

Citizen Media:

Fad or the Future of News?



The rise and prospects of
hyperlocal journalism

by Jan Schaffer



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J-Lab Executive Director

Introduction



J-Lab has been funding citizen media start-ups with micro-grants for two years now. We've seen how quickly committed founders can build momentum and gain traction in their communities. The findings in

this report were less of a surprise and more of an affirmation of what we had started to see.

We agree with 98% of the respondents in our web survey who said that the emergence of local news web sites with content built from community members is "a good thing"—although it may not all be "journalism," the

kinds of finished stories you see in a newspaper. Because of that, we prefer the term "citizen media," although we use that term interchangeably with "citizen journalism" in this report. Over 79% of the respondents to our web survey considered the information on their sites to be "journalism."

This report focuses specifically on micro-local community news sites that contain content generated by users. When we started this research in the spring of 2006, we were able to identify about 500 citizen media sites. As we issue this report, we have been able to identify several hundred more and will soon catalogue them on a new web site, the Knight Citizen News Network (www.kcnn.org), supported by the Knight Foundation.

More impressive than the numbers, though, is the impact these sites are having on their communities. With limited readership and very little revenue, 73% of those who responded pronounced their sites to be a "success." Why? Because they have watchdogged local government, provided news that couldn't otherwise be had, nudged local media to improve, helped their community solve problems, even, to a degree, increased voter turnout and the number of candidates running for office.

This study takes an early snapshot of a very robust development. We interviewed 31 site operators in-depth, and we fielded a 60-question online survey. Not all 191 respondents could, or did, answer every question, but they

poured out their hearts in open-ended responses. Their resolve to continue, often on their own dime, was palpable.

Our key takeaways:

- Citizen media is emerging as a form of bridge media, linking traditional media with forms of civic participation.
- No one size fits all; there are many models.
- Instead of being comprehensive sources of news, sites are forming as fusions of news and schmooze.
- Most citizen sites don't use traditional metrics — unique visitors, page views or revenues — to measure their success.
- Success is often defined as impact on their community.
- Half of our respondents said their sites don't need to make money to continue.
- Yet there are new kinds of media companies starting to emerge.
- There is a high degree of optimism that citizen news sites are here to stay.
- Finding ways to attract more contributors and some operating support are major challenges.

We think citizen media sites will become an enduring part of the emerging newscape. While we think many individual sites will collapse as their founders burn out, others will arise to take their place.



More impressive than the numbers is the impact these sites are having on their communities. With limited readership and very little revenue, 73% of those who responded pronounced their sites to be a “success.”

With this study, we urge those who can help build capacity in this arena to pay attention. Legacy media companies: Think about partnering – and even supporting – successful sites, not competing with them. Journalism schools: Pursue the possibilities of citizen media sites as learning laboratories. Community foundations: Be alert to real possibilities for building community capacity.

Our deep thanks to the Ford Foundation and to former program director Jon Funabiki, whose curiosity launched this project. Please read on...

Jan Schaffer
J-Lab Director

February, 2007



“I think you’re going to see four or five [hyperlocal] sites per city in a few years and none will be permanent. We’ll never be big operations. I think what will be long-term is the phenomenon” of citizen journalism.

*– Paul Bass
Founder, NewHavenIndependent.org*

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Chapter 1: The Big Picture

If 2004 was the year of the blog, 2005 and 2006 were the years the hyperlocal citizen media movement exploded.

It's been only three years since the first U.S. news organizations embarked on this experiment. In communities as divergent as Bakersfield, California (Merle Haggard country), and Westport, Connecticut (Paul Newman country), tech-savvy individuals at major media companies, and journalism mavericks operating outside of corporate media created some of the earliest models for intensely local "place sites" that would invite citizens to co-author online chronicles of life in their towns – particularly the things that happened beyond the notice of the press.

These early sites solicited whatever users would contribute in the way of neighborhood news, calendar announcements, eyewitness accounts and audio and video of breaking events and public meetings, musings, testimonials, discussion threads and especially photos. Many

citizens were prose-shy but would post images, site operators quickly observed. Some pioneers, such as former CBS newsman Gordon Joseloff of **WestportNow.com**, grafted citizen contributions and comments onto a spine of original reporting. Others, such as **NorthwestVoice.com** in Bakersfield, assigned community editors to create closely focused neighborhood content to blend with citizen voices.

Bloggers and independent operators with no legacy media attachments also began creating hundreds of local hubs built almost entirely on volunteer user-generated content. In Vermont, **ibrattleboro.com**, the side project of two web designers who focus solely on their community, embraced this model. So did **Backfence.com**, a start-up company that attracted \$3 million from investors to try to roll out templated sites from coast to coast.

The pioneers did not intend simply to experiment with new forms of journalism or give-and-take between citizens and journalists. Most site operators believe they are engaged in a new kind of community building, a kind of antidote to the "bowling alone" phenomenon. The sites that really cook, such as Morris Publishing's **BlufftonToday.com**, combine a style of in-town social networking among neighbors who might cross paths if they had the time, with news and information sharing among posters who are informed, passionate, curious, or simply paying attention.

Many sites have grown out of towns such as Deerfield, New Hampshire, where citizens get little or no attention from any press organization short of one of their number being murdered. They're also rising from cities, including many aging Midwestern manufacturing areas such as Toledo, Ohio, and Muncie, Indiana, where activists complain that local coverage is diminishing as news organizations cut costs.

Sites in several places, including San Diego, New Haven, Connecticut, and Olympia, Washington, were born of founders' efforts to prod local media to compete. Now, they say, papers are responding



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by competing more vigorously on stories they might otherwise have missed or underplayed and by reporting real-time news on their web sites.

About the Study

The rule in hyperlocal citizen journalism is that no one size or shape fits all. This study, funded by the Ford Foundation, sought to take a snapshot in time of a robust phenomenon – specifically, the development of hyperlocal community news sites – that is changing and growing week by week.

J-Lab created a questionnaire intended to capture as much data as possible through in-depth interviews in the summer of 2006 with founders, owners or operators of a diverse group of 31 citizen media sites. We supplemented that data with an online survey in the fall of 2006. We specifically targeted readers, contributors and operators of the nearly 500 citizen media sites we could identify at the time; 191 participants responded to most or all of our 60 questions.

This report presents our analysis of that data as well as commentary from the 31 front-line innovators. It offers a baseline of motivations, methods of generating content, and measures of success.

In funding this research, the Ford Foundation wanted to determine whether these initiatives were a fad or a sustainable part of the community news-cape. While it is early to draw firm conclusions about the sustainability of these sites and their ultimate place in the delivery of local news, we can discern clear patterns of organization, common motivations, common challenges, and a measure of self-reported optimism that hyperlocal citizen journalism will become a permanent feature of a new journalism mix.

Citizen journalism is emerging as a form of “bridge” media, linking traditional forms of journalism with classic civic participation. At ease with their

attachments to their communities, citizen journalists are occupying civic spaces where professional journalists would only squirm, withering under such naked caring about community.

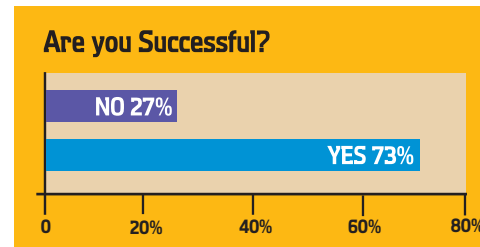
Citizen journalism ranks low on revenues and readers. It ranks high on perceived value and impact. While it aspires to report on community, it aspires even more to *build* community.

When invited to define “success” for their sites, survey respondents more often cited “civic participation” or “community building” than generating more revenue. Although, to be sure, many would like to

be able to pay their citizen contributors, even if only token amounts.

Consider that of 111 respondents able to gauge their site’s success, 73% declared them already to be “successful,” even if they were not profitable. More than half (51%) said

that continued operation of their site did not require it to earn revenue. Asked how long they would stick with their efforts, more than 81% of the 141 respondents bypassed “1,” “2” or “3 to 4” years and instead asserted that they were in the game “indefinitely.”



Hyperlocal Diversity

Hyperlocal citizen sites are diverse in every way. Some sites edit all the content that goes up, at least on the front page; some don’t touch content, except to remove offending posts. Some break news; others reprint news releases. Some struggle to get enough volunteer contributors, others are awash in content and struggling to manage it. Some are finding innovative ways to generate income to support their operations, while others are not sure where they’ll get their next dime.

At many sites, founders are riding a wave of start-up energy, but, particularly at sites run entirely by volunteers, they face a critical challenge of sustaining their labor or finding sufficient fresh replacement troops. Founders such as Christopher Grotke and Lise LePage take a very long view; they’re operating on a ten-years-to-profitability plan, hoping eventually to drop their web design business to run **ibrattleboro** full time.

Citizen journalism is emerging as a form of “bridge” media, linking traditional forms of journalism with classic civic participation.

Chapter 1: The Big Picture



ibattleboro.com

fusions of news and schmooze, where the most dedicated posters can steer intense focus to one or two issues at a time, and where people with common interests connect.

"The more I focus on the news aspect, the more I think news items are really just an excuse to have a conversation," said Lisa Williams, a new media consultant who launched the Watertown, Massachusetts, community site **H2otown.info** and more recently **Placeblogger.com**.

One surprising development, Williams and others said, is that people who run in separate circles in their everyday lives and might seem natural antagonists – political and ideological opposites, gentrifiers and veteran homeowners – talk to each other on hyperlocal sites. The great majority of site operators say that nasty conversational behavior, even among these opposites, is rare.



Lisa Williams

But first, citizens must show up. Building traffic continues to be a struggle, particularly at sites where there are few or no paid staffers to do shoe-leather marketing, or where site operators have yet to hit on successful traffic-generating strategies. Many sites are bursting with the passion and energy of their contributors, but the circle of conversation is exceedingly small compared to the population of their towns. Lisa Williams, who has analyzed the penetration of hyperlocal sites, said the successful sites claim one out of ten residents as registered or frequent users.

Almost no sites are setting themselves up to be comprehensive substitutes for a full-blown local newspaper. Few have the resources. To date, the companies that seem to have created replicable profit-making models are mostly legacy newspapers. Nevertheless, some promising alternative revenue models are emerging.

In place of being comprehensive news sources, sites are forming as

Other sites go fallow for days without new posts, or depend on P.R. professionals or local groups such as the library story-time hosts to post news releases. But citizens are quick to claim ownership of sites that



Mary Lou Fulton

connect, noted Mary Lou Fulton, *The Bakersfield Californian* newspaper executive behind the launch of **Northwest Voice**. In the summer of 2006, she described what happened when an ad with a picture of a woman in a low-cut blouse ran in the back of the print weekly that is built around citizen contributions reverse-published from the **Northwest Voice** web site.

"You wouldn't believe the outraged phone calls. **Northwest Voice** was a community newspaper, family-oriented, they were shocked and dismayed at our judgment," said Fulton, vice president of audience development. "Wow. This publication is not even two years old and you've got people who take it so seriously that they are offended by one advertisement on page 24. They did not want it to get off track. It was a watershed moment for the **Northwest Voice** way."

"We in newspapers and media have been great at telling people, 'No, we're not going to put your stuff in the paper.' We've trained generations of people to be consumers of news," said Kevin Kaufman, managing editor of *The Daily Camera* and **MyTown.DailyCamera.com** in Boulder, Colorado. "All of a sudden we want people to be participants in news. Some people are enthusiastic but a lot of people are skeptical or nervous or unsure. We're really embarking on a shift on what is news, what's important to people and what's their role in the process."

Hyperlocal citizen sites rest on this shifting ground. The question is whether they are fads, short-lived efforts that may bloom and fade like some blogs, or fundamental realignments of local news delivery.

"We're really embarking on a shift on what is news, what's important to people and what's their role in the process."

– Kevin Kaufman



NewHavenIndependent.org

city in a few years and none will be permanent. We'll never be big operations," predicted Paul Bass, a journalist who founded **NewHavenIndependent.org** in Connecticut. "I think what will be long-term is the phenomenon" of citizen journalism.

Defining Citizen Media

What exactly is a hyperlocal citizen media site? It is a multi-media digital unspooling that reflects life in a particular place, typically with a rolling front page where posts go up in blog-like chronological order. Many display professionally produced local coverage (whether originated by a small paid staff, imported from an owner newspaper, or linked to by volunteer staffs). Citizen postings take center stage on some sites or are relegated mostly to comments and photo galleries on others. Sites also typically feature event calendars, mission statements, tutorials on how to contribute text and images, local blog feeds, and government and business directories. Many include poetry or creative writing, columns on gardening or sports or other topics and vast photo galleries, with featured photos on the front page.

Site operators frequently cited local daily (45%) or weekly (44%) newspapers as their competition, but others say the competition is every other web offering – from neighborhood listservs (21%) to social networking favorites that define community as the world.

We believe that citizen media sites will be a sustainable part of the local news universe, but not all individual sites may be sustainable. Rather, ongoing efforts will likely emerge in serial fashion, with fresh sites coming online to replace those that collapse as their founders burn out.

"I think you're going to see four or five [hyperlocal] sites per



Paul Bass

Many sites emphasize, and others create space for, the kinds of micro-news that daily papers lack the staff or pages to cover: 35th wedding anniversaries, galleries of prom pictures, Rotary Club news. These may be of interest to just one subdivision or even one family, but the effect is one of inclusiveness and intimacy many users find lacking in their local press.

While some hyperlocal ventures are built around web sites, many others are essentially blogs. They are less individual soapboxes, however, than easy-to-use software systems for managing community content.

Sites are set up as businesses, as non-profits or as ad hoc citizen ventures. In our survey, 139 respondents split evenly: Half described their sites as for-profit operations, and half non-profit. Among the profit-seekers are entrepreneurs inventing new kinds of media companies to tap user-generated news and information and to build revenue models based on local shopping, local search and online advertising.

Also on the for-profit side are legacy media companies who see news holes and ad revenues declining and reader dissatisfaction ascending. They're launching hyperlocal sites to preserve or extend their reach into their local markets, to capture online advertising and, not least, to repair bonds with their communities and deepen citizens' attachments to each other. Only those who know and care about where they live will pay for coverage, the thinking goes.

Many of these newspaper-owned sites are thick with user-generated "chicken dinner" content that is reverse-published into ad-rich, free home-delivered weeklies. Several of these sites – hybrids of citizens and professional staff who solicit and produce content – show great promise in both profitability and sustainability. Bakersfield's **Northwest Voice** site became profitable in about a year. Unlike many non-profit sites, they're not as dependent on the free labor of a committed corps who hope replacements will step up before they burn out.

In another category are the for-profit solo site operators who don't seem terribly concerned with

... the effect is one of inclusiveness and intimacy many users find lacking in their local press.

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making money, at least not immediately. Like **Baristanet.com** co-owners Debbie Galant and Liz George, many site operators say they're rewarded by inventing as they go and watching citizens propel the enterprise with the surprising contributions they make.

Some of these small-scale site operators are able to claim profitability only because they count their server bills as practically their only expenses, and discount their thousands of hours of unpaid labor. Two questions bedevil some within this group: How big a town or collection of towns does one need to sell enough local or national ads to support a business? Should ad revenues be shared with the most-read or most-active contributors – and if so, how?

Then there's the most diverse category: the non-profits. These include disaffected journalists turning to foundations to support local coverage and citizen training. Both **New Haven Independent** and **Chitowndailynews.org** in Chicago are initiatives by veteran journalists to create digital-age forms of alternative media. Other non-profit sites were launched by groups or individuals attempting to build a place for the kinds of coverage and discussion they can't find in the press, and by collectives who are testing the proposition of whether citizens will pay public radio-style memberships to support community sites.

A few sites – such as the new media start-up **NewWest.net**, which covers 11 Rocky Mountain centers, and **VillageSoup.com** in Maine – put more emphasis on "local" than on citizen content. The proprietors of both sites believe professionally produced content is vital to creating interest and generating traffic. Much of their citizen content comes through comment threads and photos.

Common Characteristics

All these sites, even those with heavy doses of Big-J journalism, draw on the community brain. They depend for their vitality on citizens sharing their thoughts, observations and experiences. Subjectivity prevails. One reason sites are so different from one another is that towns are so different, and sites reflect the citizens' preoccupations. The county fair will generate outpourings of photos and contributions in rural New Hampshire, while in San Diego people can't say enough

about the price of real estate.

Another commonality is emerging: Citizens for the most part do not desire to contribute fully reported articles with leads, middles, and ends, or to communicate their experiences in polished essay form (though some do; many sites boast volunteer columnists). In a few cities, such as Madison, Wisconsin, professionals are trying to train citizens to become journalists. But there is little evidence that many civilians want to call around and conduct interviews (again, with exceptions; the blogger who created **Greensboro101.com** did start making calls after an editor at the Greensboro paper made that suggestion in a post to the site). In fact, sites such as **New West** and **Village Soup** struggle to generate user posts, in part, their founders suspect, because citizens are intimidated at putting their prose up next to professional copy.

Citizens are, however, using community sites to bring attention to critical issues or to have their say on growth, crime, jobs, schools and the environment. They also stir up talk about lifestyle, noise, traffic, and who sells decent produce. Their approach is more often impressionistic than systematic, or what journalists would consider "finished."

They go to public meetings and post a paragraph of interpretation, or skip the reporting and go straight to analysis. Some will post transcripts or documents or raw video or audiotape. Or they'll report from experience, adding their account of something happening on the block or at their kids' schools to the story mosaic taking shape on site. "Citizen journalists have an outsider stance to the news," said **H2otown's** Lisa Williams. "They creep up on the news," for example by blogging about meetings they watch on local cable channels.

Many non-journalists who have launched sites, such as Barry Parr, founder of **Coastsider.com**, and Christopher Grotke and Lise LePage at **ibrattleboro**, have assigned themselves to cover specific issues, but they do it on terms that don't necessarily follow the rules of standard journalism. Parr doesn't have to give a blow-by-blow account of a



Citizens for the most part do not desire to contribute fully reported articles with leads, middles, and ends ...

municipal meeting in cases where he's set up his tripod and made the full video available on the site.

Though in this experimental phase each site is *sui generis*, sites commonly make room for whatever kind of user wants to join the party. Certain types are showing up all over: The local official or politico who blogs; the suffering commuters who want road improvements; the development debaters; the gallery and club owners touting weekend events; the guy who posts 20 photos of his sandy baby; and the high school clubs washing cars on Saturday.

Sites often crackle with postings when towns experience big events: A hailstorm, a Nazi rally (as occurred in Olympia, Washington), a momentous issue that comes before the council or school board.

People also use hyperlocal sites to explore: What's that smell? Why was there another stabbing this weekend? Can someone baby-sit my parrot? And no one responds that the smell is too speculative, the stabbing is worth just a couple of paragraphs, or that interest in a parrot is too inside to be published.

Citizen media sites are adding valuable information to their communities, which may be an important indicator of their sustainability.

Having Impact

In these and other ways, citizen media sites are adding valuable information to their communities, which may be an important indicator of their sustainability. There is little doubt that sites are having significant impact. Site operators say they know elected officials and community leaders are following along – in part because officials often join in, in part because governments are using sites as a way to communicate real-time information (reports on road blockages or temporary changes in garbage collection schedules), in part because community journalists are getting their calls returned immediately. They know journal-

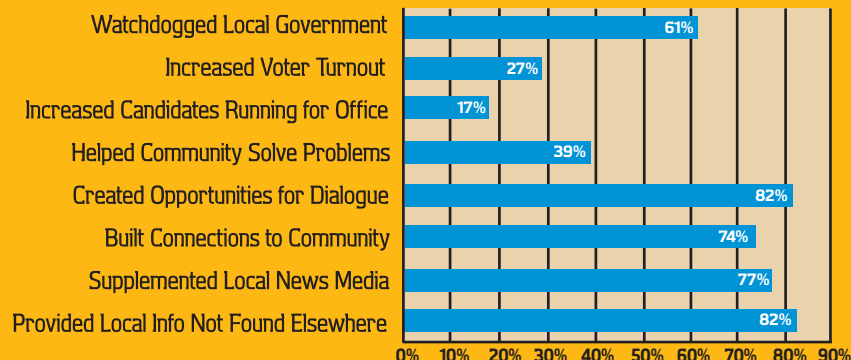
ists are mining their sites for tips and sources, and in towns such as Greensboro, joining in the conversation.

When asked what they found valuable about the citizen media sites they read, 82% of our survey respondents said they provide local information not found elsewhere; 77% said

the sites supplement what local media can provide; 74% said the sites build connections to the community.

When asked to describe the impact their sites have had in their communities, 82% said they provided opportunities for dialogue; 61% said they watchdogged local government; 39% said they helped the community solve problems; 27% said they increased voter turnout and 17% said they increased the number of candidates running for office.

Where Citizen Journalism Added Value



Lise LePage said, "I felt successful when we were at a meeting last night with 100 people in the room and someone said, 'Where are we going to find out this information?' And someone said, 'ibattleboro.'"

Among the wealth of evidence that sites are expanding coverage, prompting change or influencing events in their towns, here are a few examples:

In coastal San Mateo, California, the local weekly paper began to cover breaking news on its web site after **Coastsider** was launched.

In San Diego, **VoiceofSanDiego.org** pursues a strategy of cherry-picking an important undercovered issue and "throwing people at it." It claims credit for influencing debate on the development of a new airport and for prompting *The Union-Tribune* to add reporters to the City Hall beat.

In New Haven, a youth initiative partly directed at giving teens

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something to do grew out of a **New Haven Independent** campaign.

In Madison, Wisconsin, 50 citizens have received journalism basic training and have begun to break stories on **MadisonCommons.org**, including one about tainted water.

In Deerfield, New Hampshire, coverage of upcoming elections at **The Forum [forumhome.org]** led to a significant increase in candidates.

In Northfield, Minnesota, in the wake of a hailstorm that damaged virtually every car parked on the street, citizens flocked to **Northfield.org** to compile accounts of crop damage, to exchange tips on how to prove damage to insurers, and to share videos and 180 photos documenting damage.

In Rye, New Hampshire, which falls outside a major market, citizens heavily covered problems in the construction of a municipal building and the debate over proposed construction of a 400-person assisted living center for **RyeReflections.org**.

New West in the Rocky Mountain region produced a six-part series on sex crimes that “had a huge impact on the many people involved and in the community,”

according to site owner Jonathan Weber.

In Olympia, Washington, citizens convened at **OlyBlog.net** to discuss how to respond to an upcoming Nazi rally. “There was a long

and detailed discussion about whether they should be ignored or confronted, which went on for a long time with strong positions on both sides,” said site owner Rick McKinnon.

In Toledo, workers concerned about working conditions and other issues at a local Jeep plant held discussions at **ToledoTalk.com** and posted excerpts on a company bulletin board.

In Greensboro, the city council refused to endorse a 10-year plan offered by the Coalition to Fight Homelessness. A coalition member posted clarifying details on **Greensboro101**, a council member read it and re-introduced the plan, which was adopted.

In Maine, reporters at **Village Soup** exposed violations of open-meeting rules. And a citizen contributor helped police find an elderly man who went missing for two days after he recognized the man’s car from a photo police posted to the site.

In Santa Fe, a local store put brown wrappers on a magazine that featured a breast-feeding woman on the cover. “Eight hundred comments later,” **FreeNewMexican.com** editor Stefan Dill said, “the [company] president announced in our comments that due to public pressure, they were going to take the wrappers off.” In celebration, women posted numerous photos of themselves breastfeeding, and the site became a hub of breastfeeding tips.

In Denver, Travis Henry, the editor of **YourHub.com**, says the greatest impact of community sites is hard to quantify. “It’s allowed people to have voices who didn’t have voices before.” 🌈



Northfield.org



RyeReflections.org



ToledoTalk.com

Chapter 2: Mapping Citizen Media Models

J-Lab has previously divided hyperlocal citizen media sites into three categories: All-volunteer sites, legacy media sites and hybrid sites joining small paid staffs with citizen contributors. Sites are more diverse than that, however.

What follow are some narrower classifications and brief profiles of many of the sites examined in-depth for this study. The site classifications are necessarily imperfect; some sites fit more than one category, or have features that overlap category lines. Categorizations that apply in the summer of 2006, at the time this research was being conducted, may be out of date by summer 2007.

For the moment, however, J-Lab defines **community cooperatives** as sites where volunteers share labor and decision making, usually with formal meetings. **Trained citizen journalist sites** embrace traditional journalism values and offer training to non-journalists.

Professional journalists operating independently of legacy media

companies are operating two kinds of sites: **for-profit** and **non-profit**.

Blog aggregator sites are one-stop community repositories where citizens can scan multiple local blogs, and local bloggers can engage each other. **Syndicated multi-site models** have as their goal the development of a model that can be syndicated in and adapted to multiple communities.

Legacy media sites were launched by newspapers or broadcast corporations as places for users to dominate the content, in contrast to their news web sites dominated by the work of professional journalists.

Solo enterprise sites (both for-profit and non-profit) are the work of individuals and partners, few of whom have professional journalism experience.

Community Cooperatives

The Forum serves Deerfield and three other small New Hampshire towns that lie beyond the coverage area of any daily paper or broadcast. About a dozen people who came to know each other while working on local elections confronted the news vacuum by applying for a J-Lab grant to launch a citizen web site. With no journalism experience, the voting members of **The Forum** – who agree to contribute \$25 and 100 hours of work annually – got the site up and publishing in August 2005.

Founding managing editor Maureen Mann said about half a dozen remain regular posters, and two have joined her in the editing cooperative, which screens or edits every post. It spends a large portion of its budget publishing site content in a print edition three times a year for the benefit of citizens who are not online, and to urge readers to post to the site. More than 70 people had contributed to the site by its one-year anniversary.

The Forum, which takes a straightforward and earnest tone,



forumhome.org

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published the only detailed coverage of the March 2006 municipal elections. “We got enormous positive feedback on our candidate profiles and explanations of what the issues are,” Mann said.

A group of citizens in Northfield, Minnesota, who had been running a local issues discussion board ventured into citizen journalism in January 2006 when they launched **Northfield.org**, which invites postings from anyone in the community. At the six-month mark Doug Bratland, chairman of the site’s volunteer board, said about a dozen posters dominated the site. Members of the board of Northfield Citizens Online share the task of screening all posts that go to the site’s front page and editing for grammar and code errors. The most popular content is the photo galleries.

A part-time managing editor was hired to multiply citizen posts and diversify voices and to increase the ratio of newsy items to P.R.-style event announcements. To keep a part-time paid editor the site needs 500 people in the town of about 17,000 to become members by paying \$20 a year.

Rye Reflections was initiated by former *Boston Globe* editor Jack Driscoll, now editor-in-residence at the MIT Media Lab. Once a month



Members of the *Silver Stringers* project in Melrose, Mass., offer lessons from their citizen journalism experience to the staff of a newly launched *Rye Reflections* in April 2005.

the site publishes about 16 news and feature articles written by, and of interest to, people living on the New Hampshire seacoast around the town of Rye. “Very few in Rye have any kind of writing experience or computer experience but they have a loyalty to their community,” Driscoll said.

“This is a way they can express themselves and share the wisdom they have built up about the area.”

Contributors (all volunteers) gather weekly for story meetings, and Driscoll runs tutorials on how to conduct interviews and other practical skills. There’s a six-member editing cooperative, and three people edit every piece.

“We’re a community without a newspaper,” Driscoll said. “We are

writing about the most important issues and breaking new ground because the political leadership has operated without scrutiny for years.” That said, he notes the site could use more contributors who want to tackle news and news analysis in addition to recipes and travel pieces.

The two-year-old non-profit **ArborUpdate.com** in Ann Arbor, Michigan, is run by individuals

who in the words of one collective member “have no structure and no accountability to one another,” but whose goal is to host an alternative news site for original posts, commentary and links to other media coverage. The only cost is minimal site hosting fees, which one member pays out of pocket. About ten people have posting privileges, but any Ann Arbor citizen can e-mail and obtain guest-poster status.



ArborUpdate.com

Trained Citizen Journalist Sites

Madison Commons, which launched in March 2006, draws content from three sources: Local publications that “partner” by providing story links, the work of students trained in the citizen journalism program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and citizens of Madison who have undergone reporting and writing workshops. Some 50 citizens, recruited from Neighborhood Planning Councils, were trained as of summer 2006. About 10 became contributors, said journalism professor and project director Lew Friedland. Friedland’s intention is for citizens to provide grassroots coverage of Madison neighborhoods, meeting a threshold for fairness and accuracy in everything they write. All citizen posts are edited.

The site, however, is dominated not by citizen content but by professional material drawn from the city’s two newspapers and other publications. Friedland believes the site needs 30 to 50 “hard core” community contributors to be considered truly citizen-driven. He estimates it could take three to five years to train enough citizens to

achieve that balance. Beyond the support of the university, Friedland says, the site needs to raise about \$25,000 a year to pay editors and expand training workshops to include photography and videography as well as writing. Ten months after its launch, **Madison Commons'** small toehold leveraged a prestigious \$100,000 Baldwin grant to expand the model into a Wisconsin Commons.

Geoff Dougherty is an investigative reporter who launched the non-profit **Chi-Town Daily News** in December of 2005 after leaving the *Chicago Tribune*. He calls it an online newspaper by and for Chicago residents, and his intention is to raise enough money to hire and pay reporters (including himself), to continue to run articles produced by Medill School of Journalism students and to train citizen reporters to write for the site. Dougherty runs informal night-at-the-pub training workshops for anyone who's interested.

"One of the unfortunate things about Chicago is there are a lot of economically disadvantaged neighborhoods that are never covered at all," he said. "Ultimately we want fairly consistent contributors covering neighborhood events and hyperlocal stuff, because that's the stuff that doesn't get covered."

Professional Journalist Non-profit Sites

On a budget of about \$120,000 a year from grants and sponsorships, journalist Paul Bass runs **New Haven Independent**, a site that breaks news with Bass and one other full-time reporter, two half-time reporters, a public schoolteacher who blogs on retainer, a Hartford correspondent on retainer, a consulting webmaster and half a dozen freelancers who are paid by the piece.

Citizens contribute by turning the article comments sections into debates and by sending tips, photos, audio, videos and features such as



Chitowndailynews.org

the local crime map one created. Bass's goal is to break stories, bring undercovered issues to the forefront and stimulate more and better reporting by all local media. Though the site is having an impact, he said, he can't continue indefinitely to do all his jobs, which he described as "editing the site, raising the money, maintaining the finances, administrative work, hiring people, writing my own stories, dealing with the public. It's not sustainable," he said, "I don't know if we're here to stay yet. ... Our real goal is to prove it can be done."

The two-year-old **Voice of San Diego** has an annual budget of a half-million dollars mostly contributed by local foundations. The site employs two co-editors and five other full-time staff members, and draws on several paid and unpaid freelancers and consultants. Backed by local foundation executive Buzz Wooley, the site was launched as an alternative news source to the monopoly daily paper, *The Union-Tribune*, with an invitation for citizens to supplement the professional journalism.

The editors selectively recruit citizens to write pieces in their areas of interest for free or small fees, then edit their work to meet professional standards. Citizens also post photos and take part in discussion forums. Executive editors Scott Lewis and Andrew Donohue say readers also contribute to stories as they develop. On some breaking events, reporters post intermittently to the site as they report, and invite citizens to help fill in the gaps with tips, documents and other materials to advance stories.

Lewis and Donohue say it's difficult to find citizens who are strong writers and will contribute regularly for free, but a token payment of \$25 is enough to encourage and build the confidence of some contributors. One continued to write in exchange for business cards.

Professional Journalist For-profit Sites

Former CBS producer and correspondent Gordon Joseloff launched **WestportNow** to be a source of professionally produced "real-time news" for an affluent Connecticut town of 26,000 that gets no consis-

"I don't know if we're here to stay yet. ... Our real goal is to prove it can be done."

– Paul Bass

Chapter 2: Mapping Citizen Media Models

tent coverage, he said, between the deadline dates of two local weeklies. Joseloff, a Westport native, defines **WestportNow** as “a web site edited by professionals with the aid of non-professionals,” including a volunteer photographer who shoots the old-home “Teardown of the Day” and has learned to report. “It’s run like a professional news organization with stringers” who are citizens, he said. He was the site’s original reporter/editor; he hired a staff reporter/editor after he was elected to an office equivalent to mayor of Westport.

The front page is filled mostly with staff-produced short, newsy posts and daily photos, which constitute the bulk of citizen contributions. More than a dozen contributors posted pictures from a Memorial Day parade.

Joseloff wants to “replicate **WestportNow** in other similarly demographically impressive communities and find someone like me who will edit it professionally and wants to make a business of it.” But first he needs to move the site into the black; this year he hired its first ad salesperson on commission.



Jonathan Weber

Jonathan Weber, former editor of *The Industry Standard*, launched **New West** as a regional publication with local hub sites across the Rocky Mountain region. The web site was phase one of a new media company that has moved into custom publishing and indoor advertising. Weber has plans for **New West** to publish books and magazines and host conferences devoted to environmental and other issues in a region where, he said, media are “underdeveloped.”

With an investment of less than \$1 million from angel investors, **New West** has a staff of two regional editors and part-time editors in 11 locales who solicit pieces from contract writers and do their own writing, which blends reporting with commentary. Weber is disappointed that few citizens are contributing pieces to **New West’s** “Unfiltered” section. He speculated that the professional quality of writing and reporting on the site “serves as a deterrent” to amateurs. Photo contributions are “stronger than writing,” he said.

Blog Aggregator Sites

Greensboro, North Carolina, has an extraordinarily active local blogosphere. Web designer Roch Smith, Jr. launched **Greensboro101** as a community service to aggregate blogs in one place, but the site is more than a digest. Smith quickly concluded that some blogs were more compelling than others, so now he applies editorial judgment by creating a front page for highlighted blog posts. “We look for something that is well-written, that conveys some minimal completeness in terms of news and opinion and that has some grain of substance,” he said. “I found myself applying some measure of what traditional journalism might apply” to the featured posts, which regularly highlight the blogs of *News & Record* reporters and editors.

Before the city’s monthly blogger meet-ups, Smith runs an open **Greensboro101** meeting where editorial issues are discussed. The site is now a for-profit corporation with a local advisory board. With an investment of \$20,000 from a local businessman/blogger, Smith is working to develop an advertising model that would share revenue between the site and bloggers. “I see a lot of opportunities for things we could do if we were profitable,” Smith said, including lending out camera and video equipment and “allowing people to learn more about how to do good citizen journalism.”

In his free time off from working as a software engineer for Knight Ridder in the late 1990s, Karl Martino founded the blog aggregator **PhillyFuture.org**, which he shut down in 2001. He re-launched it in 2004 as a hybrid site where blogs are not only aggregated, but non-bloggers also post original work. He now calls it a regional online community “seeking to coalesce what the entire region is discussing.” Six volunteers help him keep an eye on postings and promote stories to the front page. The site is currently a for-profit LLC (limited liability company) with a trickle of revenue from advertising. “We need a way of sharing revenue with



Greensboro101.com

people who contribute to the site,” Martino said. “I do not know how to do that right now.”

Syndicated Multi-site Models

Village Soup, founded by former textbook publisher Richard Anderson in 1997, employs a dozen journalists who cover two areas of about 50,000 people each around the town of Belfast and the Camden-Rockland area of Maine. They contribute to what Anderson describes as a news and shopping site that allows citizens to search for local merchandise across personal classifieds and business inventories. Citizens currently can browse for purchases through the site’s database of local businesses, primarily Realtors. Businesses are charged for listings and given the tools to create pages that they can change daily to highlight sales, or perhaps a restaurant’s evening dinner special. About a quarter of the ad revenue comes through the online product, the rest from the print weekly.

Anderson’s goal is to create a platform, Village Soup Common, to be used by locally owned community network sites around the world. Although the sites would solicit and run citizen-generated news and information and photography, Anderson believes professional journalism is key to attracting advertisers.

Your Hub was launched by the *Rocky Mountain News* throughout its circulation area in April 2005 and is now 44 local web sites, with citizen-generated content fed from the sites into 15 weekly zoned print editions. The company now syndicates **Your Hub** in eight states and expects more expansion. The sites, dominated by upbeat “chicken dinner” news, link to local professionally produced articles, highlight featured bloggers and offer comprehensive community announcements and listings of government, cultural, small business and other institutions.

“There are the Googles and Craigslist of the world – they can set up local sites in whatever city they want by flipping a couple of switches,” editor Travis Henry said. “The benefit we have over the Googles and Craigslist is that we are still local because local newspapers are running the sites.”

Each hub is hosted by a local editor who blogs and posts photos but

also solicits community contributions. “You can call that person, e-mail her, she lives in and is a journalist in the community,” Henry said. “Is it traditional journalism? No, and we’re not pretending” it is. “It’s a way for people to talk to each other without all the filters and spins.”


Co-founder Mark Potts objects to the characterization he’s heard of **Backfence.com** as a “local site-in-a-box.” **Backfence** was conceived to be a network of hyperlocal community sites built entirely on citizen-generated offerings and supported by advertising revenue. The company, with \$3 million in venture capital support, launched sites in McLean and Reston, Virginia, in May 2005, then spread to other Washington-area suburbs and to affluent communities outside Chicago and the San Francisco area. The company’s goal was to re-create the site in more than a dozen metropolitan areas with approximately 10 local sites in each area, but in January 2007 it announced a downsizing and restructuring.

The site model had one editor handling the home pages for every five sites in a regional market, along with full-time community relations specialists in each market and one ad salesperson for each two communities.

The sites are dominated by blogs and local conversation. “It’s not journalism. It’s content,” Potts said. “We’ve gone back and forth about using the word ‘news’ because it freaks out people who aren’t journalists. ... To people from the outside [what’s on the site] looks incredibly mundane, but if you’re in those communities it’s incredibly important.”

Potts said, “We think the model looks like the newspaper business down the road – [with] a handful of companies doing this around the country, and we don’t bump into each other at all.”

WickedLocal.com is the central portal to a planned network of hyperlocal community web sites, the first launched in Plymouth,



“It’s a way for people to talk to each other without all the filters and spins.”

– Travis Henry



“It’s not journalism. It’s content.”

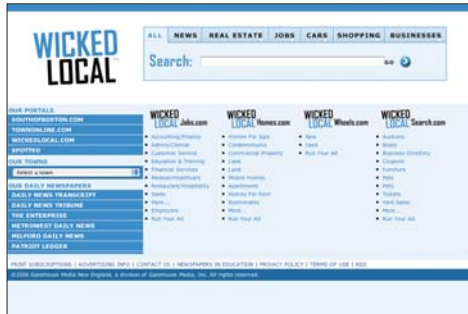
– Mark Potts

Chapter 2: Mapping Citizen Media Models

Massachusetts, in March 2006. A project of GateHouse Media, which owns six dailies and more than 100 weeklies in Massachusetts alone, the sites are intended to weave together professional and citizen journalism and to promote community discussion. The citizen journalism section also includes blogs, photos and interactive discussion forums.

The site has two online editors.

As the network expands, much of the responsibility for the web sites is being pushed out to the “print” editors, who are increasingly becoming multimedia editors. On the citizen-journalism side, the online editors monitor forums, assist citizen journalists and reach out into the community both to urge participation in the sites and determine how the sites can be



WickedLocal.com

made most useful to people in the communities.

The site is supported by several forms of advertising, perhaps most innovative is Google-type advertising associated with a robust search tool for local markets.

Legacy Media Sites

The Morris Publishing Group has launched one of the most radical old-media experiments in citizen journalism: It ended its Savannah paper's weekly zoned coverage of nearby coastal South Carolina, and launched in its place a community web site and a free home-delivered publication, called **Bluffton Today**, in the one rapidly growing part of the zone.

The Savannah Morning News, about a 40-minute drive from the town of Bluffton, was losing market share to closer McClatchy daily papers. Morris saw little value in trying to compete for penetration in the built-out towns of Beaufort and Hilton Head, but saw possibilities in Bluffton, a former fishing village that was becoming the hot spot for new golf communities rising on the coast. Half the population was new to the community in the previous five years. Morris gambled it could

launch a free daily delivery paper for the area and a companion web site, **BlufftonToday.com**, and make these indispensable venues through which residents would get to know each other and build a sense of place.

The site, which launched in spring 2005, blends local blogs with original citizen-generated content. Some 5,000 people in the town of 16,000 households became registered users in the first year, an extremely high ratio by the standards of citizen sites. By the end of 2006, registered users had increased to more than 7,300; 1,618 had posted comments, 1,289 had posted blog entries. And 960 users had posted 26,700 photos in the photo galleries.

"The vision is that the web site is this huge participative environment, and the home-delivered newspaper draws heavily on the site," said Steve Yelvington, the site's shepherd at Morris Digital Works. "In doing this we weren't trying to cut staff. We were trying to get people



Steve Yelvington

founder, Mary Lou Fulton, explained that Bakersfield's family-owned newspaper, *The Californian*, recognized it could not cover news at the neighborhood level in the rapidly growing area of about 300,000 people and considered that to be a barrier between the paper and readers. An initial investment of \$50,000 included the start-up of both a web site filled with community-generated neighborhood news and announce-

“In doing this we weren’t trying to cut staff. We were trying to get people to read and participate and be part of the community.”

– *Steve Yelvington*

ments, and a free weekly edition that draws content from the site and is delivered to every home in the area. A second site, **Southwest Voice** (swvoice.com) covers another part of the paper's circulation region.

The citizen sites combine "organic community content" – whatever citizens choose to write about or announce – with regular contributions from volunteer columnists and articles and discussion questions generated by site editors. Fulton said editors visited 25 community leaders prior to the launch to encourage them to contribute material. "Then it was just a matter of our editor bugging the heck out of people, reminding them we're around and we're looking for articles and pictures," she said.

"What we've done in newspapers is train people in communities that events that matter to them," such as wedding anniversaries other than silver and gold, "don't matter to the newspaper," she said. "Our policy is to say 'yes' to everything, provided that it's local and relevant to the community. You have to do that for a while before people believe you."

Northwest Voice reached break-even in about a year, in part by providing an affordable ad buy to small businesses that cannot afford to advertise in the daily.

In Nashville, a TV station – ABC affiliate WKRN – has launched a citizen blog aggregate, **NashvilleisTalking.com**, hosted by an in-house blogger who highlights and comments on local postings. "They're trying to engage a different type of audience who doesn't watch local news," said site operator Brittney Gilbert. "It's sarcastic, light-hearted, tongue-in-cheek. My opinions and biases are out in the open and there's no intention of being objec-

tive." The site wants more video contributions, but few have emerged from citizens who were trained in video newsgathering. Gilbert said, "We think that's because bloggers don't have the equipment. ... We're thinking of lending cameras for a week to trained bloggers."

Solo Enterprise Non-profit Sites

Evergreen State College Professor Rick McKinnon launched **OlyBlog**, devoted to discussions of Olympia, Washington, politics and news, in August 2005. The site was an answer to the unmoderated discussions rife with "negative, hateful comments" on the web site of the local daily, *The Olympian*, McKinnon said. "There was a space to have an online conversation that was more carefully moderated."

McKinnon devotes hundreds of hours of unpaid labor to the site each month and pays the \$40 server bill. He's designated half a dozen volunteers as moderators who promote posts from registered users to the front page, delete comments from discussions and generally "keep track of the site."

The site gets enough posts to be self-sustaining, McKinnon said. The greater challenge is economic: How to finance what he calls a nascent nonprofit civic network of linked sites devoted to such topics as Olympia arts and the environment. "We also want to think about how we might get one integrated wireless system in all of Olympia," he said.

John Sawvel runs **Toledo Talk**, the discussion site he founded in 2003 as a non-profit community public service. In 2005 he began to learn about community journalism and decided to start attending and writing about public meetings on the arts and municipal issues, as well as the monthly sessions of a "new urbanism" group of citizens, developers and politicians who chew over downtown issues.

Sawvel is encouraged that other contributors now cover school



NorthwestVoice.com



NashvilleisTalking.com



OlyBlog.net

Chapter 2: Mapping Citizen Media Models

board meetings and link from the site to video and audio coverage of events on their blogs. But as the site grew more popular in the last year he felt compelled for the first time to “put the brakes on” by reviewing items before they were posted to the front page and moderating discussions. “It was getting wild,” he said. He’s looking into organizing the site as an LLC, with its attendant liability protection. “I don’t want to say to my wife, ‘We’re going to lose our house because I started a web site.’”

Solo Enterprise For-profit Sites

Some citizen media sites have personalities that are so distinctive, a regular participant would know those voices anywhere. This is especially true of sites that are run by individuals or partners who got a bug to stir up a conversation in their communities, then began to suspect they had a business on their hands. Some of the most readable citizen media sites are the projects of non-journalists who started out wanting to know their towns better, and ended up creating civic conversations.

Lisa Williams, a computer-literate blogger and media consultant, founded **H2otown** in the Boston suburb of Watertown in February 2005 because she despaired of Watertown ever receiving consistent day-to-day coverage. She also felt like a stranger as a relative newcomer to the town, and suspected others felt similarly disconnected. The site is “about paying attention,” she said, “and that’s what we’re doing collectively at **H2otown**.”

Watertown has a weekly paper with frequent staff turnover, and the *Boston Globe* selectively covers stories from the suburb, “but our competition is not the newspaper,” Williams said. “We’re covering stuff that is too small or silly or beneath the paper.” By “we” Williams essentially means herself. She invites citizens to post news and information, and some do, but she’s the one who does most of the reporting. “I cover the Town Council by TiVo,” she says (meetings are broadcast on local cable). “I have little kids and can’t go to all those meetings.”

On the site Williams refers to herself in the third person as “**H2otown**,” a wry, gadget-obsessed, slightly neurotic character. She spoofs herself to downplay her authority and invite others to participate, but the tone actually intimidates some citizens, Williams said, who

have told her they can’t “write funny like you.”

Williams stands undecided on the brink of selling ads and building the site into a business. She’s not sure she wants to be accountable to clients. “I have an entirely experimental attitude,” she says. “I could stop at any time. Basically, I’ve been just not stopping.” But in the next breath she confesses to “itchy expansionist feelings about Waltham, the town next door.”

Baristanet concerns itself with the obsessions of suburban parents and below-the-newspaper-radar events in the New Jersey towns of Montclair, Bloomfield and Glen Ridge. It was founded in May 2004 by writer Debbie Galant and a business partner. Each invested \$3,000 in site design and T-shirts. The original partner has since withdrawn; Galant now co-owns the site with writer Liz George. Galant and George do all the posting on **Baristanet** (along with a paid part-time writer and occasionally their part-time technology consultant). Many of their posts consist of tart commentary wrapped around links to *New York Times* or *Newark Star-Ledger* articles on local matters, but the Baristas (as they call themselves) regularly break hyperlocal stories and post real-time coverage of breaking events. Contributors weigh in on real-time news with tips, observations and photos.

Favorite discussion topics include mini-mansion proliferation and critiques of local government and schools. The site “is about our voice,” Galant says, describing it as “fun, interactive and timely, with a blogger’s view that there are no sacred cows.”

The editors take a hands-off approach to forums except to intervene when regulars complain about trolls, those site invaders who post inflammatory or off-topic comments to provoke an angry response. Galant privately e-mails provocateurs a plea to post nicely, explaining that they’re driving away her business. “They respect that,” she said. Now their challenge is to build the business and expand geographically. Galant says, “We have figured out a way to generate community. We think it’s replicable. Now, how do we muster the managerial and capital resources to really be a player?”



“I could stop at any time. Basically, I’ve been just not stopping.”

– Lisa Williams



Baristanet.com

Life and business partners Christopher Grotke and Lise LePage run a web design business in Brattleboro, Vermont. In February 2003 they founded **ibrattleboro**, their privately owned site where anyone in the community can write about any local issues that matter to them. Grotke says the site predated the citizen media terminology, or at least their knowledge of it. “We didn’t

really know what we had started,” he said. For a long time, the founder/owners seeded the content with concise, opinion-flavored posts on municipal government and downtown development. Now a community of nearly 1,500 contributors has grown up around the site.

Grotke and LePage hope over the next decade to build the site into their primary business. They screen all content and do light editing. “You wake up, who knows what’s coming in, and you publish it,” Grotke said. “We get tons of tips, people e-mailing and calling about stuff all the time,” said LePage. But, adds Grotke, “We write back and tell them we don’t post things for other people and get them to do it. It builds up the number of contributors.”

“I don’t think we need to become like trained newspaper or any other media,” LePage says. “We’ve had news stories submitted in the form of poems covering events, and that is the beauty of it, this incredible diversity of styles.” They have developed a town wiki and plan to create an assignment desk where citizens can request that a story be covered and others can volunteer to cover it. They hope to build revenue through automated ad sales. “Businesses are starting to recognize it’s OK to advertise with us. For a while we were viewed as rebels,” LePage said. “If we focus on good content, the advertisers will come.”

Coastsider, a news and informational site about the California coastal town of Half Moon Bay and environs, was founded in May 2004 and is edited by Barry Parr, who has a day job as a media analyst for Jupiter Research. Parr contributes 90 to 95 percent of the content, by his

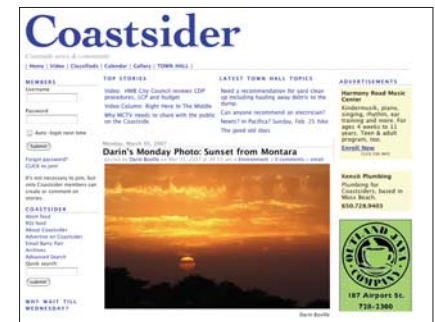
estimate, and his wife is the site’s chief photographer.

The town has a weekly, the *Half Moon Bay Review*, but no daily consistently covers the community of about 30,000, Parr said. When he launched he thought he would be just one of many citizens aggregating locally compelling items to **Coastsider** from other sites and posting original bits of news and information. Instead, he said, “nobody posted.”

So Parr assigned himself the task of inquiring into development, traffic problems and other town issues. His posts are less fully reported stories than very short chapters in an ongoing narrative on selected local issues, occasionally punctuated by his carefully considered opinions and invitations to discuss (on such subjects as whether fire-fighting should be volunteer). Parr edits all stories and moderates all discussions. He also covers breaking news. When a major road in town was closed by a landslide in the spring of 2006, “I worked hard to cover it with photos and videos and text. It was a watershed moment,” he said. Site traffic increased four-fold.

Now Parr’s goal is “to run a very personal site. I don’t want to be really responsible to anyone else for what I write.” But he also says he can’t do it alone – generate the content and sell enough ads to quit his day job and pay himself and at least one business-side employee. The site, as is, “doesn’t scale well,” he said. “I’m going to have to identify more people I know and recruit them” to post, he said. “Figuring out the advertising model is a big challenge – finding a way for ad sales to make sense, convincing local merchants in a small town that online advertising is going to work for them.”

But Parr is optimistic that a sustainable form will emerge out of the universe of citizen media models. “I’m prouder of this than anything I’ve ever done in my entire life. I’m making a real contribution to the community. I want this to last.”



Coastsider.com

Chapter 3: Creating Content

The forms that citizen contributions take are easier to imagine if you strip away the term “journalism.” People who are interested enough in local affairs to hang out at a community web site, but who are not professional journalists, rarely appoint themselves to go out and collect research, conduct interviews and file fully reported pieces.

More commonly, citizens contribute pieces of information to narratives that take form over a series of posts, or in tandem with other posters. Or they post raw audio or video feeds from public hearings, or original filings or documents that illuminate events. Citizens who are passionately interested in particular issues – development, green spaces, schools, crime, transportation – use sites to draw attention to actions by businesses or developers, or to legislative proposals or neighborhood issues that the posters consider to be undercovered in local media.

Typical is a post to **Philly Future** from August 2006. It wasn’t journalism but an appeal for engagement.

“Last week, a 19-year-old kid was shot and killed a few blocks from my house right by Louis Kahn Memorial Park on 11th and Pine Sts. The photo above is a makeshift memorial of candles, scrawlings and stuffed animals for the deceased Jamil Burton,” the poster wrote. “The neighborhood I live in is having a community meeting tonight at 7p in Louis Kahn Memorial Park to discuss what happened last week in our neighborhood and what continues to happen all over Philadelphia...I don’t have any earth-shattering answers, but maybe as we come out of our shells in our community, we can start to carve something out.”

These may not meet the definition of “news,” but like the best forms of journalism, they shine light in dark places.

Such as the day last winter when Bakersfield, California, radio host Rachel Legan posted a masterfully written and poignant column on **Northwest Voice** [<http://www.northwestvoice.com/home/ViewPost/7329>]. She disclosed that on her 21st birthday, her then-husband was convicted of raping a real estate agent. In the column she discussed how she had blinded herself to behavior she didn’t want to see. Legan – who more typically muses on light subjects, such as who gets the friends in a divorce – wrote in that post, *“I feel like I’m publishing my gut right now, but it’s a story I have wanted to tell for a long time.”* The discussion migrated from the site to her radio show and prompted the launch of a program to help young women in abusive relationships.

In June 2006, Clyde Bentley published on the “Voices” page of **MyMissourian.com** what he called a stunningly well-written essay that came in unsolicited from an administrator in a CPA firm. The writer gave a detailed account of attending the funeral of a distant acquaintance, a

The forms that citizen contributions take are easier to imagine if you strip away the term “journalism.”



MyMissourian.com

local 19-year-old Marine killed in Iraq. She went on to ponder what was “enough” of a response, suggesting in the end that readers “fight past shyness” and say a “thank you” to anyone they saw in uniform.

“Those pieces were always out there,” Bentley said, “and we somehow missed them.”

A fundamental fact of citizen media is that what citizens choose to publish is unpredictable. Even on sites where the front page is dominated by staff-reported pieces, surprises arrive via forums, comments and other original posts. For example a citizen sends a poem or a short story, which causes the site runner to decide – do we publish creative writing? At many sites the answer is yes (site operators note that newspapers once regularly published poetry and serialized novels). Indeed, 29% of the respondents in our survey said their sites posted creative writing.

Site owners or volunteer caretakers nonetheless exert great influence over content. They do this through their choices of platform and design standards (bright graphics induce light-hearted posts, posts with pictures get more hits). They do it through the mission statements they craft, through the terms of service they enact, through the nature of the posts they showcase and through the editorial controls they impose. These include whether to screen posts and comments; whether and when to edit; how to define “local” content and whether to let every new post automatically go to the top, or to let an invisible hand decide story “play” or placement.

Survey Highlights

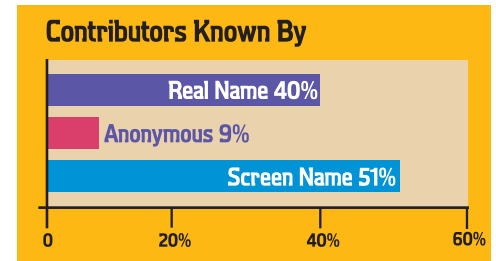
While citizen journalists don’t particularly aspire to be called “journalists,” 104 of 131 survey respondents (79%) said they considered the content on their sites to be “journalism.” In describing it, 46% said it was mainly news and information; 31% said it was mainly opinion and commentary and 23% said content consisted of “other” things.

Stories (67%), comments (65%), photos (64%) and calendar listings (55%) were the

A fundamental fact of citizen media is that what citizens choose to publish is unpredictable.

most frequently cited types of content appearing on respondents’ sites. Other types included columns (41%), press releases (37%), and videos (30%).

Overall there was little accountability built in for content contributors: 73% of all respondents said their sites didn’t require users to register; 69% said a valid e-mail was not even required before posting. Only 40% of 141 respondents said their sites required contributors to use their real names; 60% said their sites allowed either anonymous posts or the use of “screen” names.



To Edit or Not

For many sites, whether or not to edit is not a question. At **Greensboro101**, a blog aggregator, it would be a violation of the culture to screen, filter or edit the blogs that feed directly to the site. “Bloggers like the idea of not having a gatekeeper,” said site co-owner Roch Smith who concurs with that ethic. He believes any editing or screening would discourage participation. Smith will, however, remove blogs that cross into seriously offensive territory.

The aversion to screening comments or editing posts is even stronger at **Philly Future**. Co-owner Karl Martino said he is trying to develop content guidelines together with the site’s volunteer team, but “you want people to be creative and to speak out. At the same time you want them to agree to a certain level of discourse. When we see people attacking, we talk about what trolling is, but we don’t ban people from doing that kind of thing.”

Lisa Williams takes the opposite tack with **H2otown**. She requires all posts, with the exception of event listings and comments, to go to a moderation queue. She screens them before posting, though she does not edit. She’d rather communicate with a poster than alter a post.

At sites where threads get personal or hostile, she said, “The first people to leave are the women, then the people over 55. I don’t want to have a site exclusively of young men.” Williams asks posters to observe Three T’s: Truthfulness, tactfulness and transparency. Many of

Chapter 3: Creating Content

‘I want you on the site, but could you dial it back a tiny bit?’

– Lisa Williams

the tact violators “are the passionate people. I’ll write and say, ‘I want you on the site, but could you dial it back a tiny bit?’”

Madison Commons, which is built on the model of training citizen journalists, edits citizen contributions for fairness and accuracy. Project director Lew Friedland, who edits along with a graduate student, said, “We try to detach [editing for accuracy] from voice and form. We want them to write in their voices.” An early submission in the

life of the young site came from a citizen journalist who was not well educated, but whose piece was well reported. “We edited it in a way that it was coherent enough and grammatical enough that she wouldn’t be embarrassed by it,” Friedland said.

Many commercially backed sites moderate but don’t screen forum discussions but they do keep an eye on comments and lightly edit posts to topic sections or to the front page. At the same time editors are cognizant that the whole point of soliciting citizen news is to step out of the controlling role by giving contributors the greatest possible freedom to say what it is they want to say – and to keep them coming back.

At **Wicked Local**, to take one example, forum posts and photo uploads go live and unedited. But former online editor Courtney Hollands said she performed what she called “good samaritan” fixes on citizen-submitted articles and event postings. She checked for potentially embarrassing spelling and grammatical crimes, “and if I have a question” about the facts or the veracity of a post, “I will check in with the writer.” She approved stories and all comments before they went on the web site, she said.

The professionally produced copy that appears on some hyperlocal sites is actually unedited. **New West** publisher Jonathan Weber said he and managing editor Courtney Lowery have time to edit only those pieces that are sensitive. The writer/editors who run the local hubs in such places as Boise, Boulder and Missoula are not required to have a second reader on their posts.

Some independent site operators say they hold back from screening

and editing citizen posts on the advice of lawyers. This is tricky territory for volunteers or solo entrepreneurs who do not operate under the umbrella of a media company or journalism school that is covered for liability. And very few have libel insurance: **Only 7% of 129 survey respondents said their sites were insured; 50% were not; 43% didn’t know.**

Philly Future’s Karl Martino said most citizen journalism sites don’t have the tools yet to empower people to really report on their own. “What I’ve learned through the experience of getting legally threatened is that you need an infrastructure to support acts of journalism. We have the tools to write, but not to protect the people who actually do it.”

Some site runners say they’ve been advised that under certain forms of incorporation, they cannot be held responsible for libel or use of copyrighted material if they don’t screen or edit. Some organizations preserve their editing function by establishing terms of service where contributors assume liability for what they post.

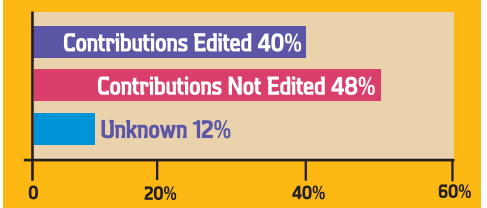
Survey Highlights

Asked whether their sites edited contributions before they were posted, 40% of 141 replies said content was edited; 48% said it was not and 12% just didn’t know. Half (50% of 133 replies) said offensive or inappropriate content was filtered out before posting. Most respondents (66% of 121 replies) said their sites removed offen-

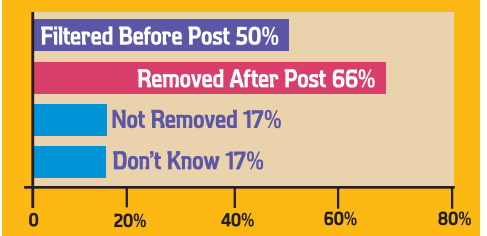


PhillyFuture.org

Contributions Edited Before Posting



Offensive Content Filtered Out



sive or inappropriate content after it was posted; but 17% of the respondents said such content was not removed, and 17% just didn't know.

Half the respondents reported that 26 or fewer people overall were contributing content or skills to their enterprise, although site operators say many of those are just occasional contributors.

Does anyone get paid? Of the 78 who replied: 33% said their sites had no paid workers; 33% said only one or two workers got paid.

Mission Statements

Citizens actually read the mission statements posted on citizen media sites, maybe because whatever your site is – a citizen enterprise, a professional site, a citizen-professional hybrid – it requires explaining. Site operators interviewed for this report frequently volunteered that they rarely had to intervene to tamp down bad behavior. Many credited contributors for heeding the goals articulated in their terms of service

Mission Statement Excerpts

NewHavenIndependent.org

"...New Haven. Its neighborhoods. Its government. Its people – from the knuckleheads to the dreamers and schemers, and everyone in between.

That's what this web site is about: A five-day-a-week report on news about the City of New Haven, Connecticut, produced by a veteran local journalist, and by you.

NewHavenIndependent.org is rooted in and devoted to the city. We believe that democracy starts at home, with smart, thorough, in-depth local news reporting and broad citizen debate about local issues. Thanks to the Internet, journalists and news-deprived citizens need no longer be hostages to out-of-state media conglomerates. We can reclaim our communities. Power of the press now belongs not to those who own one, but to those who own a modem.

We own a modem...

...NewHavenIndependent.org features daily reports on news about New Haven neighborhoods, government, politics, criminal justice, schools, business, arts and culture. It links readers to other web sites with information about New Haven. It also links readers to the good work produced by surviving reporters at other New Haven newspapers and TV and radio stations.

And it depends on your contributions. Please send us photos and news tips. Add your comments at the end of articles. (One rule: Be civil.) Let us know what you like – and don't like. Tell others about us (preferably by sending them e-mail messages with the link to the site). And sharpen that red pencil to inform us of misspellings, typos and other errors. We'll keep track of who catches the most mistakes and give out periodic Independent coffee mugs to the winners. (Sites such as ours can't afford proofreaders.) ..."

NewWest.net

"In a time of dramatic change, New West aims to serve as a nexus of dialogue and a smart guide to the news and issues that are affecting one of the greatest places on Earth. We aim to foster a bond among communities that may be distant in geography or occupation, but share common interests and hopes for the region as it wrestles with growth and change. We stand for forward thinking about the big picture and believe that citizen engagement will be instrumental in the development of the region. On our web sites you will find commentary and original reportage on the big issues, as well as a wealth of fun and useful information on everyday matters ranging from gardening and animals to books, film and travel. You will also find places where you, the reader, can make your ideas and opinions heard through our 'Unfiltered' sites."

Chapter 3: Creating Content

(no threats, no personal attacks, no publishing copyrighted material, etc.), and in the “About” statements that characterize sites as places for citizens to disseminate news and chat constructively.

Steve Yelvington helped craft a mission statement for **Bluffton Today** using the language developed by a working group at a Poynter Institute Web+10 conference. The language defines what he called “a new social contract between old media and citizens around the concept of participation.”

The site statement reads, in part: *“With your help, we will provide a friendly, safe, easy to use place on the Web*

for everyone in Bluffton to post news items, create a unified community calendar, and share photos, recipes, opinions. ... In return, we ask that you meet this character challenge: Be a good citizen and exhibit community leadership qualities.”

Yelvington said, “Much to our positive surprise, people read [the statement] and took it seriously. They bought into the social contract.”

When the contract is violated he tries to defuse the offender with a light touch. Yelvington recounted how an incident at a girls’ lacrosse championship game migrated into a flame war on the site, with the high school girls posting under fake names. He quickly unpublished the attacks, suspended the accounts of two combatants and told them they had to call a site administrator named Ryan to re-activate. He also sent a note to “the rest of you,” saying, “This is a small town, and it may look anonymous. But if you think people can’t figure out who you are, you’re wrong. Don’t make Ryan have to call your Dad.” In the aftermath, he said, “A couple of the girls became real leaders on the web site with their real names.”

Site operators report inevitable tensions between maintaining civility

and upholding the freedom and openness of expression that web dwellers demand. Mark Dilley is a member of a collective that decides policy for **Arbor Update**, a volunteer-run Ann Arbor, Michigan, news site that declares in its mission statement, *“The true value of the site is not in the posts themselves but in the discussion.”* Dilley said the site lost half its traffic while organizers debated how to handle an inflammatory and frequent poster, given the site’s commitment to open discussion. The group compromised by creating a 90-day probationary period for new posters.

Getting Back What You Put Out

Site operators report that citizens often mirror the content they find on sites by posting content that is similar in nature or tone. That is not to say posters don’t discuss substantive and newsy issues on lighter bulletin board sites, or that they don’t announce church fairs or joke around on issue-driven sites. **OlyBlog**, which teems with the political back-and-forth enjoyed by the activists of Olympia, Washington, also has a bizarre joke running through many posts about a lizard called a caiman. Mentioning a caiman is an in-joke, a way to signify a poster’s community membership.

Tonal deviations aside, many posters take their cues from what they find on a site. Everyone was posting pretty pictures of scenery to the *Daily Astorian’s Seaside-Sun.com* until some-

I’m guessing this was this particular photographer’s very last photo session ever. Now that the nutria appetizers have been pretty much consumed, the caimans are once again ready for the main course. So be careful out there as you walk around the water in the shadow of the Legislative Building.

— Steven’s blog



BlufftonToday.com and Bluffton Today newspaper

On the Shores of the Fetid Lake of Doom

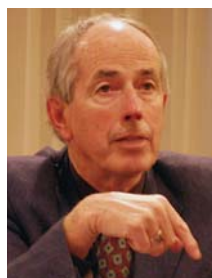




Seaside-Sun.com

An exception to the copycat rule is that, on sites built around professionally produced posts, citizens tend not to respond with items that incorporate journalistic conventions such as third-party interviews. As at other sites, they contribute brief items or comments or take their thoughts to site discussion forums, comment threads or the blog column.

Village Soup founder Richard Anderson calls much of the citizen discussion on his site “pretty low grade. ... It’s a bit why we’re skeptical of the long-range future of building something based on citizen journalism.” At **Village Soup** a full-time staff of a dozen journalists covers two Maine population centers, each with about 50,000 people. The busy hyperlocal site is animated by online polls, directories, a weather report and prominent classified and billboard ads.



Richard Anderson

Voice of San Diego, which also publishes pieces produced for the site by professional staff, is experimenting with reportorial interactivity through its “This Just In” column, a breaking news blog fed through the day by staff members. Citizens are invited at times to be “legs,” to send in tips and pieces of developing stories. “People get engaged and feel they’re part of the process,” said editor Scott Lewis. At other sites, such as **Baristanet**, contributors don’t wait for an invitation; they have developed the habit of posting or blogging what they

one sent a family photo. Soon the site was filled with pictures of sand-covered kids. Recipe submissions beget more recipes, obituary tributes spur more of the same. Site operators have noticed similar trends when they add video and audio capabilities. Once attention is drawn to the first audio or video posts or links, the spigot opens.

know about developing issues.

Discussions emerge in forms as varied as the sites themselves. Some site operators guide discussions by posting daily questions or by highlighting featured blogs with comment threads each day. At sites such as **Free New Mexican** practically all discussions key off links to stories from the paper. At **Nashville is Talking** the site operator often chooses a hot issue and creates a “blog round-up” to highlight what local bloggers are saying.

Toledo Talk is more free-form; posts appear in order of arrival under each day’s date. A critique of a column in the day’s *Toledo Blade* may be followed by the announcement of a rib-eating contest at the fairgrounds, then a complaint about someone’s DSL bill, and then a question tossed out by a poster who wonders if both minor league teams should share an owner.

Elected officials dip in and out of discussions on many sites or post their own blogs on citizen sites. In Watertown, J.D. Donohue, one of the nine elected town councilors, posted a 10-question poll on **H2otown** asking citizens to comment on the quality of city services, whether to recycle and other issues. Several sent lengthy, serious replies.

Sites reflect the interests of their towns. After “Town News,” the second most popular section of **ibrattleboro** is “Politics,” followed by “Activism,” “Opinion,” and “Questions & Answers.” **WestportNow** is laced with photographs of old homes about to be demolished.



VoiceofSanDiego.org: This Just In



FreeNewMexican.com

Chapter 3: Creating Content

Reverse Publishing: From Web to Print

Many citizen media sites actually turn their web content into a print publication, a process called reverse publishing. A popular form of reverse publishing for legacy media citizen sites involves the transformation of what Clyde Bentley calls “driveway rot” – those total-market-cov-

erage, free-delivered papers filled with ads. Once **My Missourian** launched in October 2004, Bentley worked with the daily paper, *The Missourian*, to convert a free Saturday shopper into a weekly community newspaper with citizen-generated content. Launched a year later, the paper, in its first month, helped add 200 more citizen contributors to

Case Study: A Busy Day on Baristanet

On a hot July day in 2006 site co-owner Liz George was on the phone with someone in downtown Montclair when the caller said there was a fire on the main drag of Church Street. George headed out with a camera, shot a picture of the fire scene and sent it to site co-owner Debbie Galant, who posted it at 2:26.

At 2:35 the first citizen responded. What happened next demonstrates how citizens and professionals blend their



Liz George

contributions to a breaking story. Within minutes of Galant posting the fire news, a series of citizens posted to the thread, reporting that streets were closed to traffic, emergency services had arrived and plumes of smoke were rising over downtown. “PEOPLE RUNNING – REALLY,” a poster wrote at 2:42. “People were telling us what they were hearing in almost real time,” Galant said.

The news was that an underground fire had ignited and two manhole covers had blown open, releasing clouds of smoke. In the middle of a heat wave, some 2,500 people lost power as firefighters and utility crews worked into the night.

For hours people posted brief first-person accounts of merchants evacuating their businesses while Galant and George posted interviews with the fire chief and town officials. A salon owner apologized to clients who were evacuated in the middle of their color jobs. Citizens posted their take on news: Starbucks and Whole Foods had gone dark. “People were using the site as a bulletin board to ask each other questions,” Galant said.

Late in the day Galant heard from the mayor that the library was opening as a cooling center for those without power. She called the library and heard the standard “library is closed” recording. Galant drove to the library, discovered it had opened and posted a bulletin to ignore the recording. “We had more information than the town web site,” she said.

“The site changes with what’s going on,” she said. “When you’re in the middle of a crisis you’re very into public service. You’re not thinking about being a smart aleck, you’re thinking about how to get the news out fast. Then there are other days when it’s fun to do the Stephen Colbert-take on your own small-town politics.”

Citizens don’t contribute reporting unless they develop the habit of hanging out on the site, and seeing others do it. “You can sit back and watch things happen,” Galant said.



The Forum's spring 2007 election edition comes off the presses.



MyTown.DailyCamera.com

the 400 who signed up for the web site. "The impact of the print edition was enormous," Bentley said.

These print versions have greater appeal both to advertisers and readers. The challenge, Bentley said, is to get readers to actually open them and see the transformation, instead of conveying the papers directly from driveway to trash can.

Some newspapers are also beginning to integrate web contributions from citizens into their paid-subscription daily papers. *The Daily Camera*, a 34,000-circulation paper in Boulder, Colorado, is trying to train citizens to go to MyTown.DailyCamera.com "as a way to get their news into the newspaper." Managing editor Kevin Kaufman said citizens who want to submit obituaries, wedding and engagement announcements or event listings are now directed to submit them online.

As the paper has reduced its editorial

staff, Kaufman said, "We need to figure out ways to get our readers to help us get their news into the paper."

He said, "A lot of news briefs and community briefs come in through **My Town**. We have an outdoor recreation page every day with a calendar and a daily half-page listing of things to do – they're all coming through **My Town**." Once a month the paper produces a 20- to 30-page free supplement delivered to high-growth communities outside of Boulder. "All of that content comes from **My Town**."

The volunteers who launched **The Forum**, a web site for under-covered Deerfield and nearby towns in New Hampshire, also republish citizen content three times a year in a print edition. But their motivation



Maureen Mann

is quite different. Few of the local residents have high-speed Internet connections, and many have yet to become comfortable getting their news online – they still relate better to print. Site operators use the print edition to draw attention to the site and to educate readers that they can produce as well as consume news. "The print edition is advertising that we're here, and we'd love to have you write" on the site, managing editor Maureen Mann said. 🌈

What Do Citizens Contribute?

- On New West, serialized novels and MP3 downloads of local bands.
- On The Forum in Deerfield, a crafts column and instructions on how to make a quilt and how to repair garden gnomes.
- On ibattleboro, local rumblings to the "Rumors" page.
- On Northwest Voice, recipes for locally grown crops.
- On Blount County Voice, a series on local historical sites.
- On Backfence, local business reviews.
- On OlyBlog, comics and a book of memories of Evergreen State College.
- On New Haven Independent, profiles of the "Cop of the Week."
- At Arbor Update, tips on living in Ann Arbor without a car.



New Haven Independent's Cop of the Week



Chapter 4: Building Interest


Citizen media sites, even those attached to big media companies, are not old enough to have grown fat. Regardless of whether they're published by traditional media companies, solo entrepreneurs or citizen volunteers, sites are characterized by lean editorial staffing, very little marketing, and limited readership.

Even the most popular citizen sites remain invisible to large portions of their towns or regions. For instance, the number of monthly unique visitors to the hyperlocal sites reported by our respondents typically amounted to between 5% and 10% of their local population. This was the case whether the sites were in Hoboken, New Jersey, Fresno, California, or Reidsville, North Carolina.

Whether trying to draw attention or contributors, though, the most indispensable member of the site team is the content wrangler. That's the person who goes to Rotarian breakfast meetings, to high school journalism days, to block parties, to blogger meet-ups and to wherever

artists and musicians are eager to draw crowds. The content wrangler (either a paid "editor," a site operator or a volunteer) is on a dual mission: He or she must build a community of contributors and attract a community of visitors.

Sites without content wranglers can struggle to maintain a vigorous flow of citizen contributions. "It would be great to have the local busybody on board to tap into all the local stuff going on," said Courtney Hollands, who was editor of **Wicked Local** in Plymouth, Massachusetts through January 2007, when she joined a competitor site in the Boston area. **Wicked Local** was envisioned to be a 50/50 balance between posts from the site's host newspapers and posts from citizens. In the absence of a person who could regularly leave the keyboard and work events, she said in mid-2006, the community side of the site was falling at the lighter end of the seesaw.



... the most
indispensable
member of
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is the content
wrangler.

At citizen sites the content-seeker reverses the traditional reporter dance of avoidance. Instead of ducking the gadfly who goes to every town council meeting and calls the city editor twice a day, the content wrangler targets people who want to be heard. At some sites that means the garden club president touting the club's monthly speaker and the P.R. pros at government agencies and community institutions (such as museums and colleges) peddling good news stories.

But many site operators are just as interested in individuals: Mothers who want to start a play group, political junkies who track school board minutiae, the local restaurant maven who's got an opinion on the new wings place. In some places a wrangler will come to your house and show you how to go online, if that's what it takes to get you to feed his site.

Travis Henry, editor of **Your Hub** in Colorado, makes house calls. Henry leads a staff of 25 who publish 44 hyperlocal web sites launched by the Denver Newspaper Group – and weekly print editions that draw content from the sites. "Anyone who wants help can call any of us and

... building content and marketing sites are intertwined routes to the same goal: Making sites essential gathering places where communities can debate, call out government or local media, or find a neighbor who also collects Mustangs.

we'll help them," Henry said. "We will go to their house and sit with them. I do it. I'll go out to organizations – the archdiocese, the youth sports league – but my whole staff does. One of my requirements for my staff" is that they make calls on anyone "from a grandma who needs help to a big organization."

Depending on how sites are organized, wranglers may be paid or they may be volunteers; they may be hired or be self-appointed instigators of community conversations. They may have the titles publisher or managing editor, community editor, site owner or solo operator. The content wrangler may be the same person who's writing pitch letters to foundations, selling ads, moderating discussions and filling up the site with his or her own reporting, musings or links, at least for the first few months.

The important lesson, say site operators, is to understand that building content and marketing sites are intertwined routes to the same goal: Making sites essential gathering places where communities can debate, call out government or local media, or find a neighbor who also collects Mustangs.

At sites where editors have weekly gigs discussing local events on TV or radio (as in Brattleboro and San Diego), these on-air promotions prompt more postings. Citizens who become regular posters start promoting the site to friends and networks. **Backfence** saw the effect when Little League parents began to post game pictures and circulate word throughout the league. "McLean is a huge sports town, so we've got a lot of Little League stories. Our most trafficked item on the site last week was a [photo of a] kid sliding into home base," Mark Potts said in the summer of 2006.

But while all site runners want more citizen involvement, not everyone values all citizen posts indiscriminately. Gordon Joseloff of **WestportNow** says his priority is to draw quality posts, rather than

quantity, and to keep the site focused on news and submissions that have community-wide appeal, such as the pictures posted from the Memorial Day parade.

Joseloff doesn't want the garden club speaker announcements or "chicken dinner" posts, at least not on the front page. "We're looking for more contributors," he said, "but I would rather see the site sit idle then be filled with less interesting items."

Starting Out

The founders of **Northwest Voice** in Bakersfield, California, considered local demographics and determined that homeowners with children in kindergarten through high school dominated their geographic target area. They seeded their site, prior to its launch, by calling on people they termed "keepers of information" – individuals at the center of networks of families – and urged these youth sports organizers and mega-church pastors to post and participate. The site continues to promote relentlessly by sending staff and volunteers, recruited from high school and college marketing classes, to register users at markets and street fairs.

"You need to do some aggressive outreach prior to launch," said Don Alexander, the newspaper executive who launched the Tennessee web site **Blount County Voice**. "We targeted groups where we knew we wanted content from day one, and that started the ball rolling."

Your Hub's Travis Henry said, "Once you get the ball rolling, it just rolls, but the start-up is critical ... The worst thing is to do it badly" by opening the doors and expecting posters to materialize.

Your Hub launches sites by sending staff members with



Gordon Joseloff



BlountCountyVoice.com

Chapter 4: Building Interest

“Once you get the ball rolling, it just rolls, but the start-up is critical...”

– Travis Henry

cameras to community events and passing out cards with the address where citizens can see their pictures. They run on-site photo contests in acknowledgement of the fact that many non-journalists feel more confident posting images than words.

The site hosted an essay contest for people to describe why they root for the Broncos, with play-off tickets as prizes. The responses were not always “quality posts,” Henry said, “but it got people to

the site.” He said, “You have to hit people over the head with what this is. It’s brand stinking new.”

Offering Feedback

For-profit and non-profit site operators agree that a good way to spark participation is to thank new posters. They also offer gentle critiques to posters who want to get their blog posts promoted to the front page or who lack confidence in their writing. “The very first time they write a story and we think it’s great, we’ll call them. Or we’ll make suggestions,” Travis Henry said. “We bring people to our office, they can hang out with us, we’ll give them lunch, we show them how to put out” the print edition.

“These people are part of our community now.”

“I made a point of going to coffee or lunch” with regular contributors, said Barbara Bry, founding editor of **Voice of San Diego**.

Clyde Bentley of **My Missourian** advises site operators to come out from behind the e-mail. “Talk to them,” he says of contributors. Journalism students, who screen and sometimes lightly edit site posts, want to do everything by e-mail, he said.

“But getting [posters] on the phone or going out and talking to them makes all the difference in the world.” Students also want to over-edit, Bentley said. The lighter touch is better.



Clyde Bentley

Expanding Coverage

Some site leaders court discussion the journalist’s way: By covering issues or events people care about – particularly those occurring just beneath the notice of the nearest dailies or broadcast news operations. Some also make it a point to create places to discuss issues of high regional interest, such as the environment in the West or restaurants and real estate in the Northeast. Numerous site operators reported that hits spike after local news breaks. **Arbor Update** picked up new posters after it became the place to mock a proposed local ordinance banning couches on porches.

A turning point came for **Baristanet** when a power line fell, a car caught fire, and a citizen posted a picture of the burning car. Later that day another power line fell and set off another blaze, and several tipsters e-mailed photos and one- or two-line accounts to the site. Citizens had developed a new way of interacting with the site, said co-owner Debbie Galant, and they spawned copycat tipsters who now rush to the site for every fire, storm, road closing or local government kerfuffle.

Many sites, particularly those supported by media companies, employ editors who report news stories or features and follow up by creating related opinion polls or posting discussion questions. Most of the participation on the **Free New Mexican** site comes through comments from posters who respond to news links. Online editor Stefan Dill regularly joins in the comments to direct the discussion. He feeds tips back to the newsroom, particularly when legislators or public officials weigh in. Regulars “let me know about breaking news. They call me ‘WebEd.’”

But while all site operators want more citizen involvement, several have a distinct vision for the kind of content they want. “I do think we’re looking for things that meet the definition of news, in that they’re kind of fresh and not previously reported and of interest to more than just the people who are writing them,” said Geoff Dougherty of **Chi-Town Daily News**.

“... getting [posters] on the phone or going out and talking to them makes all the difference in the world.”

– Clyde Bentley

How to (and How not to) Build Interest

- **Bluffton Today** has a combination reporter/editor who leads the online conversation and blogs heavily in search of responses (which are counted). She regularly blogs about stories the newspaper staff is reporting, and asks for input. She also recruits quasi-expert local bloggers who are paid small fees to converse and advise on subjects of passionate local interest, including gardening.
- **Wicked Local** launched with a direct mail campaign, sending postcards to instruct Plymouth residents on how to get involved with the site.
- *The Daily Camera* in Boulder tried citizen assignments. Before a popular balloon festival, the paper ran an ad asking readers to submit pictures, journals and diaries from the event to **MyTown.DailyCamera.com**. Not many sent journals, but pictures arrived by the hundreds, said managing editor Kevin Kaufman. The call for pictures was successful enough to expand to other events, including Mother's Day.
- **The Forum** in Deerfield, New Hampshire, hosted an open house to court volunteer editors and encourage more citizens to post what they see and hear in their neighborhoods. And one of its volunteers has started a creative writing class at the local library.
- **Chi-Town Daily News** hosted a club showcase for local bands as both a fundraiser and a site promotion.
- **Baristanet** created a float for the Montclair Fourth of July parade.
- **Backfence** advertised an incentive plan; a community member who posted five items got a free coffee card. "People got

angry and said, 'This seems to commercialize the whole thing,'" co-founder Mark Potts said. "We just knocked it off the site because people were violently opposed to it."

- Many sites post how-to-use tutorials. Lisa Williams of **H2otown** goes a step further and keeps an eye on the server log. She e-mails instructions to people who are "wandering around in circles."
- **Madison Commons** hosts "boot camp" journalism training sessions that trained 50 citizens of mostly minority neighborhoods its first year, but only a handful of grads have become regular posters.
- **Greensboro101's** Roch Smith, steers bloggers he knows to topics that might be worthy of investigation and citizen reporting. At Smith's suggestion one blogger found interesting fodder in the campaign reports of a Congressional candidate. Smith blogs selectively so as not to big-foot the site and make it feel like his personal sounding board.
- **Your Hub** partnered with professional sports teams, the Broncos, the Avalanche and the Nuggets, setting up fan forums on the site, giving away tickets in contests, publishing special fan sections of the print edition and flashing the "Your Hub" name around the stadiums. It also made friends with Wal-Mart. "Wal-Mart wants to become community-oriented," Travis Henry points out. Your Hub calendar items are now broadcast on Wal-Mart checkout aisle monitors. "Community events show up on screen with our brand name next to them."



Madison Commons boot camp

Chapter 4: Building Interest

Assigning the Job

It's difficult to get volunteers to make the rounds of civic organizations to solicit content. Doug Bratland, chairman of the nonprofit Northfield Citizens Online, said the group could find volunteers who would handle the technical side of the **Northfield** site, but "what we couldn't get volunteers to step up to the plate to do was getting people to contribute content." He made the rounds of meetings in his time off from his full-time job, but after the site hired a part-time editor to bring in more posts, Bratland said, he began to recover from burnout, and the site began to hear from a larger circle of posters.

K. Paul Mallasch launched **Muncie Free Press** on July 4, 2005 as a

one-man operation; he's the site's editorial, business and tech support staff, and cannot afford to hire help. He hands out business cards at events he attends and covers, but that has not been enough to build a healthy content flow in the first year.

Speaking in late spring 2006, he said the site floun-



MuncieFreePress.com

Case Study: The Power of the Wheel

When a site is new, says Mary Lou Fulton, "you have to promote relentlessly." The web sites **Northwest Voice** and **Southwest Voice** in Bakersfield, California, are published by a family-owned newspaper company but have identities separate from the paper. Each of the participatory journalism sites feeds into a free neighborhood weekly.



Mary Lou Fulton

"The Northwest Voice serves an area where 65,000 people live, and we deliver to 25,000 homes. There's no way to do personal outreach to every person in the community," said Fulton, vice president of audience development for *The Bakersfield Californian*. "We are regulars at community events. We are always out there to a

much greater degree than the daily newspaper, telling people who we are, what we do and how they can participate."

Nearly every weekend members of the staff fan out to music festivals, health fairs and other community gatherings to invite citizens to register and post items. Because the staff is small, a company marketing coordinator recruits high school and college marketing students to fill out the roving teams.

Wherever they go, they bring their portable Wheel of Fortune game.

"I can't begin to tell you the power of the Wheel of Fortune," Fulton said. People will stand in long lines and wait as long as it takes to spin the wheel and win a T-shirt or mouse pad. "While they're waiting in line, you can talk to them about who you are and what you do."

“... the more you feed, the more people are going to respond. It’s my job to make sure there is at least one new thing on the site every day. It’s a tedious, back-breaking process.”

– K. Paul Mallasch

ders when he stops posting. “I learned in the last four weeks, while I ramped down to concentrate on web design, that the more you feed, the more people are going to respond. It’s my job to make sure there is at least one new thing on the site every day. It’s a tedious, back-breaking process. Do we have a community yet? Realistically, I would say no.”

Some site operators counsel patience in lieu of a wrangler. The founders of **ibrattleboro** posted almost everything in the site’s first six months, they said, and then posts seemed to self-generate as people stretched out and brought their various interests and obsessions to the site. “For years now it’s been the citizens who are doing the writing and the ‘journalism.’” said Christopher Grotke. Lisa Williams of **H2otown** says it takes just a nucleus of posters to keep a site vibrant: “Consistent effort by a small number of people is what makes casual contributions by a huge number of people possible.”

Building on Brands

Many old-media companies that have launched citizen sites promote both kinds of media in advertising campaigns or use house ads to

direct subscribers to their citizen site. Don Alexander, who manages both a daily paper and its citizen web site, **Blount County Voice**, said the site had “instant credibility” with readers because of the paper’s reputation. “Those who are working with well-respected, dominant newspapers need to use that in their marketing strategy and don’t try to hide the fact that this community journalism publication is part of the company,” he said.

Wicked Local chose the opposite strategy. “It doesn’t have our newspaper brand plastered all over it. We want street credibility and for citizens to have ownership,” said former editor Courtney Hollands.

Professional journalists who strike out on their own with new sites say they wish they knew how to promote. “I stink at marketing,” said Paul Bass, who runs **New Haven Independent**. “It’s true that after nine months a lot of people don’t know we exist.”

Of the 31 sites interviewed in depth, only nine had conducted any kind of marketing to drive traffic or contributors to their sites. While in the web survey, just over half (56%) of the 132 responding said their sites engaged in some marketing; 27% did none, and the rest didn’t know. 🌈

“Consistent effort by a small number of people is what makes casual contributions by a huge number of people possible.”

– Lisa Williams

Chapter 5: Making Money

While hyperlocal citizen sites have energetically created new editorial models, their business models remain deeply uncertain. It's worth noting that many site operators who have had their sites up for a year or two say they have put almost all of their time and energy into developing the editorial model, giving little time to earning revenues, attracting investments or making sites attractive to advertisers.

Nevertheless, business models are emerging across the spectrum from shoestring operations built on open-source software and volunteer labor, to investor-funded national syndicates of urban and suburban news-and-conversation sites. The field is filled with optimists who believe that citizen place sites, in a myriad of forms, will continue to spread across the country and the world.

For the near future, the shoestring model will likely account for the greatest number of start-ups. These are the sites that run on the energy and determination of a dogged entrepreneur or a cooperative

group of citizens who share a passion to create conversations around issues that are not covered or can't be thoroughly covered by mainstream media in its current configuration. In the great, shared environment of the Internet such sites are helping each other develop models for at least modest sustainability.

But in the Rocky Mountain West, in the D.C. suburbs, in small towns in Maine and across the country, new kinds of media companies are being constructed around core businesses of local citizen journalism and advertising. They're experimenting with forms of search and with local shopping models that they hope will compete favorably, within their own towns and with such national behemoths as Google and Yahoo. The oldest of these, **Village Soup**, is 10 years old.

These new media companies are emerging in a couple of forms: As national syndication models, and as territorial businesses that are rooted in and reflect the priorities of one city or region.

The purest local citizen media sites, most prominently **Backfence**, have no professional reporters and depend on citizens to submit local news or items of interest or to blog – as well as to hang out and chat on their sites, and to shop with and rate advertisers. The **Backfence** model began in the D.C. suburbs, and had spread to 13 communities in Maryland, California and the Chicago suburbs by January 2007, when it announced a major restructuring as it charts a future course.

New West and **Village Soup** are also building new kinds of



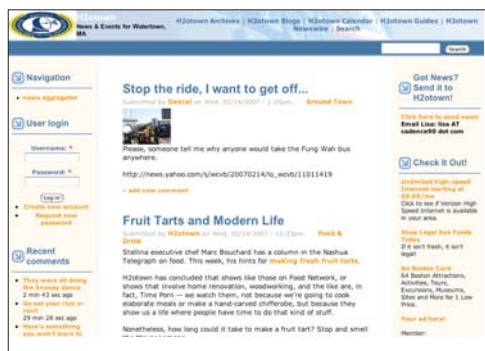
VillageSoup.com



Backfence.com

media companies around regional and hyperlocal journalism. Both pay professional journalists to generate original coverage of local issues, but they're also highly interactive with citizens, and that interactivity extends to advertising.

Some of the sites that are household names in citizen media circles – **Baristanet**, **WestportNow**, **H2otown** – are developing as small businesses that may soon produce enough revenue to pay their owners full-time salaries. Several are investing by hiring part-time and full-time editorial and business staff members or by buying equipment for citizen photographers and videographers. **WestportNow** employs a full-time reporter/editor. **Baristanet** hired a part-time tech assistant and a local reporter. It's not a newsroom, but it's growth from where the sites were two years ago.



H2otown.info

she will probably continue to run **H2otown** as a side enterprise to the business she is developing as a consultant for what she calls “place blogs.” She launched Placeblogger.com in December 2006.

In the nonprofit realm, **Voice of San Diego** and **New Haven Independent** offer high-quality local coverage produced by professional journalists, with assists from citizens. **Voice of San Diego** was launched by philanthropic investors and is developing a public radio-style model for member contributions. **New Haven Independent** secures grants from foundations.

Legacy media companies are also in the race to build out hyperlocal

Lisa Williams has received offers from potential buyers of **H2otown**, but she's refused to sell. “I don't want to work for them because I think they wouldn't let me make jokes,” she told an October 2006 Citizens Media Summit. “I think that a lot of people want the magic that they see in online sites, and then they want to control it. They're actually kind of scared of it.” Williams said

citizen sites and reprint their content in free, home-delivered, ad-rich print editions. The web/print citizen journalism paradigm is profitable and growing at papers in smaller cities such as Bakersfield, California, and Columbia, Missouri. In Columbia, ad revenues increased after the content in its drive-way, drop-free paper was replaced with content from the **My Missourian** citizen site. A product that was budgeted to produce 25 percent of the news operation's revenues was producing 33 percent within a year of its launch.

In big cities, including Dallas and Denver, legacy newspapers are using citizen journalists to extend and enrich their suburban coverage. The local papers have hired and assigned staff editors to their citizen journalism sites, and communities around Dallas and Denver now have citizen sites instead of the newspapers' zoned editions.

Many citizen journalists believe they are involved in a kind of bridge media between the traditional forms of news and local news delivery and a future where local news will be citizen-interactive – and where professional journalists will focus on the things they do best: Producing the kind of enterprise or investigative reporting that requires time, experience, travel and the backing of media companies that shoulder expenses and cut paychecks.

Time and again in conversation, citizen journalists assert they do a better job of describing the lived experiences of their towns than do professional reporters, especially strangers who pass through on their way to bigger and better journalism jobs. They say they know news at a block-by-block level that journalists can't, and there are more of them available to report, reflect or respond to questions than any zoned newspaper section can employ. **Even as they shy away from the “journalist” label, 79% of our survey respondents said they considered much of the content on their 104 sites to be “journalism.”**

Many citizen journalists believe they are involved in a future where local news will be citizen-interactive – and where professional journalists will focus on the things they do best.

Chapter 5: Making Money

On the other hand, as **Coastsider** owner Barry Parr says he has found, print still has a hold on advertisers. **Coastsider** does not reverse publish, but Parr believes the operation will need to spin off a print edition before it can reach significant profitability in a town of just 30,000.

Survey Highlights

The shoestring model of operations is borne out by our web survey. Respondents were pretty evenly split over whether the continued operations of their sites required them to earn revenue (yes, 49%; no, 51%). If that sounds odd, consider that 29% of the respon-

dents said it cost them less than \$100 to launch their site; and it cost less than \$1,000 for another 14%.

Indeed, start-up money for 43% of the sites in our survey came right out of the founders' own pockets. Existing news organizations provided funding for 11% of the sites and private donors for 14%, while venture capital funded fewer than 3% of the respondents' sites.

For those sites that are generating some revenues, advertising is the primary source for 48% of the respondents; community and corporate sponsors generate revenue for 25%; individual donors for 16%; and grants for almost 11%. Fewer than 5% rely on subscription income.

Some sites, such as **OlyBlog**, state matter-of-factly: "We accept no advertising or institutional support. All costs are covered out of pocket. If you like what we're doing, throw a few bucks in the tip jar."

Do their sites take in more revenue than it costs to operate? About 42% said

no; 38% didn't know. Almost 14% of those sites said they take in more than their operating costs only if volunteer contributions are not counted. Only 7% – 10 sites out of 141 replying – said that their operating costs were covered, even if volunteer contributions are counted as a cost.

What follows is a look at some of the interesting models in action.

Bluffton Today

Morris Publishing launched **Bluffton Today** as both a home-delivered free daily newspaper in the fast-growing golf community of Bluffton, South Carolina, and as a companion citizen journalism site. The print edition now has regular readership levels higher than 60% in the affluent coast town, where half the population is new in the last few years, and penetration is as high as 90% when occasional readers are measured.

Within this community of 16,000 households, the web site has steadily increased the number of registered users, counting 7,300 as of January 2007. There is a professional editorial staff of 18 but this site defies a lot of citizen-journalism math, which holds that a few devoted posters trigger many casual contributors. More than 20% of its users have posted something to the site.

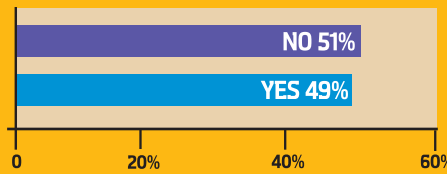
All income is derived from ads, including sponsorships, tower and banner ads, and business ads with "presumptive upsell," Yelvington said. "Making income on the web site is not as important as the overall health of the enterprise. Papers have set up web sites almost in competition with the papers, so they want them to pay their own way.

"The relationship between this site and the newspaper is the opposite. The web site delivers tremendous benefits back to the paper and doesn't rely on print reporting. If it never made a profit it would be fine. Our real goal is to do well in the market as a business unit."

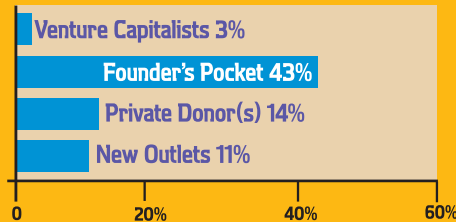
Wicked Local

This portal site draws on professionally produced content from GateHouse Media's dailies and weeklies in Massachusetts and blends it with citizen content and a comprehensive local search engine. Although the full citizen journalism model has not yet been extended to all of

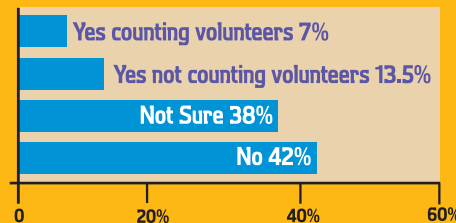
Need to Earn \$ to Continue?



Start-Up Funding Sources



Take in More Than Your Costs?



GateHouse's Massachusetts web sites, "**Wicked Local Search**" is available from all 100-plus sites.

The search site has traditional elements, including banner advertising, but has taken traditional classifieds – real estate, auto and jobs – and reframed them as searches, not classifieds. The searches aggregate results based on keywords by combining news, classifieds, newspaper ad content and other content into one search results page. Said Anne Eisenmenger, vice president of audience development for GateHouse Media New England: "By aggregating not only our own content but also content from many other sources relevant to each community, we're aiming to produce sites that can serve as a one-stop online resource for living in any one of our communities."

For **Wicked Local**, the challenge is to convince local advertisers that consumers want local search, and that the model will lead users to advertisers' products.

New West

This regional news operation, launched for less than \$1 million from angel investors, has a web site at its center, but it's also pursuing related businesses. **New West** has launched a conference series, a custom publishing business, an indoor advertising business, and has plans to expand into book publishing. It sponsors wireless computer connections in coffee shops to help market its operations. "We conceived this all along as about building a media brand, about growth and change,

leading with online," said founder and CEO Jonathan Weber.

The **New West** staff has learned that the basic rules of the news business apply to their venture. Good stories and frequent postings drive the readership traffic that advertisers want. "What you really want, and what's really going to sustain you, are the people who are going to bookmark



Courtney Lowery

you and come to you every morning, every afternoon, every night before they go to bed," said managing editor Courtney Lowery. "Those are the people that you have to win over."

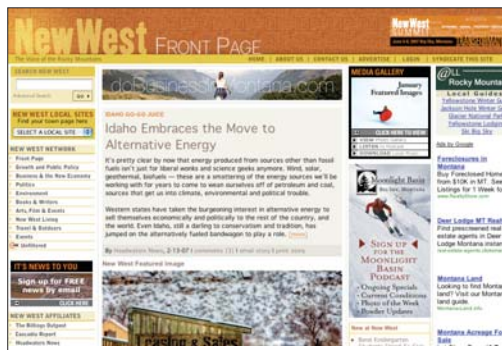
Village Soup

Richard Anderson, the owner of this site that covers two towns in Maine, said, "Research shows that 50 percent of the market contains non-newspaper readers, and 75 percent of the market contains non-newspaper advertisers. So there's a huge opportunity out there to solve the problems or the needs of those people who are not looking to the newspapers." Anderson has invested more than \$5 million in developing the site, which had about 9,300 unique daily visitors in June 2006 and 1.2 million page views. He said recently, "We're not cash-flow positive yet, but we're gaining dramatically, and the printed paper has done a tremendous amount to help us get there."

Among the steps **Village Soup** has taken to build online revenue are:

- On-demand advertising. Online posts feature last-minute sales or promotions that would be outdated in the weekly print edition.
- Enhanced directory listings. Advertisers can pay for featured listings in the business directories posted at **VillageSoup.com**.
- Online auctions. Local businesses can sell products through the web site's continuous online auction, with proceeds going to the news site as an advertising credit.

The site has had its greatest success so far with a local database of real estate listings, which includes a link to town maps. Realtors are charged a fee to list in the local database. Anderson said, "The real long-range need is for businesses such as restaurateurs to decide it is worth the extra 15 minutes a day to put their daily special online, and to get more businesses to participate in the sharing of inventories in community databases." The ultimate goal is to build a platform, which Anderson calls Village Soup Common, which can be adapted to communities of about 30,000 internationally.



NewWest.net

Chapter 5: Making Money

Backfence

Backfence is a venture capital-backed commercial network of hyper-local sites with all content written by the community itself and with a target audience of suburban “soccer Moms and soccer Dads,” according to co-founder Mark Potts. It launched in 2005 with two local portals in Virginia since grown to six, plus one in Maryland, three in San Francisco and three in the Chicago suburbs by fall of 2006.

The site allows readers to promote events, rate and review local businesses and post free classified ads, which can be upsold. The sites sell display ads, enhanced local yellow page listings and self-serve business classifieds for \$25 a month.

Backfence aims to capture local advertisers who can’t afford to buy into print. Businesses pay \$120 per year for a one-page web site that can include photos, their hours and contact information. Increasingly, though, **Backfence** finds itself in competition with independent local start-ups.



Baristanet's interactive teardown map

Baristanet

Baristanet delivers an edgy blend of local comings and goings, community musings and all things related to food and real estate in three affluent New Jersey communities, Montclair, Glen Ridge and Bloomfield. It also has delivered readers, recording 140,000 page views in September 2006, up from 70,000 a year earlier.

Advertisers have taken notice. Along with the site's new interactive teardown map, which chronicles the address of every home in the community being replaced with something newer or bigger (a feature that originated on **WestportNow**), **Baristanet** features a standing billboard advertisement, rotating side pages and paid classifieds (\$20 a month for 30 words; \$40 to include a photo).



WestportNow's teardown map

The site sells for \$1,000 a month a rotating ad at the top of its main page, and for \$300 a month side ads that also rotate. The revenue helps pay \$500 a month for technical support and \$1,000 a month for a regular contributor, a citizen journalist trained by the site's two professional editors.


Voice of San Diego

This is among the most ambitious of the nonprofit sites, with heavy backing from local foundations and a paid staff of journalists. Readers are responding; page views grew from about 250,000 a month in the summer of 2005 to 700,000 a month in January 2007.

Revenues include large charitable gifts from founders, and corporate donors who are recognized onsite as sponsors of the weather, traffic and surf reports. The site runs membership drives and now counts 595 individual members who have donated from \$35 to \$5,000. 🇺🇸



Chapter 6: Defining Success



Seldom do the hyperlocal sites launched by individuals define or measure success in the same ways that traditional media organizations do.

There are as many definitions of “success” in the world of citizen media as there are types of hyperlocal news sites. Benchmarks will become more sharply defined as time goes on.

Seldom, though, do the hyperlocal sites launched by individuals define or measure success in the same ways that traditional media organizations do. They pay scant attention to numbers of unique visitors, page views or return on investment. And while more revenue would be nice – especially if the sites could make even token payments to their contributors – it is not essential.

Based on their own definitions of “success,” 73% of our survey respondents pronounced their sites to be successful.

Achieving even psychic success, however, invites

How do you measure success?

While a handful said success would mean a million monthly readers, and the founders would get syndicated columns or mainstream media writing gigs, most respondents voiced quite humble goals.

“To have 5% of the population as unique readers. The town has 58,000 people, so 2,900 unique readers per month who visit the site at least once a week,” said one.

For others, success markers include:

“... Helping our members make more informed decisions as citizens.

“... Having a public impact on issues.

“... Challenging traditional media to improve.

“... Motivating citizens to pay attention.

“... Making a difference.

“... When we’re no longer referred to as a ‘blog.’”

“If people read/comment and talk about us, we’re succeeding,” said one respondent. Said another: “There is no success, there is no failure – there is only the process. If people find something they did not realize before – great. If not, it happens.”

questions about sustainability. While patting themselves on the back for their contributions and impact, citizen journalists are wrestling with the challenges of expanding their corps of contributors, growing their readership, and bringing in more revenues. They all have wish lists of things that would help them hang around.

Many volunteer sites are hoping to mature to the point that a broader coalition of volunteers will keep them going once first-generation enthusiasts step away. Volunteer co-ops face the challenges of establishing institutions of shared governance and operational responsibility. When they can finally afford to pay someone, who will it be?

Chapter 6: Defining Success

Community Sites

Many solo entrepreneurs say they are well on their way to achieving their goals of creating forums for community conversations and new forms of information sharing among people who don't normally cross paths. They take credit for disseminating unfiltered news and information and prodding local media to improve.

Success can be a two-edged sword, observed Doug Bratland, chairman of the board of Northfield Citizens Online. "Some people think we're a business like a newspaper, and we're getting complaints about things we didn't cover." Still, he said, "People are finding out about things going on in town from people who they normally don't interact with."

H2otown's Lisa Williams admits to targeting residents who were not born in Watertown, people who had "no on-ramp" in the community. "That's who I was going after, but immediately I got a ton of old-timers and civics nerds. What's been gratifying is the interplay between people who have been here forever and the newcomers. They're showing each other the works, working out class issues. And sometimes there's a lot of resentment."

Citizen sites have made significant inroads in supplementing local news or supplying news coverage where none existed. Before **The Forum** launched in Deerfield, New Hampshire, for instance, no one else covered local elections or announced filing dates to run for local offices. "There was a very large increase in the number of people who signed up to run," said **Forum** managing editor Maureen Mann. In the spring 2005 elections, eight of 22 municipal offices had no candidates; the following year – seven months after **The Forum** launched – all but two offices had a contest and turnout rose to 33% of eligible voters from 20% the previous year.

Increasingly citizen sites are becoming known and trusted community venues. **WestportNow** "is

the talk of the town. It's taken on a life of its own where people are very protective about it...[Success was] when people out of the blue responded to an event that was only publicized on **WestportNow**. Ninety or 100 people showed up and the sponsor was amazed," remarked founder Gordon Joseloff.

A big part of this perceived success, however, is not only getting citizens to pay attention to them, but getting local media outlets to pay attention as well.

"The weekly here was not posting breaking news to its web site two years ago," said **Coastsider** editor Barry Parr. "They're doing it now."

"We have bloggers doing their own investigations, stuff that later gets picked up by mainstream media," said **Greensboro101's** Roch Smith. "Maybe doing what we do will eventually be considered mainstream."

Still, citizen media sites are thinking about a business model, acting on a business model, or developing systems for philanthropic, subscription or advertising revenue.

Solo operators including **Coastsider's** Barry Parr and **H2otown's** Lisa Williams say they have achieved profitability primarily because they're not paying themselves real salaries and because other costs of running the sites are low. They are pondering how and whether to turn these sites into businesses that can pay salaries to advertising and editorial staffs.

For many, that means expanding to other communities to get a critical mass of advertisers and possibly launching a print edition. "It's really hard to envision profitability of any significance without opening up additional markets," said **Greensboro101's** Roch Smith. "That opens up other opportunities [to sell to] regional or national advertisers."

As important is getting more readers to click through from their sites' front pages to longer stories inside. "Because that's where the ad space is," declared **WestportNow's** Joseloff. "We're going to run out of ad space on the front page." Indeed, there is finite space for tile ads or

"What's been gratifying is the interplay between people who have been here forever and the newcomers. They're showing each other the works, working out class issues."

– Lisa Williams

"It's really hard to envision profitability of any significance without opening up additional markets."

– Roch Smith

even rotating ads on a home page – no matter how fast you rotate them.

New Media Companies

Meanwhile the entrepreneurs behind more ambitious efforts, including **Backfence**, **New West** and **Village Soup**, are recalibrating old-media company models. For them, success will mean harnessing citizen and advertising contributions to profitable online revenue models. And syndicators, such as **Backfence**, are in a race to conquer territory ahead of their competitors. More than anything, marketing is critical not only to secure advertisers, but also contributors.

"It's very grassroots. ... There are not a lot of places for us to advertise ourselves. We've got to be out at community events, setting up tables, [speaking to] Little League teams. It doesn't take a lot of people to do it, but you've got to do it," said **Backfence's** Mark Potts.

In the world of citizen journalism, there is no build-it-they-will-come paradigm. Getting people to write actual stories in **New West's** citizen content section "has been more difficult than we anticipated, and that reflects the fact that it's work," said founder Jonathan Weber. "There are no magic tricks there. There's a lot of legwork involved, you have to talk to people, they have to know you."

As challenging is getting advertisers to embrace new online models. "The real long-term need is for businesses such as restaurateurs to decide it is worth the extra 15 minutes a day to put that daily special online, and to get more businesses to participate in the sharing of inventories in community databases" so site users can comparison shop on the site, said **Village Soup** founder Richard Anderson. It's that shopping component that **Village Soup** is trying to monetize. "Either we're geniuses and ahead of the world or really stupid," Anderson said.

Adds **New West's** Weber, "A lot of people are all jazzed up about self-serve advertising models," but he cautions that advertisers are relatively unsophisti-

cated and not eager to try out new things that are even slightly complicated. "They're not going to go in there and figure it out."

Old Media Companies

The stakes hardly need to be stated for old media companies that have launched citizen ventures as facets of their online and print or broadcast ventures. Old media companies have their own definitions of success. Some are looking to citizen contributions to offset losses in editorial staff; still others are trying to build community as a way of keeping interest alive in local coverage; still others are primarily concerned about preserving or expanding market share among both consumers and advertisers. All are trying to establish interactive relationships with the people once referred to as readers or audiences, and to find formulas for online advertising profitability.

"Success for us was replacing a product that was losing money and had no value to our readers or advertisers (a weekly, total-market driveway-drop) with something that had value and was going to make a profit (a weekly with content drawn from the paper's citizen site)," said Don Alexander, general manager, *The Daily Times* of Maryville, Tennessee, which publishes **Blount County Voice**.

"There's a skepticism in the business community – that you really can submit your press release and we're not going to make you buy an ad," acknowledged Laura Sellers, online director, East Oregonian Publishing Co., which owns *The Daily Astorian's* **Seaside-Sun.com**.

Northwest Voice's Mary Lou Fulton says citizens, too, are skeptical when the local newspaper approaches them and now wants the anniversary announcements and the block parties and other items that have long been rejected as not newsworthy. "Our policy is to say 'yes' to everything provided that it's local and relevant to the community. You have to do that for a while before people believe you," she said.

"Everyone in the world of journalism, we're just starting to learn what [citizen media] is. ... But the public – they don't care. They're not debating this, they're not thinking about this. If you don't tell them about it they'll never know about it unless you hit them over the head," said **Your Hub** editor Travis Henry.

"The real long-term need is for businesses such as restaurateurs to decide it is worth the extra 15 minutes a day to put that daily special online."

– Richard Anderson

Chapter 6: Defining Success



YourHub.com

Bluffton Today architect Steve Yelvington, however, cautions old media companies not to enter the citizen journalism arena just for business reasons. “The most important thing is to keep your eye on the ball – the community process and building a strong community. If you do this for the wrong reasons (to build site traffic or raise circulation), you’ll have the wrong impact ... If [people] spend all their time watching TV, if they don’t

talk to their neighbors, if they don’t really live there, they don’t care about the things that are likely to be in the newspaper, and they’re never going to read it.”

Wish Lists

Citizen site operators are stepping up to the plate, accepting responsibility, aspiring to higher quality, and understanding that they may need to make some investments if they want to stick around.

“It took a year or so for us to realize we have a printing press and readers. Another part of this is realizing the rights and responsibilities of owning a major media site in our town,” **ibrattleboro’s** Christopher Grotke said.

Northfield hired a managing editor, not only to wrangle content, but also “to meet our goals of being the place where the community talks to each other. We needed to get content from people who weren’t all in the mainstream. We needed someone to be responsible for that,” said Doug Bratland, chair of Northfield Citizens Online.

We asked our survey respondents: What would help them be sustainable? More marketing and promotion to ramp up visibility and

attract additional readers and contributors. More money to pay editors or reporters and improve the quality and credibility of the content. More hours in the day. Those were the things they cited most often.

Said one, “\$40,000 of ad revenue per year would be great, and we plan to get there by 2013, our 10-year plan.”

“Funding and a full-time staff” to build a more comprehensive site, said another. “Quality authors who can earn the readers’ trust,” and “a continued stream of quality contributions,” said two more. “A way to reward the contributors of the site in some way.”

Or just simply: “Advertising and another me.”

How long founding site operators can labor on their journalistic hobby of love will determine the long-term sustainability of most independent sites built with citizen-generated content. “If I stay in the neighborhood, it will be sustainable,” said one respondent.

“A really long-term challenge will be what to do when we’re too old and gray to do it. We understand there’s a certain uniqueness, and that our personalities contribute to some of [the site’s] success,” said **ibrattleboro** co-owners Christopher Grotke and Lise LePage.

We asked our survey respondents how long they would continue participating in their site: 81% skipped over 1, 2 and 3 to 4 years, and even bypassed “until resources run out.” They said they would stick with their sites “indefinitely.”

“There was a point a couple months after we launched that I realized we had built the site we set out to build,” said **New West’s** Jonathan Weber. “Is it going to work in the grand scheme of things? I have daily anxiety about that question. On the one hand, I very much believe it’s going to work ... But the way I think about it, it hasn’t worked until we can really show the level of business and level of traffic we expected. I’m not relaxing.” 🌈

“If I stay in the neighborhood, it will be sustainable ...”
– Survey Respondent

Who Participated in the 31 In-depth Interviews?



Name	City	State	Web site
Arbor Update	Ann Arbor	MI	www.arborupdate.com
Backfence	multiple		www.backfence.com
Baristanet	North Jersey	NJ	www.baristanet.com
Bluffton Today	Bluffton	SC	www.blufftontoday.com
Chi-Town Daily News	Chicago	IL	www.chitowndailynews.org
Coastsider	Half Moon Bay	CA	www.coastsider.com
The Forum	Deerfield	NH	www.forumhome.org
Free New Mexican	Santa Fe	NM	www.freewmexican.com
Greensboro101	Greensboro	NC	www.greensboro101.com
H2otown	Watertown	MA	www.h2otown.info
ibrattleboro	Brattleboro	VT	www.ibrattleboro.com
Madison Commons	Madison	WI	www.madisoncommons.org
Muncie Free Press	Muncie	IN	www.munciefreepress.com
My Missourian	Columbia	MO	www.mymissourian.com
Nashville is Talking	Nashville	TN	www.nashvilleistalking.com
New Haven Independent	New Haven	CT	www.newhavenindependent.org
New West	Rocky Mtns.	MT	www.newwest.net
Northfield Citizens Online	Northfield	MN	www.northfield.org
Northwest Voice	Bakersfield	CA	www.northwestvoice.com
OlyBlog	Olympia	WA	www.olyblog.net
Philly Future	Philadelphia	PA	www.phillyfuture.org
Rye Reflections	Rye	NH	www.ryereflections.org
Seaside-Sun	Seaside	OR	www.seaside-sun.com
The Blount County Voice	Blount County	TN	www.blountcountyvoice.com
My Town/The Daily Camera	Boulder	CO	www.mytown.dailycamera.com
Toledo Talk	Toledo	OH	www.toledotalk.com
Village Soup	Camden	ME	www.villagesoup.com
Voice of San Diego	San Diego	CA	www.voiceofsandiego.org
WestportNow	Westport	CT	www.westportnow.com
Wicked Local	Plymouth	MA	www.wickedlocal.com
Your Hub	Denver	CO	www.yourhub.com

Who Participated in the Online Survey?



We sought information from people who were familiar with citizen journalism sites, either as readers or contributors, and that's what we got: 92% of our 191 survey respondents said they had read a "web site created by community members to share very local information that might not be readily available"; 85% of 176 respondents said they had actually contributed to such a web site.

What kinds of things did they contribute? Of our 191 participants:

- 65% had posted a comment.
- 65% had posted a story.
- 56% had posted a photo.
- 27% had posted a video or audio file.
- 45% had helped to create a new site.
- 25% helped manage a site that already existed.
- 12% had donated money or merchandise to a site.

Citizen journalists wear many hats and juggle overlapping responsibilities. When asked what roles they play in their site: 68% contribute content; 34% edit other contributions; 23% assign topics for others to contribute; 43% shape the organization of the site; 27% manage site finances; 38% own or operate the site.

As a group, the survey respondents reported a high degree of formal education: 157 of our respondents (82%) either had earned a college degree, completed some graduate or professional education, or held a graduate or professional degree.

Finally, 115 of our participants (60%) had never worked as a professional journalist.

Methodology



This study took a snapshot of a robust phenomenon – specifically, the development of hyper-local community news sites – that is changing and growing week by week.

J-Lab created a questionnaire intended to capture as much data as possible through in-depth interviews in the summer of 2006 with founders, owners or operators of a diverse group of 31 citizen media sites. We supplemented that data with an online, 60-question survey in the fall of 2006. This was not a random-sample survey; we wanted data from people who were readers of or contributors to hyperlocal news sites with citizen-generated content.

We specifically targeted readers, contributors and operators of the nearly 500 citizen media sites we could identify at the time. We asked them to suggest other possible participants and e-mailed the survey to them as well. In addition, we asked the 18,000 recipients of our J-Flash e-mail newsletter to forward it to citizen journalists they knew.

Overall, 191 people responded to most or all of our 60 questions; 149 of those respondents said they had contributed to a citizen media site in some way; others had read sites with citizen-generated content.



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This report is available online at: www.kcnn.org/research/citizen_media_report

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