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digital edge report

Citizen Journalism and Newspaper Sites: The Revolution will be Uploaded



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Citizen Journalism and Newspaper Sites: The Revolution Will Be Uploaded

Here's a late-breaking bit of news from Bluffton, S.C., as reported by a citizen journalist going by the unfortunate moniker "noprostate."

Forced off 278 by a Sun City driver—I left Kroger and noticed a blue Ford Focus behind me. She was pointing at my back window and several political stickers, one the celebration of the last days of W's reign, the other about End[ing] this War. I pulled away and noticed they were speeding toward me. When they passed me, I looked over and the silver-haired male driver swerved into my lane! I had to run off the side of the road... They quickly turned left at the Hampton Inn.... So I dialed 911. The BC Sherriff was going to pursue my complaint. At the time of this writing, I have not heard a thing.

Hardly page A1 material for a daily newspaper, but it has all the elements of a compelling story—the hint of danger in a familiar public place, the involvement of law enforcement, and even a difference of political opinion to give it a bit of resonance. H. L. Mencken it's not, but perhaps this flavor of user-contributed citizen journalism shares more in common with I. F. Stone, who a generation ago took his investigative form of reportage out of daily newspapers and into the self-publishing world.

What a difference a generation makes. Citizen journalism started coming into its own in 2005 and has grown by leaps and bounds. Now, it has become national news in its own right. Consider the well-documented attacks on the Church of Scientology by "Anonymous," a group of hackers and activists who've delighted in posting confidential documents and unflattering stories about the Church in recent months. Or Wikileaks, which invites a global audience of whistleblowers to post documents to an "uncensorable" and "untraceable" site for "maximum public impact." Some 1.2 million documents, including information about alleged human rights violations and military interrogation procedures, are posted on the site, which in March won a U.S. court victory that attracted amicus briefs from the Newspaper Association of America, the Associated Press, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Gannett and the Society of Professional Journalists, among other groups.

But the local connection holds the most promise—and peril—for existing media companies, and several organizations are focusing research and resources there. MIT, whose Media Lab helped develop the software that powered early citizen media sites, has now created a center devoted solely to the topic. The [Center for Future Civic Media](#) focuses specifically on "geographically local communities"—in other words, your newspaper's market.

The [Knight Foundation](#), which provided \$5 million to the Center, also announced at the [We Media 2008](#) conference a \$3 million grant to create 30 global fellowships to redefine participatory journalism. Alberto Iburguen, president of the Knight Foundation, told the audience he hopes to fulfill the social-bonding role newspapers played in the 1960s and 1970s.

"The revolution may not be televised, but it will be uploaded," Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr., CEO of the Hip Hop Caucus, told attendees of the February conference.

MEETING A NEED

Citizen journalism covers a broad spectrum, from cranky bloggers who cover town council meetings and newsy collectives that operate like professional media organizations to unshaped observations and photos shared across participatory media environments.

The [Knight Citizen News Network](#) counts more than 450 citizen media sites across the United States. Some are guided by professionals

79 percent of respondents to a 2006 J-Lab survey of citizen media sites considered their work "journalism"—a phrase no longer exclusively associated with traditional media outlets.

whose résumés abound with traditional journalism experience. Others raise questions of credibility and responsibility, but those questions are often in the eye of the beholder: Some 79 percent of respondents to a 2006 J-Lab survey of citizen media sites considered their work “journalism”—a phrase no longer associated exclusively with traditional media outlets.

That’s hardly surprising, as newspapers continue scaling back coverage areas and resources. Large metro dailies “used to be the state’s newspapers—they can’t put the same resources into that any more,” says Leonard Witt, a communications professor at Kennesaw State University and author of the pjnet.org blog. “If you live in small-town America, you aren’t getting the coverage you were 20 years ago. People feel that void.”

“It’s nobody’s fault but the newspapers,” agrees Steve Yelvington, Internet strategist at Morris DigitalWorks in Augusta, Ga. “If you don’t meet the community’s needs, they’re going to route around you and find a better solution.”

One commonality among many of the best-known, textbook-case citizen journalism sites is that they did just that. The state of New Hampshire, with a predominately older, small-town population served by about a dozen daily newspapers, hardly seems a hotbed for citizen journalism. But both along the state’s narrow coastline and on higher ground, local residents tackled the need for more news head-on.

The Pawtucket region of New Hampshire is served by three daily newspapers—[The Union Leader](#) in Manchester, [Foster’s Daily Democrat](#) of Dover, and the [Concord Daily Monitor](#). All three cover murders and major accidents in the area, as well as the occasional feature and the annual fair. But there was “no coverage of town or school boards or actual news, and there was no way for a resident to find out what was really going on,” says local resident Maureen Mann. Not a professional journalist, she still managed to notice another worrisome trend: “More and more articles were [from] news services rather than local reporting of even the large cities they represent.”

So Mann and others began the process of creating a local news site, applying for a J-Lab grant to cover expenses. None were journalists. None had written a grant application before, but they argued their site would “encourage community involvement and identity.” Much to their surprise, they won the grant and in 2005, [The Forum](#), a site devoted to local news in their four towns, was born. “None of us believed it,” says Mann, now the site’s co-managing editor. “Because we had established clear goals before we began, we just started.” (See sidebar, p. 5.)

Mann points to an increase in number of candidates running for local boards as proof the Forum has impact. But she’s also noticed how the local newspapers have reacted. A year after The Forum launched, the Union Leader began a standing weekly feature called Route 101 East, providing regular coverage of two of the site’s four towns; the feature became twice-weekly about a year later. “We feel we are the instigation of that coverage and wonder if it would continue if we did not publish,” Mann says.

Charlie Perkins, vice president of new media at UnionLeader.com, credits the Forum for its local orientation, though points out it still has a long way to go before becoming a definitive source of news for its communities. “Its clear focus on hometown events is a good thing,” Perkins says, though he notes the site’s user-submitted content can amount to “a bulletin board for local press releases.”

“Taken as a whole, its news and sports content consists of fewer stories than the local coverage available from traditional weekly and daily newspapers,” Perkins adds.



KCNN map showing citizen news sites

“If you don’t meet the community’s needs, they’re going to route around you and find a better solution.”

- Steve Yelvington, strategist,
Morris DigitalWorks

Still, existing community journalism sites like The Forum “are a resource for papers, and papers are going to have to figure out how to use them,” says Jack Driscoll, who tackled similar concerns about (cont., pg. 6)

HOW CITIZENS COVER NEW HAMPSHIRE

Two citizen journalism sites covering the Granite State provide a glimpse at how volunteer sites diverge from traditional editorial models, both by choice and out of necessity.

The *Forum*, which covers the towns of Northwood, Nottingham, Candia and Deerfield, has an editorial staff of about nine core volunteers with posting privileges. They funnel content to the site from more than 200 bylined contributors—not including calendar items and other information submitted to a catch-all address.

The *Forum* also publishes a print companion several times a year, intended largely as a promotional tool for the site. The most recent edition included information about candidates for local boards, coverage of local school athletics, and a calendar of events. “People love the print edition, and it is the only truly local news for those who are not comfortable with computers or are without access,” says co-managing editor and site founder Maureen Mann. “Usually we get a few online contributors after a print edition.”

While its staff operates under the assumption that there’s “no such thing as too much coverage,” Mann admits that consistent coverage of every elected board has been a challenge, particularly after several prolific reporters moved or switched jobs. “That requires a time commitment only a few are willing to make,” Mann says, and without them, coverage is often “sporadic.”

In the coastal community of Rye, a core group of 15 contribute regularly to *Rye Reflections*, with a dozen providing more sporadic reports in the town of 5,000. Editorial decisions about the direction of the site are made during regular meetings, which provide a freewheeling, group-style deliberative process founder Jack Driscoll recalls only during the largest reporting projects during his time as a newspaper editor.

“What I call story editing takes place in a group setting—it’s very powerful,” he says. “You have 12 minds working on an idea opposed to one.”

While the site has covered a variety of complex issues, including a controversial public services building and environmental issues affecting the state’s 17 mile-long seacoast, Driscoll is well aware of the limitations of volunteer journalists.

“If I were running a newspaper here, I’d have beat reporters covering certain areas—everything that wiggles,” he says. “Even on a monthly schedule, with people who don’t have the experience to tangle with certain stories... you kind of have to pick your spots, even in a small town.”

The screenshot shows the homepage of 'The Forum' website. The main content area features several news items:

- Passport Day at Epsom Post Office:** An event on Saturday, March 22, 2008, from 9:00 am to 2:00 pm for passport applications.
- Deerfield Salutes Joe Stone:** A photo of Joe Stone, a community member, with a list of his roles: School Board member and chair, Municipal Budget Committee member and chair, Select Board member and chair, State Representative, France Committee member and Municipal & County Government Committee member.
- Legislation This Week In Concord: Education, Parental Rights and Immigration:** A report on bills considered in the House.
- Finding What's New on The Forum:** A tip for finding new articles.
- The Forum in Print:** Information about the print edition.
- Spring Ahead!** A reminder about Daylight Savings Time.
- Report of the Governor's Council March 5: What's Happening, Who's Paying?** A report on a meeting of the Governor and Executive Council.

 The left sidebar contains a navigation menu with categories like News, Perspectives, and Notices. The right sidebar features advertisements for 'Advertising Sales Person', 'Pleasant Hill Landscaping', 'Jean Stenme', and 'Psychothera'. At the bottom, there are links for 'Get the News via Email' and 'Contact Us'.

limited coverage of his seaside village of Rye, N.H. “People were frustrated to some degree,” he says.

Unlike Mann and the core of volunteers who built The Forum upstate, Driscoll had considerable experience in both traditional and citizen journalism—in addition to working for the Boston Globe and MIT Media Lab, he started the *Melrose Mirror*, arguably the first citizen media site, in 1996. He also served as an advisor for Junior Journal, a site administered by children from more than 90 countries. But the core of mostly retirees that launched *Rye Reflections* in 2006 had no writing experience (see sidebar, p. 5). Driscoll spent two months before the launch training volunteers on basic skills and MIT’s Silver Stringer software, developed during earlier citizen media forays to help simplify the process of getting news online. “The learning is very rapid once you start publishing,” he says.

Other citizen media sites have greater resources to draw upon. The *Voice of San Diego* was launched, in part, to provide an alternative news source in the one-paper city. With more than a half-dozen paid staffers and a generous budget supported by area foundations and businesses as well as public radio-like individual memberships, the site recently celebrated its third birthday. It also just hired investigative reporter David Washburn, who previously worked at the city’s sole daily, the *Union-Tribune*. Citizen contributors play a key role, with one of the site’s two executive editors coordinating both commentary and breaking news information from users.

But comprehensive coverage and breaking news are what separate even professional, well-funded citizen sites from established media, argues Chris Jennewein, the *Union-Tribune*’s director of Internet operations. “More journalism is always better, and I don’t think we live in a world where there are single outlets any more, so I think the *Voice of San Diego* is doing a valuable thing,” he says. “Can you go to it and know everything that’s going on in the city? For that, you need a major media source.”

Such sites may draw niche audiences and attention to niche topics, but they don’t always draw corresponding amounts of traffic. In San Diego, for instance, 918,000 people visited the *Union-Tribune*’s site, SignOnSanDiego.com, in February, according to metrics from compete.com. Just 12,670 visited the *Voice of San Diego*.

“I think the challenge for user-generated sites and specialty journalism sites is to develop a significant audience,” Jennewein says. “On the Internet, everyone is potentially a competitor, but I see them as a competitor in the same sense as a suburban weekly—a competitor on a small scale.”

PARTNERS OR PERILS?

For their part, citizen journalism sites also rarely consider their larger, mass-media counterparts as competitors in the traditional sense. “If there had been a viable local newspaper that covered our communities regularly and in-depth, we would not exist,” says Mann of the Forum. “But now that we do, we are very interested in promoting more local coverage.”

While the Forum hasn’t entered any formal partnerships with nearby newspapers, “all it would take is a paper contacting us and seeing how we can work together,” says Mann. In the meantime, its volunteer writers have established less formal relationships. The site’s sports reporter now also regularly writes for the *Concord Monitor*, while other contributors pass along information to the *Union Leader*’s local reporter—“who gets paid while



we volunteer," Mann notes archly. Beyond that, "a few [local papers] encourage citizen submissions of pictures and the like, but so far we have not seen any interest in the kind of full local coverage we seek."

Even in markets without established community journalism sites, there's often a host of other folks working on the periphery of local news. In southwest Florida, Kate Marymont of [The News Press](#) points to "community activists going to council meetings and blogging about it."

"There's plenty of that going on, and that's important news and information, too," says Marymont, executive editor of the Fort Myers daily. "One part of our evolution as legacy media is figuring out how to be the hub where all of this comes together [and] is greater than the sum of its parts. It's happening around us, and the community involvement will only cascade."

Aggregation has long been a mantra for newspaper sites, and extending that approach to citizen journalism brings its own set of concerns—some expected, like authenticity and credibility, but others more intangible. "The one thing I worry about is that some newspapers see this as a route to free coverage, and that's not a good thing," Driscoll says. "They're giving nothing in return." Adding value to existing conversations is the key challenge, agrees Yelvington of Morris DigitalWorks. "If I were moving into a market with a lot of active bloggers, I would look at it and see what I could do to make it better," he says. "It's an opportunity to build community a lot of newspapers should be pursuing."

At Morris' [SavannahNow.com](#), for instance, local bloggers often post brief summaries and links to their own sites, but "people read and respond" on the newspaper Web site, Yelvington says. "So you don't get the page views from their blogs and you're not placing advertising—get over it. A certain point of loyalty accrues to the place that helps people find the conversations that are scattered, and that's a powerful thing."

Other papers are also beginning to take existing citizen journalism more seriously. [Washingtonpost.com](#) recently launched a local blog directory, cross-referenced by location and subject area. A partnership with [outside.in](#) provides additional geotagged access to many bloggers' posts. Driscoll also points to Italy's [La Repubblica](#), whose [kataweb.it](#) site uses MIT's Silver Stringer software to host more than 7,300 school newspapers. "I could never understand why American newspapers wouldn't do this," he says.

Even if such sites become more viable competitors, "they're never going to be more than a percent of the audience," says Jennewein. "I would look at them as places to learn from and potentially partner with." For example, citizen journalism sites can help traditional media outlets identify underreported stories that have resonance with key audience segments, he argues. In return, they could consider partnerships in which they'd run links to such sites' most popular stories.

"Look at it as an ecosystem and take part in it," Jennewein says.

"More journalism is always better, and I don't think we live in a world where there are single outlets any more, so I think the Voice of San Diego is doing a valuable thing. Can you go to it and know everything that's going on in the city? For that, you need a major media source."

— Chris Jennewein, Director of Internet Operations, San Diego Union-Tribune

SOCIAL JOURNALISM: SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE

Across the country, newspapers are working to not just take part in existing ecosystems, but to create ones of their own.

A rapidly growing Sun Belt town not far from the resorts of Hilton Head Island, Bluffton, S.C., is home to one of the newspaper industry's best-known forays into social media. But [Bluffton Today](#) also offers lessons about how fostering a community conversation can spark citizen involvement, both on- and off-line.

When Morris Communications opted in 1995 to replace a zoned edition of the Savannah Morning News with a free daily newspaper and an accompanying Web site featuring social media elements that have since become familiar on many newspaper sites (individual profiles and friend lists, forums, and blogs), people noticed the unusually high levels of participation. Some 5,000 users registered on Bluffton Today in its first year, a significant

number considering the area's 16,000 households. While growth has since stabilized, the site enjoys "a consistent level of engagement," says Yelvington.

Similar approaches have been tried by newspapers elsewhere, including at The Californian in Bakersfield, which launched the [Northwest Voice](#), a community-news site which was followed by the [Southwest Voice](#). Both serve fast-growing areas of the Californian's market, and both reverse-publish content into free weekly print publications. GateHouse Media's group of Massachusetts weeklies and dailies created [Wicked Local](#), which meshes hyperlocal newspaper content with user-submitted photos and comments. Working with the University of South Carolina, the 5,000-circulation weekly Hartsville Messenger launched [Hartsville Today](#) in 2005, targeting churches, civic groups and businesses, and offering to lend digital cameras to community members who want to post.

Like many social media sites, the conversations aren't always newsy, and photos and pets remain top draws among an audience that skews slightly female in many places. But there's a definite intersection between the free-for-all of social media and citizen journalism, and newspapers can find ways to tap into it.

"The sweet spot is very different from what people would consider journalism in the traditional sense," says Yelvington, "but news does travel naturally through this channel." He worries that newspapers experimenting in this space are "trying to put user-generated content into the pre-existing soup without changing the flavor."

"They're so concerned about controlling the balance and tone and yadda yadda yadda they're not taking advantage of the process that wants to happen," he says. "That's why third parties are building whole new businesses around social networking and newspapers are stuck in the 20th century."

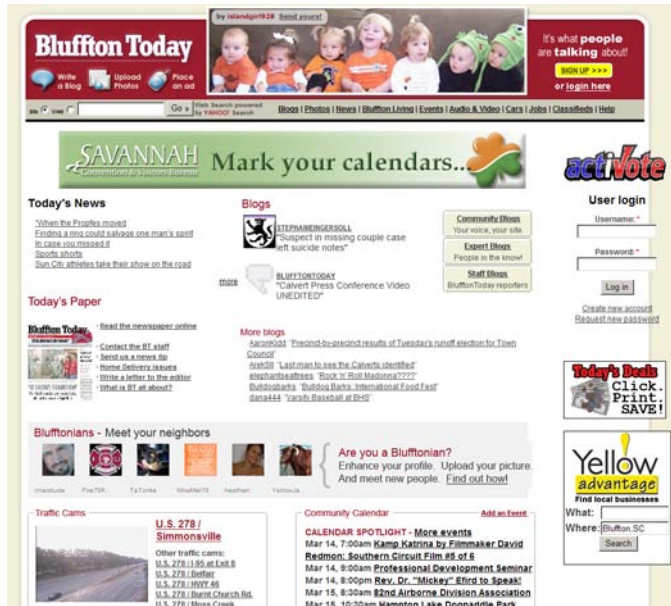
In a sense, Morris got lucky in Bluffton—extensive market research ahead of the site launch found no local bloggers or forums. At the same time, the print daily's staff identified "some really strong personalities and characters, and we were able to get them to show up in a positive way," Yelvington says. "It was a moment of opportunity that may never be repeated."

The key to meshing the bubbling social media elements of the site with the print product, he says, is ensuring that the newspaper staff keeps tabs on—and participates in—online conversations. "When it works, the newsroom staff is engaged and comes back with a lot of impressions and leads they didn't have before," he says. "To me, that's the way it fits with journalism. Trying to get people to go out and cover stories like a cub reporter doesn't work very well."

PRO-AM PARTNERSHIPS

Citizen journalists may hardly be cub reporters, but the universes of amateur and professional media are now colliding in a host of different ways. The most common is "crowdsourcing," in which newspapers encourage citizens to feed information to reporters as stories are developed. After successful experiments helped The News-Press in Fort Myers break major stories involving FEMA aid and a local utility project, the newspaper took the model a step further, recruiting a group of volunteers with deep experience in specific subject areas to work hand-in-hand with reporters on major projects (see case study, p. 9).

Growing numbers of media organizations are building similar networks, such as [Beatblogging.org](#), a collaboration between 13 news organizations—including the San Jose Mercury News, The Chronicle of Higher Education, the Star-Ledger of Newark, The Dallas Morning News, and The Patriot-News of Harrisburg, Pa., among others—and [NewAssignment.net](#), an "open platform" journalism site launched by media critic and New York



University professor Jay Rosen.

Reporters covering topics ranging from child welfare and science to pharmaceuticals and education issues use the site to build social networks among informed sources. In Hershey, Pa., Patriot-News reporter Daniel Victor monitors a Ning social network which attempts to provide more relevant local conversations than the paper's open forums that "are busy but often like a (slightly drunk) conversation in a bar," as Executive Editor David Newhouse explained in his proposal. Education reporters at The Dallas Morning News created a Facebook network for employees of the Dallas Independent School District. "I've learned from my beat (cont., pg. 11)

CASE STUDY

FORT MYERS: CROWDSOURCING BEGETS TEAMSOURCING

news-press.com

Like other Gannett dailies, The News-Press in Fort Myers, Fla., has worked hard to reach into its community and create a "newsroom without walls," as Executive Editor Kate Marymont calls it. Readers sit on the paper's editorial board, submit photos online, write blogs and columns, and comment on stories.

"Our customers used to be passive," she says. "Now I think people have this rapidly growing expectation of being involved. People want to jump into the middle of a story and fire off their comments. If there's a tornado, they want their pictures on the Web site—that's the expectation."

But The News-Press has upped its level of commitment well beyond posting user-submitted content online. ("If we got 400 tornado pictures, we wouldn't say we're going to run the 12 best," Marymont says. "We'd try to plot them on a map to a very micro level.") The newspaper has also gained nationwide attention for its [experiments](#) with citizens both feeding information to reporters and serving as adjuncts to its own staff of professional journalists.

The former approach, commonly known as "crowdsourcing," involves getting readers involved in scoping out stories as they're being developed. After fighting a three-year legal battle to force FEMA to disclose how it distributed funds to Florida hurricane victims, The News-Press found itself with a massive 1.1-million record database. The court battle "was something traditional media can—and should—do... but we needed the public to look at it and say, 'Tell us what to look for,'" Marymont says. Once placed on news-press.com, the database logged more than 60,000 searches in its first 24 hours.

A more recent success involved a massive utility project planned for Cape Coral that sent homeowner assessments skyrocketing. After posting documents online and asking readers two simple questions—"What do you know?" and "What angles do you want The News-Press to investigate?"—the paper's professional journalists were provided with a range of leads. Architects, for instance, reviewed proposed designs and found them

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CASE STUDY FORT MYERS (CONT.)

lacking. More significantly, someone leaked an unreleased audit of the project. “We went through the channels to verify it and broke the story,” Marymont says. The initial project was ultimately halted, lowering fees by at least \$6,000 per household. Such projects provide “a really good example of how professional media and citizen media both have really important roles,” she says.

Marymont sometimes calls such contributors “citizen witnesses” rather than citizen journalists. The latter moniker is “almost intimidating—it scares some people,” she explains. “They’re welcome to tell us or share with us what they’ve witnessed.”

But other readers want an even more active role in shaping the news, and that’s where The News-Press has developed a new model, enlisting teams of citizens who work hand-in-hand with professional journalists to craft hard-hitting investigative stories or amplify the newspaper’s community ties. (The News-Press calls its teamsourcing approach “Crowdsourcing 2.0.”)

Blurbs placed in the paper and on news-press.com last spring sought “folks who are champions of the First Amendment, deplore government waste, and revel in research”—and who have expertise in accounting, law, public service and education. More than 120 submitted applications, and after a thorough vetting process, the News-Press narrowed the field to 20 retirees, including a former school superintendent, airline pilot, FBI agent, CPA and attorney. Dubbed “Team Watchdog,” they were envisioned as “part consultants, part sources, part reporters, part researches,” as Cindy McCurry-Ross, the paper’s senior managing editor, put it in a Gannett newsletter.

“They aren’t fully formed journalists. None can pull together fully formed projects,” Marymont says, noting that she had to dispel staff misconceptions that the team was a precursor to reducing headcount. “But they can build and review databases to help reporters get to the heart of a story, or they can review legal documents with more expertise than we can and help us understand their meaning. They’re people with very specific kinds of knowledge who believe government should be held accountable and saw themselves in a role of citizens doing that. They’re motivated by the same things that motivate us.”

“I have always been interested in research, and in the role the media plays in keeping government leaders accountable,” retired corporate attorney Gary Celestino said in an interview. “This group gives me a way to be involved.”

Over the past nine months, one member of Team Watchdog worked with the paper’s child-welfare reporter to build a database of daycare inspection reports. Another submitted requests for government documents involving a special tax district, while others have consulted on stories ranging from education practices to consumer fraud. The entire group also submitted a host of FOI requests as part of a recent report on government accountability. A similar group called Team Upbeat, made up of a dozen volunteer contributors, now supplements lifestyle coverage focused on such “random acts of kindness” as buying diapers for needy mothers.

Marymont cautions editors that the process is anything but easy: “It’s all very helpful, but it requires monitoring, managing, and it takes editors’ time. You have to spend a lot of time thinking about how to manage information and people.” Team Watchdog members were trained on everything from journalistic ethics to the paper’s policies, and two of the group’s original members have been dismissed “because they weren’t satisfying our standards,” she says.

Both the paper’s crowdsourcing and teamsourcing experiments have one thing in common: “A level of civic engagement I haven’t seen for a while,” Marymont says, “which is just fabulous.” While that’s a goal shared by many in the citizen journalism movement, it’s one particularly important for newspapers’ long-term survival as well.

reporting that there is a strong grapevine/rumor mill among the district's 20,000 employees, but these folks don't have a central place to gossip, swap stories and/or compare notes about the latest district project," says reporter Kent Fischer.

While such collaborative approaches add depth to newspaper articles, they benefit the networks' participants as well. "Beat reporters have always had networks of sources, but the sources haven't been connected to one another, or able to self-publish; they haven't been social networks at all," writes David Cohn, NewAssignment.net's director of distributed reporting. "To better understand the difference, take the Rolodex of a typical beat writer and imagine all the scattered but well-connected people in it wired together. Pooling their knowledge for the good of the beat, they also get something from participating in its daily buzz."

Along with helping professional journalists with their existing work, such networks could also bring professional journalism to bear in places where mass-market media economics are no longer viable. Noting that newspaper coverage of Florida's threatened manatee population had itself become endangered by staffing and budget cuts, pjnet's Witt found himself wondering, "Aren't there thousands of people who value that issue enough to pay \$20 a year?" More importantly, would people be willing to pay for geographically local coverage instead of a vertical, affinity-based topic? Armed with a \$51,000 grant from the [Harnisch Family Foundation](#), Witt and a citizen journalism site in Minnesota now aim to find out.

"What they need is more in-depth, thoughtful conversation—which if they have a journalist, they can do," says Witt, who is working with [Locally Grown](#) in Northfield, Minn., on the concept, which he calls "representative journalism."



The "representative" part is key, Witt says. "It's not just an online newspaper that's thrown on the online doorstep and the reporter walks away. The reporter is one voice in the bigger community—an informed voice, but one voice. Everyone else can jump in and add a bit of information, providing a higher-quality conversation."

Working with Bill Densmore of the [Media Giraffe](#) project and Chris Peck, editor of [Commercial Appeal](#) on the concept, Witt is advertising for a reporter who will serve as the center of a "hub" that will supplement—but remain independent from—Locally Grown. That independence is important, particularly since two of the site's three founders are also members of the local planning commission. All three are also involved in civic endeavors, and two helped found the community's [Northfield.org](#) citizen journalism site. The group is working on being "collaborative yet separate," but roles are not yet defined, Witt says.

Along with a reporter and editor, such a hub needs "someone—not the reporter—to help build the community and get people to pay attention," Witt says. That work is made somewhat easier by Locally Grown's established community, but the end goal is to attract enough paying readers to make the hub self-sustaining, ushering in a new business model for entrepreneurial journalists in the process. Newspapers may stand to gain from underwriting such experiments, given the low cost of entry and the built-in safeguards protecting independence and quality journalism, Witt adds.

While the Northfield experiment is envisioned without newspaper participation, publishers' longstanding community ties could help bolster all kinds of nascent journalism models. Consider Bluffton: "We had people in the market who were plugged into the community," Yelvington says. "They let us know who was active and opinionated and had something to say. Our marketing was feet on the ground."

But newspapers—and the journalists who work for them—both stand to gain far more than markets and metrics from working with their citizen counterparts. "Citizens can help journalists reconnect to the idealistic wellsprings of the craft," writes Minnesota professor Doug McGill, who teaches basic journalism skills in community education classes. "Because when we work simply as citizens, doing journalism as we would vote, or serve on a jury... the will to serve others arises."

NEWSPAPERS THAT BRING THE COMMUNITY IN

These papers are among the many that work to bring in community voices:

- The Bakersfield Californian's *Northwest Voice* and *Southwest Voice*
- GateHouse Media's *Wicked Local* publications
- The Hartsville Messenger's *Hartsville Today*
- Morris Communications' *Bluffton Today*
- The Fort Meyers News-Press