience to improve their own reporting. Journalists can't make reporting more relevant to the public until we stop assuming that we know what people want and start listening to the audience.

We can't create relevance through limited readership studies and polls, or simply by adding neighborhood sections to our Web sites. We need to listen, ask questions, and be genuinely open to what our readers, listeners and watchers tell us is important everyday. We need to cre-

ate a new journalism of partnership, rather than preaching.

And that's where social media can guide us. If we pay attention and use these tools, we can better understand today's culture and what creates value for people.

## Relying on Collective Wisdom

Today's new culture is about connection and relationship. Social networks are humming because they fit the spirit of the time, not because they created the spirit of sharing. They're about listening to others and responding. They're about pursuing our interests because we know they will converge with the interests of others. The new culture values sharing information and being surprised by the experiences, knowledge and voices of others.

The old journalism, with its overreliance on the same experts and analysts, is out of touch with a culture of information sharing, connection and the collective wisdom of diverse voices passing along direct experience.

Take Wikipedia as an example. For better or worse, most school kids treat it as the first place to go for information, and so do many adults. It's not written by scholars,

as is Encyclopædia Britannica, but by citizen experts. In today's culture, collective expertise carries as much or more weight than scholarship or deference to titles. And while fewer than 45,000 people are actively contributing to the nearly three million English articles on the site, people know that anyone can contribute, and they have trust in the culture's collective wisdom.

Digg and reddit are popular as sites because they are about collective wisdom and trust. These social bookmarking sites help people find relevant news based on who is recommending stories. Anyone can play, even if experienced and dedicated users have an advantage. Twitter is half diary and half stream of consciousness, and it is all about relationships and trust because it is easy to follow people, see if there is a connection, and drop those you don't like.

## Changing Journalism's Culture

Social media sites are not doing journalism, though sometimes breaking news shows up there (like when a plane crash-lands in the Hudson River). For the most part, they rely on news coverage from mainstream media organizations to produce their value. And these sites are not yet prof-

itable. They are not models for the new journalism. But they do serve the new culture and point to how news organizations must change to be considered relevant and value-creating.

Of course, news organizations are rushing onto social networks, adding social bookmark buttons, and creating Twitter feeds at a torrid pace. But for the wrong reasons. You can hear the cries in newsrooms of “we need to be on Facebook, we need to Twitter” as a fervent attempt to win followers and increase traffic on their sites.

Mainstream media see social media as tools to help them distribute and market their content. Only the savviest of journalists are using the networks for the real value they provide in today’s culture—as ways to establish relationships and listen to others. The bright news organizations and journalists spend as much time listening on Twitter as they do tweeting.

Most of the discussion about the “future of journalism” these days centers on finding the new business model that will support journalism in the Internet age. Yet that is premature. There is no magic model that will save us, if only we could find it. We have no business model unless people need our work to en-

rich their daily lives and value it highly enough to depend on it.

Unquestionably, we must be creative about designing new models and smart about marketing our work. But a fact of business is that people only pay for what has obvious value to them. Every good business plan starts by explaining how it creates value for the customer.

The problem with mainstream media isn’t that we’ve lost our business model. We’ve lost our value. We are not as important to the lives of our audience as we once were. Social media are the route back to a connection with the audience. And if we use them to listen, we’ll learn how we can add value in the new culture.

The new journalism must be a journalism of partnership. Only with trust and connection will a new business model emerge. ■

*Michael Skoler, a 1993 Nieman Fellow, is a Reynolds Journalism Institute Fellow at the University of Missouri School of Journalism. He founded the Public Insight Journalism model used by a dozen public broadcasting newsrooms to partner with their audiences. He wrote “Fear, Loathing and the Promise of Public Insight Journalism” in the Winter 2005 Nieman Reports.*

# Media Users, Media Creators: Principles of Active Engagement

In transforming ‘ourselves from passive consumers of media into active users . . . we’ll have to instill throughout our society principles that add up to critical thinking and honorable behavior.’

BY DAN GILLMOR

*This article is adapted, in part, from an essay Gillmor wrote in 2008 as part of the Media Re:public project ([www.mediarepublic.org](http://www.mediarepublic.org)) at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. In the Winter 2008 Nieman Reports, Persephone Miel, who directed that project, wrote “Media Re:public: My Year in the Church of the Web.”*

In the age of democratized media, the tools of creation are increasingly in everyone’s hands. The personal computer that I’m using to write this essay comes equipped with media creation and editing tools of such depth that I can’t begin to learn all their capabilities. One of the devices I use regularly boasts video recording and playback, still-camera mode, audio recording, text messaging, and GPS loca-

tion, among other tools that make it a powerful media creation device (and, by the way, it’s a phone).

Equally important in this world of democratized media, we can make what we create widely accessible. With traditional media, we produced something, usually manufactured, and then distributed it—put it in trucks or broadcast it to receivers in a one-to-many mode. Today, we create media and post it online. We make it available; people come and get it. There’s an element of distribution here, by virtue of letting people know it’s there, but the essential fact in a one-to-one or many-to-many world is availability.

This democratization gives people who have been mere consumers the ability to be creators. With few exceptions, we are all becoming the latter as well as the former, though

to varying degrees. More exciting, some creators become collaborators.

What does this mean? For one thing, contrary to the panic we're hearing from newspaper people whose jobs are disappearing, the end of our oligopolistic system of media and journalism is good news, not something to dread. Indeed, I no longer worry about a sufficient supply of journalism, not in the emerging age of abundance. We'll have ample amounts of information and journalism—in some ways, too ample.

Why, given the crumbling of newspapers and the news industry in general, should we believe in abundance? Just look around. The number of experiments taking place in new media is stunning and heartening. Entrepreneurs are moving swiftly to become pioneers in tomorrow's news. Philanthropic enterprises are filling gaps they perceive in coverage. Even the tra-



**The Mediactive project consists of a book, Web site, and more with the goal of creating a user's guide to democratized media and persuading people who have been passive consumers to become active users.**

ditional media dinosaurs are, probably too late, moving to adapt to the changes that have put them in such difficulty, namely the transition from monopoly and oligopoly to a truly competitive marketplace.

Most of the experiments in new journalism and business models will fail. That is the nature of the new and of start-up cultures. But even a small percentage of successes will still be a large number because so many people are trying. We won't lack for supply, though we should

never stop trying to make it better.

But to ensure that this supply of information is useful and trustworthy, we'll have to rethink our relationship with media. In the supply and demand system that guides all marketplaces, including the marketplace of ideas and information, we need better demand, not just more supply. To ensure that demand, we'll need to transform ourselves from passive consumers of media into active users. And to accomplish that, we'll have to instill throughout our society principles that add up to critical thinking and honorable behavior.

Even those of us who are creating a variety of media are still—and always will be—more consumers than creators. For all of us in this category, the principles (illuminated below) come mostly from common sense. Call them skepticism, judgment, understanding and reporting.

Media saturation requires us to become more active as consumers, in part to manage the flood of data pouring over us each day but also to make informed judgments about the significance of what we do see. And when we create media that serves a public interest or journalistic role, we need to understand what it means to

be journalistic, as well as how we can help make it better and more useful. This adds up to a new kind of media literacy, based on key principles for both consumers and creators. These categories will overlap to some degree—as do their principles, each of which requires an active, not passive, approach to media.

## Active Media Users, Not 'Consumers'

**Be skeptical of absolutely everything.** We can never take entirely for granted the absolute trustworthiness of what we read, see, hear and use. This is the case for information from traditional news organizations, blogs, online videos, and every other form known now or yet to be invented.

**Although skepticism is essential, don't be equally skeptical of everything.** We all have an internal "trust meter" of sorts, largely based on education and experience. We need to bring to digital media a more rigorous level of parsing, adapted from but going far beyond what we learned in a less complex time when there were only a few primary sources of information. A key point: Some things deserve negative credibility;

that is, they would need to improve just to achieve zero credibility.

**Go outside your personal comfort zone.** The “echo chamber” effect—our tendency as human beings to seek information that we’re likely to agree with—is well known. To be well informed, we need to seek out and pay attention to sources of information that will offer new perspectives and challenge our assumptions. This is easier than ever before, due to the enormous amount of news and analysis available on the Internet. If we’re not relentless with ourselves, we can’t expect much of others.

**Ask more questions.** This principle goes by many names: research, reporting, homework and many others. The more personal or important you consider the topic at hand, the more essential it becomes to follow up on the media that cover the topic. Lifelong learning is now accepted as fundamental, and it applies to our use of media, too.

**Understand and learn media techniques.** In a media-saturated society, we need to know how digital media work. The techniques of media creation are becoming second nature,

at least to younger people. But it’s equally essential to understand the ways people use media to persuade and manipulate. Moreover, we need to help each other know who’s doing the manipulating.

## Media Creation, When Credibility Matters

**Do your homework and then do some more.** You can’t know everything, but good reporters try to learn as much as they can about a topic. It’s better to know much more than you publish than to leave big holes in your story. The best reporters always want to make one more call, check with one more source, because they worry that the fact(s) they don’t know are the ones that might matter the most.

**Get it right, every time.** Accuracy is the starting point for all solid journalism. Get your facts right, then check them again. Factual errors, especially ones that are easily avoidable, do more to undermine trust than almost any other failing.

**Be fair to everyone.** Whether you are trying to explain something from a neutral point of view or arguing from a specific side, fairness

counts. You can't be perfectly fair, and people will see what you've said from their own perspectives, but making the effort is more than worth the difficulty. Like all of these principles, fairness is a never-ending process, not an outcome.

**Think independently, especially of your own biases.** Being independent can mean many things, but independence of thought may be most important. Creators of media, not just consumers, need to venture beyond their personal comfort zones.

**Practice and demand transparency.** This is essential not just for citizen journalists and other new media creators but also for those in traditional media. The kind and extent of transparency may differ. For example, bloggers should reveal biases. Meanwhile, traditional journalists may have pledged individually not to have conflicts of interest, but that doesn't mean they are unbiased. They should help their audiences understand what they do, and why, in the course of their journalism.

Who should teach or coach these principles? Parents and schools,

of course, should lead. It's tragic, however, that journalism organizations haven't made this one of their core missions over the years; had they done so they might not be in as much trouble because they would have helped people understand better what it takes, from all of us, to have the kind of news and information we need.

These principles are just the beginning of a larger conversation. In my new project called "Mediactive"—which includes a book I am writing, a Web site<sup>1</sup> and more—I intend to explore ways to help foster a new generation of activist media users and better journalism in general. Most of all, what I hope to contribute to is a society in which critical thinking is understood as not just an interesting concept but an essential part of our daily lives. ■

*Dan Gillmor is director of the Knight Center for Digital Media Entrepreneurship at Arizona State University's Cronkite School of Journalism & Mass Communication. He is author of "We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People," published by O'Reilly Media in 2004.*

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<sup>1</sup> The Mediactive Web site can be found at <http://mediactive.com>.

# Creating Ethical Bridges From Journalism to Digital News

‘... what appears on Web sites and on blogs is not generally regarded as adhering to standards that govern legacy news organizations.’

BY JAN LEACH

If all content consumed will be digital within 10 years, as Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer told an international advertising audience in late June, then it's time to embrace our roles as “digital doers,” and figure out how best to connect digital consumers to reliable news and information. Improving credibility will be high among our strategies, and this means more attention must be paid to ethics.

As Ballmer put it, “Static content won't cut it for the consumer in the future.” Neither will static ethics; as media evolve so, too, will ethical guidelines.

Digital media—and the emerging use of social media—are exponentially expanding the reach of journalism, and this presents us, its practitioners (and those whom we hope to reach) with opportunities and dilemmas. Among those

who gather news, publish it and consume it, ethical questions will be raised by the demands and possibilities of this new media environment—one that now embraces social engagement as a core function. Views on ethics will intersect and overlap among players, and there doubtless will be places where opinions diverge. It's unlikely that agreement will be easy to find across the wide range of ethical issues, but unity ought to be expressed in ways that let digital consumers know we are thinking hard about these emerging ethical issues.

Here is a sample of some of the ethical issues rising to the surface:

- How will journalists and/or news organizations approach the issue of posting stories on personal or company Web sites

or blogs? If a reporter covering a local business posts negative information or complaints about the business on his news organization's site, does that compromise the reporter's objectivity?

- Is it appropriate for reporters to publish on a personal blog their opinion about a source, an event, or a story?
- Does posting of personal opinion compromise a reporter's fairness? If opinion is discouraged, does that infringe on free expression? Does it "dehumanize" the reporter?
- In an environment where anonymity rules, how is the accuracy of user-generated content such as tips, articles, photos and video, to be determined? And how are consumers to be alerted?
- When news organizations invite and feature citizen contributions, does publishing these stories on their site transfer "authority" to information that may be biased or incomplete?
- Posted without any moderation, comments about articles often stray off topic or, worse, devolve into name calling and ugly slurs. Does the anonymity of the Web culture encourage animosity? If so, is moderating essential for a

news organization? Or is churlish online debate simply the price to be paid for increased online traffic?

Journalism's reliance on the tools of social media is evident already. What this means for a battered journalism industry is significant. Consider the coverage of the post-election protests in Iran. With journalists banished or silenced by the Iranian government, news organizations and Web sites relied on showing random snippets of video or text messages or tweets sent from people witnessing the protests on the streets of Tehran. Having access to these images and words, but not being certain of what was being shown or who was sending the information, troubled many journalists on this end of the story. News organizations were confronted with what seemed their only choice: publish unconfirmed, yet compelling pictures and information or be left behind and considered uncompetitive in breaking and updating news accounts of this global story. A New York Times story well captured this dilemma: After acknowledging the difficulty in substantiating some of the citizen-witness information, news

managers admitted that texts and cell phone video were the only way they had to cover the protests.<sup>1</sup>

The Iran protest coverage illuminates how legacy media's goals now intersect with social media's tools. Accuracy and credibility are still seen as worthy goals, but do traditional reporting rules—among them the attempt to reach all sides before publishing a story and verification of information—take too long? Should posting of unverified information as news raise questions about accuracy and bias?

It's possible that as various news gathering and social media efforts intersect with greater frequency, they might also find themselves moving in very different directions in terms of their goals and purpose. Even as they do, credibility and ethical concerns should continue to be

points of intersection and overlap.

Areas of overlap are likely to be found, for example, in the emerging voices of diverse communities and in feedback from users. A great strength of the Internet is its ability to encourage the formation of

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**... as various news gathering and social media efforts intersect with greater frequency, they might also find themselves moving in very different directions in terms of their goals and purpose.**

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community while giving voice to anyone digitally connected. In journalism, recognizing diversity and inviting feedback adds depth and human interest. Those who are overlooked in mainstream media coverage, including people espousing unpop-

ular causes, will use the Internet to gather and share information and use it to stitch online communities together.

Yet, some are expressing concerns related to the nature of the Web-user's experience. In digital media, people self-select information and news to read or view. Of-

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<sup>1</sup> "Journalism Rules Are Bent in News Coverage From Iran" can be read at [www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/business/media/29coverage.html?ref=business](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/business/media/29coverage.html?ref=business).

ten what they search for is biased toward affirming what they already know and believe. Then, by using social media tools, they share links with an online community of self-selected friends. The notion of reaching more diverse and broader communities with information and news all but evaporates in the fragmentation that characterizes digital media.

## Ethical Issues

Areas of disconnect between the practices of journalists and the emerging conventions of digital/social media demonstrate the need for ethical guidelines. Among the issues are:

- Authenticating sources of information, especially when they are provided by an anonymous source
- Assuring the reliability of information on linked sites
- Dealing with conflicts of interest
- Concerns involving lack of oversight or accountability.

These ethical issues, and many others, have been discussed in journalism organizations for years. And numerous industry and news orga-

nization policies have been created to address them, even if ethical lapses still occur with worrisome regularity. But even this organized step of establishing guidelines hasn't happened yet within digital/social media. Some news organizations have drawn up policies regarding ethical reporting conduct when using social media sites such as Facebook and MySpace, and on occasion one hears stirrings among bloggers to urge the development of standards to address ethics. Still, however, what appears on Web sites and on blogs is not generally regarded as adhering to standards that govern legacy news organizations.

When it comes to news reporting via social media, conversations about ethical standards and guidelines ought to be taking place in more news organizations. Right now, digital consumers are right to feel confused by what they read and watch online. When they see user-generated content on a news outlet such as CNN (and CNN.com), they might believe it has been verified as any other news story on CNN would be, even if the iReports page is labeled "Unedited. Unfiltered." And as they travel around the Web and link to and read blog posts and in-

formation on other Web sites, what gets blurred is the line separating personal opinion and unverified information from what journalists are reporting.

In his keynote talk at the Poynter Kent State Media Ethics Workshop in the fall of 2008, PressThink blogger Jay Rosen described online media as an “open system” that offers anyone with access to the Web the opportunity to contribute news and commentary.<sup>2</sup> For digital does the challenge will be to find ways to embrace this open system without sacrificing what it takes to sustain credibility.

Here are two recommendations: transparency and education. Though many ethical tenets are contained within these suggestions, maintaining a focus on journalistic transparency and on passing along reliable news and information to consumers will give credibility to digital/social media. Explain to consumers what is being covered, how it's been reported, and what information might be missing. Avoid sensationalism and offer context. Invite feedback and provide cau-

tionary warnings to readers when feedback is not moderated. Explain conflicts, even potential conflicts of interest. Prominently label Web pages that contain user-generated content and, provide signals to point out discrepancies between user-generated and reporter-generated information. Strive for accuracy, and make sure that information about transparency is visible.

Educating online users about journalistic ethics—what they are and why they matter—will require effort and commitment. And journalists will not be—nor should they be—the only ones raising ethical questions and figuring out ways in this digital territory to find a place for standards that speak to the credibility of the content we read and watch. ■

*Jan Leach is an assistant professor of journalism at Kent State University and director of Kent's Media Law Center for Ethics and Access. She is the former editor of the Akron Beacon Journal and a 2004 Ethics Fellow at The Poynter Institute.*

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<sup>2</sup> Watch Rosen deliver his remarks, “If Blogging Had No Ethics, Blogging Would Have Failed (But It Didn't. So Let's Get a Clue),” at <http://jmc.kent.edu/ethicsworkshop08/keynote.php>.

# Closing the Credibility Gap

Web users have developed a set of tools for deciding what to trust online, and now journalists can learn from them.

By **SCOTT ROSENBERG**

In November 1996, Pierre Salinger, former ABC News correspondent and White House press secretary to President John F. Kennedy, inspired a brief flurry of headlines when he stepped forward with what he claimed was dramatic news: He'd found documents proving that U.S. Navy missiles had shot down TWA Flight 800, which had crashed in the Atlantic Ocean earlier that year.

The FBI looked at Salinger's papers and identified them as identical to discredited documents that had been floating around the Internet's Usenet newsgroups for months.

Whoops! Salinger's snookering illustrated a common failing among journalists at that early point in the Internet's rise—a sort of online credulity syndrome. Somehow, he'd concluded that if information was published online and seemed real, it must be trustworthy. Once Salinger placed his imprimatur on the story, his credentials as a media insider ushered it past the usual check-

points. It wound up all over cable news and front pages.

This sequence of events was plainly a failure of the journalistic process. But its coverage as news reframed it as a failure of the Internet. The problem, observers like Matthew Wald of The New York Times declared, was that the Web just can't be trusted: "It used to be called gossip. Now it takes the form of e-mail or Internet postings, and it has a new credibility."

As I read this coverage, I fumed. I'd already been online for half a decade, and I'd left my newspaper job a year before to help start Salon.com, a professional news magazine on the Web. I knew that the Internet sped up the diffusion of rumors—and that it also accelerated their debunking. Surely it behooved newsroom pros to grasp the dynamics of this unfamiliar but fascinating process. The flow of information was changing fast in front of us, and reporters, of all people, needed to become experts in navigating that flow.

Journalists should have been leaders in teaching others how to gauge the trustworthiness of information in this exciting but anarchic new environment. Instead, they were making awful public mistakes themselves, such as this one, and then scapegoating the Internet.

## Breakdown of Trust

This Salinger flap set me on a trajectory, for the next several years, of chronicling the triangular breakdown of trust I saw unfolding among the media, the Web, and the general public. Journalists thought they could defend the reputation of their newspapers and broadcast outlets by trying to discredit the upstart online world. Internet natives and recent immigrants to it lost respect for many mainstream journalists, concluding that they were clueless about the emerging online medium. Members of the public, instead of enjoying a smooth transition guided by the journalists they knew and trusted, found themselves asked to take sides in an intramedia feud.

In this melee, everyone lost. Today's newsrooms are full of journalists with considerably more Web experience and online savvy than their predecessors, but the "blame

the Web" reflex is now deeply embedded in the media-professional psyche, emerging on cue each time some hapless journalist makes a Salingeresque mistake.

Fortunately, we now have a wide range of reasonably sophisticated tools and approaches for rating the quality of information on the Web. Here are a few examples:

- Reliable online coverage documents its assertions with links to primary sources; the absence of such links is a red flag.
- Good bloggers lay out their backgrounds and biases in a stream of posts over the years, allowing readers to decide where they can be trusted and where they lose their bearings.
- Every page on Wikipedia—the collectively assembled and edited online encyclopedia—has a "discussion" tab where users can see who has challenged what and a "history" tab that shows every change to the page's information.

The comments area found below most Web articles and posts provides a natural space for give-and-take about possible errors, omissions and problems with the coverage—and how a site handles

such issues is another way to decide whom to trust.

Anonymous sources remain as suspect online as they are in any other medium, but new opportunities to examine who links to any site and what they say about it often yield insights, even about sites that don't tell us their authors' names.

These customs and practices for assessing the trustworthiness of information online have evolved in the years since Salinger's gaffe. Throughout that time, journalists have also often found themselves in a defensive crouch, unwilling or unable to embrace the Web's new techniques. Large media companies spent years discouraging outbound links from their Web sites, citing business reasons, and they still lag behind. Newsroom traditions of impersonality and aspirations to objectivity mean that most newspaper bylines remain opaque in comparison with the full profiles we have for our favorite bloggers. Newsroom culture remains committed to delivering a finished product to readers, so the Wikipedia-style

"discussion" and "history" pages aren't an option. And the comments feature on most newspaper sites serves as an outlet for readers to vent frustration, rather than an arena for collaboration between readers and journalists.

All this has left editors and reporters employed by traditional news organizations scratching their heads, wondering how it is that their time-honored approaches have continued to lose trust and readers, while new-media upstarts multiply and thrive.

Earlier this year, a 22-year-old Dublin student inserted a bogus quote into

the Wikipedia entry for composer Maurice Jarre, who had just passed away. Wikipedia's moderators did a pretty good job of removing the unsourced quotation, but not before it had been picked up by a depressingly high number of news outlets for use in their Jarre obituaries.

Surely, in 2009, working journalists must understand how to use Wikipedia. It was easy to discover that this quotation had been added to the Jarre page after the compos-

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**Newsroom culture remains committed to delivering a finished product to readers, so the Wikipedia-style "discussion" and "history" pages aren't an option.**

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# MediaBugs: Correcting Errors and Conversing

The Knight News Challenge describes Rosenberg's MediaBugs project:

All journalists make mistakes, but they sometimes view admitting errors as a mark of shame. MediaBugs aims to change this climate, by promoting transparency and providing recognition for those who admit and fix their mistakes. ... Comments will

be tracked to see if they create a conversation between the reporter and the person who submitted the error, and then show whether corrections or changes resulted.

MediaBugs<sup>1</sup> will launch a pilot project in the San Francisco Bay Area in late 2009 or early 2010, and once it begins people will be able report errors in any news report—online and offline. ■

er's passing; one click on the page's "history" tab brought up all the information you'd need. Apparently, not a single obit writer of the many who used the quotation bothered to make that simple inquiry.

The quotes would most likely have stood, uncorrected, had the student prankster not notified the publications of their error himself. That's depressing enough in itself. It's even sadder when we realize that, 13 years

since Salinger's mistake, there are still so many journalists who know less than their readers do about how to read critically online. ■

*Scott Rosenberg is the author of "Say Everything: How Blogging Began, What It's Becoming, and Why It Matters," published by Crown this summer. He was awarded a Knight News Challenge grant for his project, MediaBugs.*

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<sup>1</sup> MediaBugs can be found at [www.mediabugs.org/blog/](http://www.mediabugs.org/blog/)

# Blogging: Taking a Look After a Decade of Growth

Scott Rosenberg's book, "Say Everything: How Blogging Began, What It's Becoming, and Why It Matters," looks at the history of blogging and offers his opinions on what, after 10 years of existence, the medium can provide.

The book opens with the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, which sent countless bloggers in the city and across the country to their keyboards to chronicle the moment. Rosenberg credits these blogs with jumpstarting the modern blogosphere, as he writes in his introduction that "in September 2001, conventional wisdom held that Web content was 'dead.'"

Web content was not, of course, dead, and Rosenberg uses the book to discuss the course it has taken since then and even dates the now-familiar organization of a blog (newest items on top, oldest on the bottom) to the Internet's very first Web site. The book also focuses on a number of

the influential players in the history of blogging.

Naturally, he also discusses the longstanding feud between these bloggers and the mainstream press, examining the ways that each has influenced the other and taking on the question of blogger vs. journalist by writing:

The answer has always seemed simple and obvious: writing a blog neither qualified nor disqualified you for the "journalist" label.

Blogging could be journalism anytime the person writing a blog chose to act like a journalist—recording and reacting to the events of the day, asking questions and seeking answers, checking facts and fixing errors. Similarly, journalists could become bloggers anytime they adopted the format of a blog as a vessel for their work.

■—Jonathan Seitz

# Confessing Errors in a Digital Age

‘With accuracy as the foundation of media credibility, setting the record straight is essential to restoring trust that is eroded by errors.’

BY SCOTT R. MAIER

‘**A**ccuracy is our goal, and candor is our defense,” proclaims The Washington Post’s credo for handling corrections and doing so promptly. Imagine the chagrin when earlier this year the newspaper’s ombudsman, Andy Alexander, discovered a backlog of hundreds of correction requests; a few dated back to 2004. In his column, “A Corrections Process in Need of Correcting,” Alexander observed that reporting inaccuracy for some was akin to “sending a correction request into a black hole.”

Rest assured that the Post won’t be lonely in digging deep into this black hole. News errors rarely are corrected. In a study I did of factual errors reported to 10 daily newspapers, I found that nearly all—97 percent—went uncorrected. Nevertheless, survey research indicates the majority of U.S. newspaper editors and reporters believe that a correc-

tion “always” follows a detected error. This level of faith is not widely shared by newspaper readers.

It’s important to understand why newspapers have tended to fall short on their perceived commitment to correct what they got wrong the first time around. And in a time when anybody can easily post—and pass along—news and information online (usually without an editor’s scrutiny), the need is greater than ever to set in place a coherent system of correcting errors—despite the digital practitioners’ assurances about the Web’s inherent self-correcting nature.

With accuracy as the foundation of media credibility, setting the record straight is essential to restoring trust that is eroded by errors. The code of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists states: “Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.”

So, if corrections are agreed to be a fundamental contract of journalism, then why have newspapers shown themselves to be hesitant, at times, to acknowledge their errors? I'd propose a few explanations:

**Unwillingness to recognize that errors are numerous:**

Journalists err more often than many in the profession acknowledge—or even realize. The first step in overcoming inaccuracy is to recognize that errors in the press are far more numerous than the “corrections box” would indicate. Industry and scholarly research have documented time and time again that errors in the news media are disturbingly common. The largest accuracy audit, a recent study that Philip Meyer and I conducted of 22 newspapers, found an error rate among the highest in seven decades of accuracy research: over 59 percent of local news and feature stories were found by news sources to have at least one error.<sup>1</sup> Still to be assessed

by research is the toll on accuracy brought by newsroom staff reductions and the concurrent expansion to 24/7 operations producing print and digital editions of the news.

**Hesitancy in offering corrections:**

In a follow-up study, I tracked 1,220 news stories identified by news sources as being factually flawed. Of those, corrections were published for 23 of them, a corrections rate slightly below two percent.

**Hesitancy in demanding corrections:**

Journalists and news organizations are often unaware of the errors they've made. In our cross-market examination of accuracy in U.S. newspapers, Meyer and I found that only about one in 10 news sources informed the newspaper of errors that they'd identified.<sup>2</sup> While many errors were considered too inconsequential to correct, news sources also expressed a sense of futility; either a correction would do little

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<sup>1</sup> This study, “Accuracy Matters: A Cross-Market Assessment of Newspaper Error and Credibility,” was published in the Autumn 2005 issue of *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* and in Meyer's book, *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age* (University of Missouri Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> The article, “Setting the Record Straight: When the Press Errs, Do Corrections Follow?” can be read at [www.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/0/9/1/5/3/pages91538/p91538-1.php](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/9/1/5/3/pages91538/p91538-1.php).

to set the record straight, or worse, that their complaints would draw reprisal from the newspaper. The study's findings are consistent with a large-scale public survey by Associated Press Managing Editors, in which many people told pollsters that they don't contact newspapers about mistakes.

**Reader complaints are often ignored or denied:** The news media can hardly be expected to correct errors they do not know were made. But what happens when mistakes are brought to their attention? Too often, very little. Of 130 news stories in which the news sources said they informed the newspapers of factual inaccuracy, complaints yielded only four published corrections. In other words, the corrections rate budged barely higher (three percent compared to two percent) when sources reported factual errors than when they did not inform the newspaper of errors.

There are few incentives to acknowledge errors. Even quality newspapers often lack a system or culture of vigilance when handling reported errors. As Alexander noted in his Washington Post column, "Accountability is lacking. Reporters

and editors can neglect correction requests with little consequence. Correction rates are not typically raised in performance evaluations."

## Corrections Online

The corrections system is often flawed in print journalism, but the checks and balances needed to assure accuracy are arguably even more haphazard with the journalism that news organizations display online. In a survey of 155 U.S. newspapers, my colleague John Russial found that in only half of the newsrooms were stories posted online always copyedited. Among larger newspapers (circulation above 100,000), a quarter reported they never copyedit online stories. Blogs received even less scrutiny—only one third of editors said they copyedit these Web postings. This sharply contrasts with the print tradition of having all stories, including staff columns and guest op-eds, be edited for accuracy, style, taste and libel.

"Unlike reporters and photographers, copyeditors have not been invited to participate in the online revolution at many newspapers. That failure might have serious implications for the quality of newspapers," Russial dryly concludes in an

article published in the Newspaper Research Journal.<sup>3</sup>

Many bloggers contend that online news needs less editorial oversight because readers quickly point out errors and content is corrected in real time. “We need to realize that journalism and the telling of a news story is a process, and we don’t have to wait until we have everything before we publish,” writes Mathew Ingram in a PoynterOnline column with the provocative headline, “Break Journalism Rules When You Blog?” Ingram continues: “That doesn’t mean we should stop at telling just part of a story, of course; but it is fine to publish something short, then update, edit and correct. That’s what wire services do, after all.” A responsible blogger, Ingram adds, acknowledges mistakes and corrects them.

Still, a clear standard for handling online errors is lacking. As freelance journalist and author Craig Silverman notes in his “Regret the Error” column, news organizations often “scrub” their errors online. This means that an entire story can disappear without explanation when it has

been found to have been erroneously reported. Yet, others not only quickly correct errors but acknowledge within the article what had been previously misreported. Unformulated, too, are accepted standards for correcting assertions made in citizen videos, blogs and other forms of social media.<sup>4</sup>

Silverman argues that acknowledgement of inaccuracy is even more essential in an online world than in print because it is virtually impossible to erase erroneous information posted on the Internet. He writes: “Online errors don’t disappear like yesterday’s print edition. News organizations need to recognize what the new permanence means for errors and corrections, and act accordingly.”

## Improving Accuracy

News accuracy is an age-old challenge, now heightened by the online realities of real-time, multimedia reporting by citizens as well as professional journalists. While it’s not plausible, or perhaps even desirable, for every news error to be detected and corrected, clearly the profession—in print and

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<sup>3</sup> Russial’s article, “Copy Editing Not Great Priority for Online Stories,” was published in the Spring 2009 edition of Newspaper Research Journal.

<sup>4</sup> Silverman wrote “Reliable News: Errors Aren’t Part of the Equation” in the Spring 2009 Nieman Reports.

online—can and should do better.

Minimizing errors by figuring out why they happen and doing what it takes to get the story right at the start is, of course, the best solution. As absurdly obvious as it might sound, the evidence supports it wholeheartedly. Research shows that error rates fall markedly when two things happen:

1. Reporters take the time to recheck their work sentence by sentence.
2. Reporters and editors are held accountable for mistakes when they occur.

Ensuring prompt corrections is another good remedy. It might also seem obvious, but when National Public Radio last year adopted a vigorous policy to identify and correct mistakes in broadcasts and on the Web, the network reports that its corrections' page had nearly as many error posts in one month as it had during the entire preceding two years. And The Washington Post whittled its huge corrections backlog after summoning 30 editors and staff for "remedial training" on how reported errors should be handled.

Digital practitioners should recognize that it isn't sufficient just to update content as mistakes are discovered. If time doesn't permit traditional copy-editing, then a system of

"back editing" should be implemented so that all content benefits from an editor's eye. Mistakes should not only be promptly corrected but also explicitly acknowledged in the story.

Then there is the now-legendary claim that the interactive nature of digital media makes mistakes quicker to be identified and corrected. This premise needs to be tested and evaluated by independent research. In the meantime, communication scholars also can help identify and evaluate ways to proactively curb inaccuracy as well as to encourage corrections when errors are made, whether in print or online.

Technological change does not fundamentally alter the need to publicly confront these errors. As The Washington Post states in its corrections policy: "We have an affirmative obligation to make corrections, not just to avoid repeating them. Confessing error enhances our credibility with readers, and humbles us appropriately." ■

*Scott Maier is an associate professor at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication. He worked for nearly 20 years as a newspaper and wire service reporter in Seattle, where he acknowledges having made more than his share of errors requiring correction.*

# Blogging Communities Spurred to Action

‘Coverage of civil rights and social justice issues could be made the core of a digital news organization, national or global in scope.’

BY LEONARD WITT

This could be the finest era to be a journalist. My daughter, Emily Witt, a recent graduate of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, got a summer gig at ProPublica. Her first coauthored story highlighted proposed cuts to California’s state crime lab and was picked up by The Huffington Post. Within 24 hours there were 177 comments. Think back just 10 years: To write a story and receive 177 letters would have been a miracle. Frankly, it never happened in my 30-year career.

Veteran reporter Howard Witt, this time no relation, experienced his own social media miracle. Working out of the Chicago Tribune’s Houston bureau, he wrote a story about Shaquanda Cotton, a

14-year-old black girl who pushed a hall monitor at her school and was sentenced to seven years in prison. Pretty harsh punishment for a push. The real twist in this story, however, was that this same sentencing judge put a 14-year-old white girl on probation after she burned down her family’s house.

He filed the story, knowing it was a good one, but, as he told me in a video interview,<sup>1</sup> he didn’t expect much reaction. What happened next surprised him. “Within a matter of a couple of days I started to get hundreds of e-mails from people who had encountered that story through e-mails, through blogs, through places far removed from the Chicago Tribune’s Web site. ... I started to realize there was

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<sup>1</sup> Watch Leonard Witt’s interview with Howard Witt at <http://pjnet.org/post/1841>.

this network of blogs out there devoted to African-American issues that were actually distributing that story.”

Turns out that the African-American blogosphere picked up Witt's story, and it had gone viral. So much fervor erupted over the apparent injustice that in three weeks Cotton was released from prison.

For my daughter's generation, social media is part of their daily milieu. For Witt, witnessing the power of the African-American blogosphere was an epiphany. So when he traveled to Jena, Louisiana, to report on six black teenagers charged with attempted murder following a fight at a high school, he didn't wait for the bloggers to find him; he e-mailed them to suggest they read his stories from Jena. In time, word spread through this blogging community and the young men became known as the “Jena Six.” Soon, more than 20,000 people descended upon the tiny town of Jena to protest, some riding more than 20 hours on buses. As far as Witt could tell, the protest organized itself with no central leader.

Of course, these events would not come as a surprise to New York

University professor Clay Shirky, who wrote the book, “Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations,” which was published last year. Nor would it surprise Howard Rheingold whose book, “Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution,” published in 2003, says in a nutshell, “Smart mobs consist of people who are able to act in concert even if they don't know each other.”

## Investing in Social Justice Reporting

This notion of crowd action being propelled by online exchanges raises a related question: If people organize themselves for social justice, will they do the same to support—which in this case means invest in—journalism that gives people reliable information about civil rights and social justice? After all, if Witt (or another reporter) is not there to report these stories, it's unlikely that the injustice Shaquanda Cotton faced or the trial of the Jena Six would have generated this kind of public response. Yet, in working for the Chicago Tribune, his job is hardly secure.

If reporting jobs aren't there for my daughter and her peers,

will such stories be told? In some ways, it is ironic that only when the crowd recognizes the invaluable role that high-quality journalism plays in social action—and realizes that such reporting isn't done for free—will social media and journalism become truly linked in common purpose.

Would this crowd be willing to invest in journalism—to “own” newsrooms like fans own the Green Bay Packers? Coverage of civil rights and social justice issues could be made the core of a digital news organization, national or global in scope. Or the creation of such content could be done in partnership with other journalistic enterprises. In an interview I did with John Yemma, editor of The Christian Science Monitor, he said that his online newsroom of about 80 people costs about \$7 million a year. With that as a gauge, a 20-person “newsroom” could exist for about \$2 million a year.

What percentage of the 20,000

people who came to Jena might want to become owners of such a journalistic cooperative with a stable of editors, investigative reporters, and feature writers whose job it would be to cover these beats?

The civil rights and social justice story well runs deep and its issues are complex. What follows are some starter ideas,

stories that even now don't receive the attention they should:

- The prison industrial complex where thousands of people languish for selling a few joints or for having a drug habit
- The immigrants, who will, in time, save the United States from aging itself out of existence
- The buyout story in which older workers are cast out because they cost too much.

Or stories similar to those Barbara Ehrenreich highlights in her

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**It is ironic that only when the crowd recognizes the invaluable role that high-quality journalism plays in social action...will social media and journalism become truly linked in common purpose.**

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book “Nickel and Dime” and reinforced in her New York Times op-ed, “Too Poor to Make the News.” There, she paraphrased a social justice worker in Los Angeles:

The already poor ... the undocumented immigrants, the sweatshop workers, the janitors, maids and security guards had all but ‘disappeared’ from both the news media and public policy discussions.

Will those marginalized by race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, age discrimination, or economic circumstance decide it is in their interest to become part of a community-supported journalism cooperative devoted to covering social justice issues? Of course, the promise on the other side of the equation would be adherence to the standards and ethical practices of journalism and a rejection of pressures to act as a public relations’ vehicle.

Ruth Ann Harnisch, president of the Harnisch Foundation, believes enough in community-supported journalism that she provided a \$1.5 million pledge to enable me to start the Center for Sustainable Jour-

nalism at Kennesaw State University, outside of Atlanta. This center has the capacity to develop such a project. From the Jena protest, we know the crowd exists. And we know that in the African-American blogosphere—and other blogging communities—resides the power for self-organizing. If these various online communities can find ways to come together in common purpose—and a social justice journalism infrastructure is in place to greet them with the “ask” to potential investors—then a grand experiment in democracy will be launched, and it will be grounded in an emerging model of sustainable journalism.

Interested in joining? We are ready to begin. ■

*Leonard Witt holds the Robert D. Fowler Distinguished Chair in Communication at Kennesaw State University and is the founder of the Center for Sustainable Journalism at <http://sustainablejournalism.org>.*

# Internet Censorship: The Myth, Oft Told, and the Reality

Protests in Iran and China have spotlighted the use of social media, showing its power in finding ways to push information past barriers set up by government.

BY FONS TUINSTR

The political situations and protests in Tehran, Iran and Xinjiang, China unfolded as this summer began. So, too, did the latest round in the inevitable clash of the Internet's borderless communications and governments' attempt to rein them in. Similar tensions from earlier confrontations offer glimpses of the complicated relationship between the power of the Web and the question of how authoritarian rulers exert their power in return.

Follow reports on Internet censorship, and the road leads not only to China, Kenya and Iran, where governments have attempted to clamp down on the use of social media, but to Australia, Germany and the United States, where companies develop software to enable such censorship. In such stories resides the illusion that the Internet

actually can and will be controlled. This myth of control is perpetuated by many in the old media, some of whom must be hoping, as they tell these stories, that their top-down approach to news gathering and distribution still has a chance against the tsunami of people-generated information that has devastated so many legacy media brands and likely will destroy more in the years ahead. (Of course, there is also the argument that when freedom of information and press is at stake, siding with those who urge restraint seems odd. But let's not make things too complicated.)

In the telling of this Internet censorship story, a psychological component is almost certainly in play. This is, after all, a time when journalists feel their livelihood is under siege from the Internet. Although some at legacy news orga-

nizations have embraced parts of the Internet, a foreboding fear of its power and consequences prevails. Stories about the success of Internet censorship, illusory as they might be, can provide relief to those who feel embattled and who hope that in some way the Internet can be controlled, in part because their survival depends on it.

Such hope is misguided. Add to this a trail of inaccurate reporting about what's been happening in Xinjiang—and last year in Tibet—and a crisis of mistrust has been created. The increasingly active online community knows the Chinese news media cannot be trusted given their government control. But Western media, too, are

systematically scrutinized for what is regarded as their biased reporting. In China, at least, I have observed that the Western press have lost the high ground of reliability they used to hold. Drastic cuts in funding for foreign correspondents have had an impact on the quality and diversity

of reporting. Now, this force of online scrutiny cannot be stopped. Attempts to block it are answered with new, inventive ways around whatever barriers are constructed.

## China's Response

Technically, a government can shut down the Internet. But there are reasons—economic and political—that trump censorship and help to explain why it seldom does. China

could have closed the entire Internet in Xinjiang province in July after riots there resulted in nearly 200 deaths and more than 1,000 wounded. In fact, reports from the region indicated that the Internet was not accessible for some time.

Because Xinjiang is a marginal part of China, the consequences of temporarily bringing its economy to a standstill are not huge for the country as a whole. However, when China and Iran, as nations, experience political crisis and citizen protest, they cannot afford to close

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down the digital highway of information given the impact this would have on commerce and the economy. North Korea is the only country that has fully controlled the Internet, though few countries seem to be willing to follow its example.

Throughout the rest of China, the response of the telecommunication operators was more moderate during the Xinjiang crisis. Twitter, YouTube, some local clones of Twitter, and a few other sites were shut down for a time. I watched as the number of tweets from China was reduced a bit, but after three hours they were up to speed again. Although the information flow was more limited—and most of the Western and Chinese media mostly stuck to the same story lines they'd been reporting since the start of the riots—a flood of fresh video clips, digital commentaries, and blog posts made it around the government's Internet barriers.

This situation was described in the China Digital Times in early July:

Nevertheless, many Chinese netizens are still managing to access outside information and publish their views on the situation. For example, photo-

graphs taken by foreign journalists are being spread online; people are finding ways to post on Twitter despite the site being blocked; and netizens are still finding ways to post their views to BBS forums. Overseas Chinese Web sites and communities are also playing a role by posting information and discussions, many of which can find their way back into Chinese cyberspace.

Stories from Xinjiang, some true, some not, kept arriving in my computer. Some Internet users shared information about ways to work around the Internet blocks, helpful to those who had not yet discovered such tools. This was testimony to the ineffectiveness of what some in the Western media were describing as an Internet “crackdown.” In the meantime, Chinese officials, with years of experience in filtering the Internet, were practicing well the lessons they've learned: Use their force sparingly since this prevents a new generation of Internet users from discovering the numerous ways netizens have figured out to thwart their efforts.

Every now and then, however, one of China's senior leaders panics and

suddenly the country finds not only Twitter, but even Google has been blocked. Earlier this year, this happened for a short while. Such measures prove to be not only ineffective in terms of stopping the flow of information, but the economic effects of such a closure, if it was to last for some time, would be massive. Because of this, even these impulses to undertake larger scale Internet blockages disappear after a short while. Additionally, the Chinese have learned, too, how to use the Internet as their watchful eyes and ears.<sup>1</sup> At times, the government's public relations officials improve even their spin as a result of using the Internet as a vehicle for disseminating information. Shutting down or restraining the Internet, especially in times of crises, would make it impossible for those eyes and ears to pick up information about what's happening, and it

would shut down the government's channels for countering with their own messages.

In these ways, the Internet presents a very different medium from radio, TV and print in terms of how governments respond in times of severe crisis. Whereas a government takeover of broadcast stations or print publications is a fairly straightforward operation, this isn't so with the Internet. As the Internet is teaching, conversation rules. Those who

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**At times, the government's public relations officials improve even their spin as a result of using the Internet as a vehicle for disseminating information.**

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want to share information will employ whatever digital tool can be used to keep the flow of information going. Platforms still matter, but they can be replaced if they are shut down. And shutting them down isn't as simple as it used to be. ■

*Fons Tuinstra, who now directs the China Speakers Bureau, was a foreign correspondent in Shanghai.*

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<sup>1</sup> In the Winter 2006 Nieman Reports, Tuinstra wrote about how the Internet can strengthen the power of China's central government in "Puzzling Contradictions of China's Internet Journalism."

# Engaging Youth in Social Media: Is Facebook the New Media Frontier?

A research project creates experimental applications for Facebook to learn whether the news habit can be fostered online and lead to civic engagement.

BY CHRISTINE GREENHOW AND JEFF REIFMAN

Like many young people her age, Jackie, who is 18, admits that she's not one to put pen to paper, turn the pages of *The New York Times*, or devour a paperback on a lazy summer afternoon. Yet on a Thursday morning before school, she logged into Hot Dish,<sup>1</sup> a youth-oriented Facebook app that serves up "the hottest climate news." For Jackie, it's a go-to social media site within her Facebook network. She goes there, she told us, to "check in to see what articles other people had posted and to read their comments" on thoughts she had shared.

Once there, she reads stories about climate change, comments on them, and easily shares news with her friends. She calls this site her "everyday RSS habit," a place she goes to read and post.

Counter to the decline in young people reading anything printed on paper—whether news or books—is a notable increase in out-of-school online reading and writing through fanfiction (at [fanfiction.net](http://fanfiction.net), for example) and social networking sites.<sup>2</sup> Yet, according to The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, more than one third of

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<sup>1</sup> Hot Dish can be found at <http://apps.facebook.com/hotdish>.

<sup>2</sup> A report entitled "To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence," issued by the National Endowment for the Arts in November 2007, explored these issues. The report can be read at [www.nea.gov/research/ToRead.pdf](http://www.nea.gov/research/ToRead.pdf).

people under 25 get no news on a daily basis. Yet, teens spend many hours each week online—a recent British study estimated the number at 31—especially on Facebook, which is the most-trafficked social media site in the world.

We wondered if young people could be persuaded to critically engage in reading news and conversing about it on Facebook. Would doing this provide them with a sense of community? Furthermore, would their involvement translate into real-world actions or consist solely of virtual activism? And, if we understood better how young people decide how to handle, produce and talk through information online, would we be any closer to knowing how to develop successful media-rich and educational environments?

With these questions and goals in mind, in 2008, with a generous grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, we embarked on a pioneering social media experiment. Our goals were:

- To create and launch two cutting edge Facebook news community applications
- To discover which strategies work best to engage 16- to 25-year-olds in current events and information
- To understand how to deliver educational materials in innovative and effective ways
- To build community through social media.

## The Experiments Begin

In previous research (done by Greenhow) on young people's learning and literacy within social network sites,<sup>3</sup> it was found that teens and tweens are Facebooking for more than just informal socializing, pet photography, the occasional "thumbs-up," tag, or diatribe. They are also "Faceworking," a term that Neil Selwyn, a sociologist at the London Knowledge Lab, coined this year. The word describes what happens when people intentionally put their social networking site to work, for example, when they seek or promote information, problem-solving, peer-sharing, and creative inspiration.

If we want to inform, educate and mobilize an engaged citizenry—as the vision for active participation

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<sup>3</sup> Greenhow's research studies are available at [www.cgreenhow.org/research](http://www.cgreenhow.org/research).

in solving 21st century challenges—then we need to make sharing news and experiences fit easily into young people's lives. Most importantly, we need to measure the success of our efforts.

In a meet-them-where-they-are spirit, we developed Facebook applications to provide young people with the ability to easily do the following:

- Post news stories and articles they write to a niche network within Facebook.
- Vote up stories that others write.
- Write blog entries and comments.
- Interact with other users on online discussion boards, chats and Twitter.
- Earn points for engaging in these and other activities.

As a way to observe community involvement and patterns of use and to collect information for our research, we developed software to track, record and archive the users' activities. When all of this was in place, our two community-focused Facebook applications were launched—Hot Dish and MN Daily. The MN Daily was created to supplement the University of Minnesota's student-run paper,

The Minnesota Daily, and its Web site at [www.mndaily.com](http://www.mndaily.com).

## Hot Dish

Climate change issues garner international attention. But as fewer youths engage daily with current affairs than did a decade ago, there are questions about how to engage them in keeping up with news about these issues. So we created Hot Dish, an online community where those interested in environmental issues can share articles, learn about climate change, take action online and in the physical world, and win eco-conscious prizes.

Launched on February 27, 2009, Hot Dish's features encourage reading, writing and sharing information and experiences. The Seattle-based online magazine [Grist.org](http://Grist.org) provides environmental stories daily. Those who come to Hot Dish participate in challenges where they can earn points for civic engagement and local activism, such as writing a letter to the editor, writing lawmakers, starting a recycling program, or recycling old electronics. The most active user wins a trip to the Arctic.

At its peak, Hot Dish attracted about 5,000 active monthly users,

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The editors at [Grist.org](#) ensure Hot Dish always serves up the hottest news and action on climate change. Share news, talk up solutions, and get in on the action. Yeah, you.

**Climate change sucks, but you can do something about it... Learn more**

Join the Team to take online and real-world eco-action. You can earn

Using grant money from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Greenhow and Reifman developed Hot Dish, a Facebook application focused on news about climate change. Users receive points for sharing stories and blog posts; the user with the highest point total wins a trip to the Arctic.

including 150 Facebook fans. By midsummer, it had 1,157 registered members, and in a two-month period between March and May, 346 Hot Dish participants (ages 16-25) joined its action team. During this time, users posted and shared 3,600 news stories, wrote more than 2,200 comments and blog entries, and completed 1,800 eco-challenges.

## MN Daily

Launched on March 29, 2009, The MN Daily<sup>4</sup> on Facebook is a place

where users receive campus-related stories from The Minnesota Daily and other sources. Here they can sign up to become members of the Daily Action Team, earn points for reading, writing and sharing online or for participating in their community. As with Hot Dish, users can redeem those points for prizes. As of midsummer, The Daily on Facebook had 1,123 registered members and 155 had signed on to the action team. A bump in membership is expected when classes resume in the fall.

<sup>4</sup> MN Daily can be found at <http://apps.facebook.com/mndaily>.

## Learning What Works

In both cases, we've been steadily collecting data from surveys, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and online usage patterns. Our analysis

of these data is ongoing, with results from these Facebook experiments expected this fall and publication anticipated in the spring or summer of 2010.

Here are two insights based on



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**ryanmathre:** Fun tour of TCF Bank Stadium with @randball of #mn\_news <http://bit.ly/3ox5cj> #umnn

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As part of a research study to find out if young people would read news, converse about it on Facebook, and be motivated to get involved, MN Daily on Facebook was launched in March 2009.

our preliminary findings and review of other studies:

1. General agreement exists that there might be efficiencies in locating niche media-sharing communities within existing social networks, such as Facebook.
2. Findings indicate that niche social media are doing a better job than other sites and forms of online community in catalyzing youth-initiated conversation.

As we analyze our findings, we'll discover how much they adhere to or expand on this previous research. For now, we have more questions than answers. What forms of digital media literacy do young people need to fully and critically participate in opportunities for engagement? Does the existence of new ways of transmitting news and information within existing social networks encourage habits of news tracking and civic engagement among young people? If so, how and what can we learn from tracking the patterns of sharing within their community of friends? How might insights from youth-initiated public dialogue and debate be fed back into the framing of these issues? How could these

online youth experiences inform the ways that the news media produce and distribute their content to make it more engaging for those who are growing up in the era of Facebook?

These are key questions that both educators and journalists might be asking themselves as they think about how to connect their job of informing with the notion of transforming the ingestion of news into the actions of public engagement. ■

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