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Why Must Citizen Journalists Fill the  
Information Gaps Left By Mainstream Media?

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### Abstract

Mainstream news media has been affected by the dominance of the internet and personal media technology. Blogs, public access cable TV, YouTube and other media venues available to regular citizens in America have spawned a small army of citizen journalists. In examining the statistics reflecting the current state of mainstream news media, there is a growing relationship to the citizen journalist. With ad revenues falling for print news media, coupled with staff reductions, the citizen journalist sometimes steps in to fill the news gap. The attitudes of professional journalists about amateurs encroaching on their turf will be explored showing the positive and negative views. Are the mainstream media businesses that employ professional journalists willing to accept the help of the citizen journalist as a fellow defender of democracy and free speech? How far will mainstream media extend the invitation to citizen journalists while they scramble to develop a profitable new business model, retain their audience and build a robust online presence?

### **Mainstream Media Problems**

Recent statistics for print news establish that business is stagnant or decreasing for this out-dated business model. Newspaper ad revenue growth for publicly traded newspapers fell between 2 and -2 percent in 2006 (Hopson, 2006) In the 3 years prior to their survey in 2004, The Pew Research Center found that print newsroom staff sizes had decreased 48 percent for survey respondents nationally and 54 percent locally (Pew, 2004). Repackaging and repurposing the news has been a growing trend, especially in light of newsroom staff cuts. When 52 percent of national respondents and 53 percent of local respondents admit that “more often” they repackaging news, this narrows the spectrum of news coverage (Pew, 2004). Repackaging news stories narrows the range and focus of the news offered to their audience. The limited focus of

newspapers has caused audience disconnect which is related to the decline in print circulation. Statistics for daily newspaper circulation show that it has been steadily declining since 1990 (Hopson, 2006). In 1940 the U.S. daily newspaper circulation was 41.1 million or 143.4 percent of the 34.9 million U.S. households (State, 2006). In 1990 U.S. daily newspaper circulation was 62.3 million or 58 percent of the 93.3 million U.S. households (State, 2006). Compare those numbers to 2004 where the U.S. daily newspaper circulation is 54.6 million or 61 percent of the 112 million U.S. households (State, 2006). The numbers for growth in the number of households and daily newspaper circulation are moving in opposite directions. These numbers indicate that over time there have been changes in the American media preferences for personal news consumption moving away from print. As the mainstream newspapers have begun to develop multimedia internet news products the print news industry has slowly begun to open the door for citizen journalists to enter their developing online presence.

### **Audience Statistics**

An analysis of newspaper audiences reveals that young people are not using the newspaper as their main news source. Young people have grown up with their computers, ipods, cell phones, the Internet, user created media and participatory media. Statistics from the Project for Excellence in Journalism's report, *The State of the News Media 2006*, show that newspaper audiences in all age groups are declining. For people ages 18 – 24 in 1999, 42 percent read a daily newspaper (Edmonds, 2006). By 2005 that number was down to 38 percent and falling. Similar results were found for 25 -34 year olds where the numbers were 44 percent and 37 percent respectively (Edmonds, 2006). Paper is not the medium of choice for these young information consumers. An online, interactive, customizable, portable, concise, multimedia information system that will not get black ink smudges all over your hands and face is what the

younger audience's desire. When mainstream media comes up with a business model that can do all that, you will have a winner for the young adult audiences. Audiences young and old have also observed behaviors by mainstream media that have led to negatives views about journalists, editors and the owners of these businesses. The problems the audience has with mainstream media companies include; one sidedness in reporting, lack of objectivity, shallowness of content, repetition of meaningless sensational stories, lack of trust, recent cases of plagiarism, diminished credibility, and the inability of mainstream media to connect with the audience. The public perception coincides with the opinions journalists have about themselves. This quote from the *Views On Performance* section of the Journalists' Survey from *The State of the News Media 2006* affirms these opinions, "Four- in-ten (39%) of journalists working at national newspapers, magazines and wire services say credibility is the biggest problem, compared with just 15 % at national TV and radio outlets." The *Views On Performance* continues to reveal the problems journalists see in their profession: "news reports are increasingly full of factual errors and sloppy reporting", "Journalists are out of touch with the public", "the press pays too little attention to complex issues", "there are too many talk shows on cable television", and "the distinction between reporting and commentary has seriously eroded." (State, p. 9-10). With all this criticism of professional journalists it was inevitable that citizens who are sick of fluff Hollywood stories, and disappointed with the constant disconnect and lack of relevant information decided to start filling the gaps in coverage themselves.

### **Legal Issues**

As the "citizen" journalist steps up to the challenge and publishes their stories, photos and videos in various internet forums, what is their legal status compared to the "professional" journalist? Professional journalists have had state shield laws since 1896, but what about

bloggers, public access cable TV producers and citizen journalists? Connecticut is one of the seventeen states that do not have shield laws for professional reporters, which means citizen journalists have an increased risk for exposure to identify their sources (Elliot, 2002). In Connecticut professional reporters can be issued subpoenas to reveal their sources and the same treatment would apply to the citizen journalist. State court cases have been working their way through the judicial system attempting to define the extent to which reporter's privilege should be extended to the ranks of amateurs on a case by case basis. The facts examined in these cases examine the intent of the citizen journalist and the type of information published and disseminated. If the citizen journalist is publishing information to contribute to the public domain and that information is not legally protected, like trade secrets, they may receive the reporters' privilege, but that is not guaranteed. With the large numbers of people participating in blogs, this privilege could potentially be extended to a large number of people. Could this mass application of reporter's privilege invalidate their protections? If everyone who participates in citizen journalism is entitled to the reporter's privilege, does it become worthless? A quote from a faculty member from Boston College Law School sums up the dichotomy. "Courts confronting reporter's privilege issues in cases involving traditional media entities have been so worried about the expansive scope of the privilege that they have been throwing the baby out with the bathwater and refusing to recognize the privilege at all" (Papandrea, 2006). The attitude of the courts relating to the reporter's privilege is one of the most serious legal problems facing journalists today.

### **Professional Journalists' Opinions**

The opinions of publishers and members of the news media discussed below, reveal that some of these professionals are not impressed by the citizen journalism movement in user

created media. Samuel Freedman, professor of journalism at Columbia University, was invited to comment in the CBS News Public Eye Blog in 2006. In his commentary about citizen journalism he said, “However wrapped in idealism, citizen journalism forms part of a larger attempt to degrade, even to disenfranchise journalism as practiced by trained professionals.” He goes on to blame mainstream media for tarnishing the image of the professional journalist and thus providing reasons for amateurs to blog. Recent news stories about inaccurate and biased reporting published by and about news organizations like the New York Times, makes it seem that the professionals now ignore their own high journalistic standards. Not everyone is anti-citizen journalist; I suspect that many professional journalists feel the same as Professor Freedman. The writing can be seen on the wall, when publishers and journalists see that traffic to newspaper blogs grew 210 percent in the year from December 2005 – 2006 (Bausch, 2006). Nicholas Lemann, Dean of the Columbia School of Journalism, had a different point of view in 2006 when he was interviewed by Benkoil and Stableford. When asked if citizen journalism was a valid movement his answer was “Citizen Journalism does absolutely no harm and is a very helpful add-on.” He goes on to talk about the fear that mainstream media organizations will make business decisions to cut news reporters, assuming that citizen journalists will take their place. Lemann sees a working partnership between the professional and amateur. Since there are a limited number of professionals and they can not be everywhere, citizen journalists can increase the potential media coverage. Merrill Brown in his article, *Abandoning the News*, had a pragmatic view of the evolving journalistic relationship between the professional and amateur. Brown says “the news industry should recognize the importance of what is going on... and work hand-in-hand with bloggers and other independent journalists and citizens to experiment with the formation of new alliances and the development of new products.” CNN has begun to

experiment with new relationships in an effort to fulfill the needs of their growing online news audiences. CNN encourages submission of user created media, citizen journalism and discussion through blogs.

### **Citizens Filling the Gaps in Mainstream Media Coverage**

Merrill Brown comments on the obvious disconnect young audiences have with traditional news media. He stated that in a study as a part of “Declare Yourself”, an effort to get young people to register to vote, “Jon Stewart host of *The Daily Show* on the Comedy Central Network was identified as the most trusted of the TV anchors”. When a comedy star is your most trusted source of news, this has got to be a wake up call for mainstream media. I must admit that I prefer the comedy, timeliness and accuracy in reporting by Jon Stewart. Young audiences are immersed in the participatory nature of technology and the Internet. It is only natural for young people to want to contribute to the discussion and reporting so they can have an impact on their world. A citizen journalist may be witness to something that should be reported in the news and may never be covered if you needed a professional journalist on site. In recent years citizen journalists have provided coverage of tsunamis, hurricane damage, Katrina flooding, the horrors of war, African hunger and genocide. Dan Gillmor in his book, *We The Media*, tells a story about investigative reporting by a group of people who only know each other through their involvement with a blog. Kaycee Nicole wrote a blog about her chronic illness and attracted many sympathetic visitors. Kaycee dies in 2001 and later that year someone posts in MetaFilter this question, “Is it possible that Kaycee did not exist?” This question mobilized a small group of people who investigated and verified whether the facts about Kaycee were ever true. Public records were searched to find the truth. It seems this group of people worked together as well as any professional news team and discovered it was all just a hoax (Gillmor, 2004). Citizen

Journalists have many tools available to them and can be additional eyes and ears gathering news and information for public dissemination. The *Freedom of Information Act* gives citizens the right to obtain copies of public documents and requires government meetings to be open to the public. *The Constitution* protects free speech, public debate, and freedom of the press. By using these tools and taking advantage of opportunities, a citizen could provide news coverage in areas neglected by journalists. Citizen Journalists posting their notes blogs or uploading video clips to YouTube can help keep their community informed. Cell phones with cameras and video capabilities can record the observations of a citizen journalist when something pertinent to public debate, news or information occurs. When professional journalists in newspaper and television must deal with minimal staff numbers, news coverage becomes minimal and unrelated to the lives of the local audience. This is the area where the citizen journalist can make a difference connecting with the local audience and providing information related to their daily lives.

### **Integration into Mainstream Media on the Internet**

On January 17, 2006 Nielsen/NetRatings reported that within the top 10 online newspapers growth of Internet traffic to their blog pages grew 210 percent. Male audiences for the year reported, between Decembers 2005 – 2006, grew 226 percent (Bausch, 2006). It is evident from these statistics that blogs are drawing people to online news sites. Mainstream media must develop an Internet business model to take advantage of and keep this audience traffic. Pew Internet and American Life Project conducted a national survey in 2003 called *Content Creation Online*. Pew reported that “44 percent of Internet users have created content for the online world through building or posting to Web sites, creating blogs and sharing files” (Fallows, 2004). Of the adult internet users responding to this survey, 10 percent have posted comments to online news sites (Fallows, 2004). One in five Internet users are visiting online

newsgroups, and 4 percent say they use these newsgroups to post text, photos, videos or audio files (Fallows, 2004). Now that some mainstream news organizations are opening the doors and inviting participation online, citizen journalism has become part of this increased traffic to newsgroups. Other sources of news are developing on a local level as small community papers are coupled with a web site. In these community papers, an example would be *The Northwest Voice* in Bakersfield, California, local citizens participate interactively in the creation and publication of local news stories using their paper's web site (Outing, 2005). In some situations the need to address the gap in local coverage is being met by the community, for the community. Merrill Brown, in *Abandoning The News*, talked about the future of the print newspaper business saying that investment in the Internet presence needs to match the growth in the online audience. People have busy lives today and the ability to retrieve news and information in an interactive and digital format is essential. If a consumer can read your newspaper where ever there is an internet connection you are reaching the audience. When blog traffic to the top ten online newspapers is up over 200 percent, newspapers need to expand and invest in the Internet. To fail to take advantage of this fast growing audience, who desires Internet based information and audience participation, is short term thinking.

### **My Experiences With Citizen Journalism**

The New York Times is one of the top newspapers and has an impressive web site. The content on their web site is tightly written, contains hyperlinked text, multimedia presentations and the whole internet extravaganza. I wondered if there were many blogs there and how easy it would be to find any citizen journalism within the New York Times web site. When you scroll down to the second page of the New York Times home page you will find Blogs, Multimedia and Podcasts along with Cartoons, Weather, the Obituaries and other seemingly less important

internal links. Upon selecting the Blogs link I was brought to a page that listed 25 blogs with topics from Diner's Journal to Wheels. All the blogs allow the audience to link, comment, email this, and set up an RSS feed. Unfortunately the blogs are written by various professional journalists, columnists, correspondents, and authors. I did find a blog written by a couple building a house in Florida. It is a day to day diary of their experiences. At first you think this is a blog by citizen journalists then after checking their bio pages, I found they are communications professionals and the husband even writes for the New York Times. I could find no obvious traces of amateur citizen journalism within the New York Times web site. I must admit that I did not conduct an extensive search of the entire New York Times web site.

An article by Eytan Avriel, a Haaretz reporter, who spoke with Arthur Sulzberger, the New York Times publisher, at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland, shed some light on the blogger topic. Avriel asked Sulzberger to comment about bloggers and he replied "There are millions of bloggers out there, and if the Times forgets who and what they are, it will lose the war, and rightly so" (Avriel, 2007). Sulzberger then says "We are curators, curators of news. People don't click onto the New York Times to read blogs" (Avriel, 2007). Sulzberger does not value the potential contributions of bloggers and other citizen journalists. This is the mentality of the man making decisions at the top of the New York Times organization. These statements explain to me why all the blogs in the New York Times web site are by "professional" journalists.

Citizen journalism is part of my life. I am the producer, director and editor of a public access cable TV show that has a blog and a web site, [www.insidetheboe.com](http://www.insidetheboe.com) (IBOE). The goal of the small group of citizen journalists affiliated with the IBOE show is to monitor and report on the actions of the local Board of Education and report on the issues that impact education in our

town. We produce a monthly cable TV show and get our information by attending meetings, video taping, taking notes, interviewing people, taking still photos, researching and filing FOI requests. We will also file FOI complaints when meetings are closed to the public illegally or if proper procedures are not followed during these meetings. Recently we videotaped a Town Council meeting which revealed information about potential problems with bids for a new gym floor. The local news reporter was not able to attend this meeting because he covers multiple towns and had to be in another location that evening. We edited and uploaded our video to YouTube. Then emailed the local news reporter so he could watch the video and possibly investigate more and write a story. The reporter thanked IBOE for the video link and information. The reporter from the New Haven Register did write a story that was published a few days later.

### **Conclusion**

The statistics presented above provide proof that Americans are increasingly turning to the Internet and user created media for information, entertainment, and social activism. Citizen journalism, as a form of participatory user created media, has a place among the news disseminating networks within the Internet and other mass media formats. Unfortunately, many mainstream media organizations are not fully investing in the Internet side of their businesses. The statistics show that online audience growth is phenomenal and mainstream news organizations are not taking full advantage of this growing business sector. It is encouraging to find that CNN's home page has links to web pages for user created media submission and participation. The CNN web site is full of photos and videos provided by every day people covering what is happening in their lives. It looks like citizen journalism is alive at CNN. As I demonstrated in my own story above, the citizen journalist can work hand in hand with the

professional journalist to provide better coverage of issues concerning the public. This relationship must be developed on a small scale, person to person, building trust between the professional and the citizen journalist. Any new relationship requires a test period where the parties feel out each other and learn the boundaries of the relationship. When you have a citizen journalist who can be trusted, verifies information, provides honest information and is truly passionate about providing that information you can have a working relationship with a professional news organization. Citizen journalists provide the public with insights and information they otherwise would never see. Citizen journalism fills the gaps left by shrinking mainstream media coverage providing varying viewpoints and a range of topics that no single professional media organization could provide. The gaps may be little gaps representing small topics where coverage by professional news organizations is absent, but these topics matter to the public. A quote from the Overview section in *The State of the News Media* report sums up what is happening in journalism today, “Power is moving away from journalists as gatekeepers over what the public knows. Citizens are assuming a more active role as assemblers, editors and even creators of their own news.”

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