

Citizen Journalism: Back to the Future?

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Introduction

It's difficult to imagine two words that have raised more anxiety among news media professionals than "citizen journalism."

Citizen. Journalism. Simple words but a complex concept variously seen as either the end of the literate media world or the salvation of disconnected civilization. This paper will illustrate that it is neither -- and yet it is both.

I have been a curious but often skeptical participant researcher in citizen journalism since 2004. I am in fact a traditionally trained journalist for whom the only "C" before my "J" was "community." I spent two decades in the media of small and mid-sized cities where local news was *the* news. I am by nature an early adopter of technology, but I first saw blogs as mindless blather and most "contributed" stories as an editor's nightmare.

Our tradition at the University of Missouri is to shoulder the challenges of the news media, test them as realistically as possible and then offer a roadmap to the future. When in the first few years of the new century a few Web sites began challenging the traditional media paradigm by letting readers become writers, I was given the job of integrating this new concept into our news organization.

We launched MyMissourian.com on Oct. 1, 2004. Aimed at the community around the University of Missouri rather than the school itself, MyMissourian features content written by non-journalists but lightly edited by the staff of senior-level student journalists. We then insert a selection of the content in the free-circulation Saturday print edition of the Columbia Missourian. Like all of the journalism school's products, both the online MyMissourian site and the weekly print edition are aimed at the surrounding community rather than the university's students. Both also carry advertising.

Four years later, I'm very comfortable with both the citizen journalism concept and the phrase itself, but I'm still frustrated that my colleagues have such difficulty with it.

Citizen journalism is no more a replacement for professional journalism than teabags are a replacement for water. Both can stand comfortably alone, but when combined they produce something quite wonderful.

The "citizen" in the term is a continual irritant to news people, who complain that it implies professional journalists are excluded from citizenship. That is the wrong definition of "citizen." The better analogy is "citizen soldiers" -- the militia and National Guard that serve our country "part time." As my chief warrant officer father often explained, Guard members want to help shoulder the responsibility of defending the nation -- they just don't want make careers of it.

Similarly, citizen journalists don't want newsroom jobs -- they just have something to say. And often they want to say it because those of us on the professional side are too busy with the big stories to see the little items that mean so much to people.

The history of what we now call citizen journalism is enlightening and should be comforting to the modern scribe. The theory that grounds it is both solid and humanistic.

And the future is a bright new journalism that not only ensures the jobs of trained-and-paid journalists, but expands their roles.

Humble beginnings

While the term “citizen journalism” is new, the concept is literally as old as the rocks. The cave dweller who painted a bison on his cavern wall was unlikely a fulltime chronicler of that eon’s events – he was more likely a hunter who wanted to share his adventure.

There is an argument to make that the citizen journalist title is a variant of Martin Luther’s observation (paraphrased) that “every man is a priest.” Luther’s secular inspiration was Johannes Gutenberg, who invented a moveable-type printing press 30 years before the cleric was born. Gutenberg’s famous Bible was in Latin – the HTML of the day – but editions in German soon followed it. The increased availability and reduced cost of the Bible meant the Good Word was available not just to the princes and priests but also to burghers and others of modest means.ⁱ

Free of Biblical gatekeepers in the pulpit, lay people could analyze the church’s teaching, form their own conclusions and protest – or Protestant – at will.

In the New World, professional journalism was the work of printers. Much of the content of the early America publications came “over the transom” from people who wished to share their knowledge or influence others.

Perhaps the best known citizen journalists of the young American nation were Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay. Their 85 essays published in newspapers in 1787 and 1788 later became a standard of civics class homework: *The Federalist Papers*. But the papers were not the work of paid writers. Their work ran under a mysterious byline “Publius” and was dribbled out to readers piece-by-piece.ⁱⁱ In the 21st century, we might call them bloggers.

The practice of using unpaid or token-pay correspondents continued in the United States well into the mid 20th century. Walter Williams, eight years before founding the first school of journalism in 1908, spoke fondly in of country correspondents who “often worked for stamps, stationary and recognition among their neighbors.”

These small items (called “personals” by some editors) often seem trivial to the editor but they attract and hold the country subscriber without whom the newspaper would not exist.ⁱⁱⁱ

Those of us who were in newsrooms during the 1970s can well remember when this practice changed during the great newsprint shortage of 1973. When the price of newsprint skyrocketed and the paper itself was rationed by suppliers, newspaper owners took drastic measures. Comic strips shrank to a fraction of the page width, ads were restricted and non-essential content such as those local columns was pulled.^{iv}

When the newsprint market stabilized, only the ads came back. Unfortunately, most of the midlevel editors in newsrooms today are too young to remember the popularity of

“The Fred Walters of Littleport hosted a dinner party Thursday to celebrate daughter Sylvia’s high school graduation...”

Without the tempering effect of non-professional correspondents, professional news people evolved into the “priests of journalism”. Jay Rosen described the concept in a fanciful syllabus for an “Understanding the Priesthood of the Press” course:

How does this elite group create and maintain its authority over what counts as serious journalism? What sense of duty goes along with being one of the high priests? What are the god terms and faith objects in journalism, and how are they derived?^v

By the late 1990s, critics were decrying the press as arrogant, elitist and unresponsive to the public. Then along came the Internet. The launch of the World Wide Web in 1991 was the cultural equivalent to Gutenberg firing up that first press in 1440. As in the 13th century, the Web had little impact at first. But once the public was given translations of the neo-Latin HTML code, all hell broke out again. The heretics now had the ability to distribute “news” in their own way.

Blogs open the door

The Internet first granted wide access to the ordinary readers through newsgroups and later personal Web pages. Newsgroups are a primarily text segment of the Internet also known as the Usenet. They are organized as bulletin boards, with the latest post at the top, and require little expertise beyond that of e-mail. The ability to chat with people of similar minds around the world made newsgroups especially popular in the 1990s with disenfranchised segments such as gays and political radicals.

The development of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee allowed a relatively easy combination of text and graphics. When WYSIWYG (“what you see is what you get”) webpage editors were popularized in the late 1990s, users no longer needed to learn HTML code to produce a Web page and personal pages began to flourish. The Web authoring software was often expensive, however, and still took enough skill to daunt the non-technical. Additionally, Web pages required access to an Internet hosting site or server.

Meanwhile computer programmers were organizing their work via a small diary program called a weblog. Soon shortened to “blog,” the online diary allowed teams of programmers to post the progress of their work on the unit’s network. The log was easily accessible to anyone on the team and displayed the latest announcement at top of the screen page.

Like many Internet developments, the functional weblog workhorse soon became a recreational Web fixture. When entrepreneurial companies offered free software and hosting in 1999, the technical world took notice. *Wired* reported that the upstart Pyra company had an amazing 3,000 subscribers on its year-old Google platform in February 2000.^{vi}

Today, Technorati tracks more than 70 million blogs. Technorati CEO David Silfry estimated 120,000 new blogs are created each day – 1.7 per second.^{vii}

Blogs are extremely easy to set up, cost nothing to maintain and simple to access. The impact of the blogging tidal wave is immeasurable and will be discussed later, but one of its shortcomings spawned the variation of traditional media popularly known as citizen journalism. The great challenge of blogging is writing day after day. Many people want to write, few want to work like a journalists. It is much easier to make an occasional contribution to a Web site operated by someone else than to face a daily publication deadline.

Enter citizen journalism.

The New Luther

If there is a new Martin Luther in this Digital Reformation, it is Oh Yeon-ho. Luther said every man is a priest. Oh declared “every citizen is a reporter.” Blogging gave citizens public diaries. Oh gave them their own newspaper.

In 2000, Oh and three colleagues started a politically motivated online daily newspaper, *OhMyNews*. Oh said he and other South Korean liberals were dissatisfied with the mainstream Korean press, but had too little financial backing to start a conventional newspaper. Oh resorted to what he called “guerilla methods” – using volunteer reporters and posting the material on the Internet instead of printing it.

I wanted to open a place of fair competition where people who wanted to share news with one another could do so through the Internet. I wanted to establish a culture where the quality of news determined whether it won or lost. I wanted to start a tradition free of newspaper company elitism where news was evaluated based on quality, regardless of whether it came from a major newspaper, a local reporter, an educated journalist or a neighborhood housewife. I wanted to realize through the Internet the motto “Every citizen is a reporter,” something that couldn’t be done through printed newspapers. So I decided to make the plunge into the sea of the Internet, even though I feared that which was different from what I was accustomed.^{viii}

Oh recruited 727 “citizen reporters” to write the news, which was edited and processed by four professional journalists. Few in or out of the journalism profession foresaw the phenomenal success of Oh’s unusual publication strategy. The “staff” numbers have since grown to 75 professional journalists and 60,000 citizen journalists in Korea alone and thousands of other contributors around the world. *OhMyNews* is also now profitable and monthly unique visitors have jumped from 600 at launch to more than 3 million. It also has an English-language version that is popular worldwide.

What differentiated *OhmyNews* from other blogs and other user-generated content is that it consolidated material from a variety of writers and published it on a platform with much greater distribution than a single blog or personal website. It used a variant of the traditional newspaper circulation strategy to compete against traditional newspapers.

OhmyNews was strongly political at its launch. The Korean media industry was dominated by conservative newspapers backing the conservative government. Oh’s liberal paid staff wrote the main daily political coverage, but thousands of “citizen reporters” who were paid a token amount for each story provided the bulk of the content. To the surprise

of the media establishment, the tactic swayed public opinion in Korea and was credited for helping elect human rights lawyer Roh Moo Hyun president in 2002.

But *OhmyNews* came into its own with what Oh called “life stories.” He was especially moved by a December 2003 story that simply began ““The first snow fell in our neighborhood, too.”

Oh and his colleagues discovered that by breaking down the formal structure of news writing, interest by everyday readers increased. As he explained:

Breaking article formalism and “every citizen a reporter” were two sides of the same coin. If the time had come for every citizen to be a reporter, why was it necessary to continue to follow the same article writing formula set by the professional journalists? Moreover, these formula were created for the era of the printed newspaper, which had been constrained by time and place.^{ix}

It’s back to that priesthood of journalism. Like Luther, Oh found that those who claimed to have the direct pipeline to Truth often have little justification for the rules they establish.

The American migration

Meanwhile in the United States the media both traditional and otherwise were trying to come to terms with Internet technology. Individual bloggers were growing in number daily, but critics argued they did not really provide “journalism.” In 2003 researcher Mark Deuze categorized the new media world into four types of online journalism: ^x

- Mainstream news sites
- Index and category sites
- Meta and comment sites
- Share and discussion sites.

Mainstream news sites of the time offered original copy produced for the Web or that was taken from the parent medium (sometimes called “shovelware”) content with very little participation from users. Index and category sites do not produce original content, but rather link to it -- the Drudge Report is a good example. Meta and comment sites were sites about journalism itself, written by journalists and often containing comment about how the news is framed by various media outlets.

Then there were the share and discussion sites -- places for users to connect with one another and exchange ideas in an open forum. There were precious few of these at the time. Slashdot was popular for techies, but little was available to the general public. With the growing adoption of high-speed Internet connections in residences, there was a growing opportunity for interactive news media.

U.S. media watchers combined Oh’s Korean concept with the principles of the burgeoning movement in the technology community to share the source code for

programs. The result was “open source journalism,” news-like information that was freely contributed and freely shared.

The first practical experiment in this was in the unlikely small California agricultural city of Bakersfield. Mary Lou Fulton was an experienced newspaper reporter who moved into the digital world first as editor of Washingtonpost.com and a senior manager of America Online. Tired of the East Coast, she moved back to California to be a member of the independent Bakersfield *Californian* board of directors.

Fulton persuaded the *Californian* management to let her experiment with a planned suburban section for an affluent area northwest of Bakersfield. She surprised most of the newspaper industry by reversing the normal publication order of online and print with the resulting *Northwest Voice*. She developed a website filled with locally contributed articles, photos and columns. Then she printed the copy from the site in a biweekly newspaper.

“The readers responded in interesting ways,” she told me in 2004, “The emotion has taken me by surprise. People *love* this paper. The emotion is borne of the notion that people see themselves in this paper and it is written by people in this community.”^{xi}

Where Oh found success in politics, Fulton found success in horses. She quickly saw that Americans were much less interested in government than their own lives. In the Bakersfield area, that often meant saddle horses. Columns and stories giving tips and information about horses were enormously popular, she said. The same applied to hot rods, religion and youth sports. The key was focusing on what really mattered to people rather than the reflections of what mattered.

“There is a real lack of authenticity in our journalism today,” Fulton said. “Reporters cover education, not schools, healthcare not clinics. Not writing about you, but about an abstraction.”^{xii}

After following the progress of both Oh and Fulton for, we at the Missouri School of Journalism decided to test the process in a controlled environment. As a journalism school focused on the newspaper industry since 1908, Missouri was particularly interested in Fulton’s use of an “umbrella” strategy to create synergy with an existing traditional product. *The Northwest Voice* used the citizen journalism content to revive an existing product, thus it was not intended to be in direct competition with the parent newspaper company. The umbrella model of citizen journalism sees this the new medium as a way to enhance the company’s products rather than to compete with them.

In the summer of 2004, a team of faculty and graduate students outlined the procedures and technology needed to launch a site. By fall, undergraduate students in an online journalism class were contacting local activists, school officials and other community sources for content. On Oct. 1, MyMissourian.com was online.

By the time the Missouri team submitted its first research paper in 2005, “open source journalism” had morphed into “citizen journalism” and the term was beginning to get mention in the popular press.

The goal of MyMissourian.com was always to develop an economic model that incorporated the new journalistic practices into a traditional newspaper organization. We

did that by positioning the website as a content collector on which nonjournalists could publish material with the editing help of trained journalists. It took a year to work out the kinks, but in Oct. 2005 MyMissourian.com content was ported to a free-circulation edition of the Columbia Missourian each week. This TMC (Total Market Coverage – also called a “shopper”) edition had been popular with advertisers because of its high circulation numbers. However, the low-grade content in it had considerably reduced its pickup rate, resulting in “driveway rot.” Our plan was to use stories and photos by local residents as the compelling content that enticed readers, yet did not duplicate nor compete with the content from the paid daily newspaper.

The hybrid design gave us a unique opportunity to test the power of the citizen journalism concept removed from its more common online technology. One easily seen impact of adding print to the online site was that after two months in print, registrations to author on the site were triple what the Web-alone site had gathered over the entire previous year.

In 2007, a valid-sample telephone survey of Columbia, MO tested the readership of the citizen journalism free print edition. The results surprised even the researchers. An earlier student survey about the pre-citizen journalism weekly shopper was too small for statistical reliability, but it indicated a readership in the neighborhood of 35%. The 2007 survey showed a 65% readership. More importantly, it showed that familiarity with the citizen journalism content was the strongest predictor of that readership. The citizen journalism stories in what news people considered a “shopper” even outdrew the advertising content.^{xiii}

Theory and Citizen Journalism

The Missouri TMC survey documented in a practical sense what researchers had found about both citizen journalism and neighbor-to-neighbor type content. Since the 1940s, communications researchers have sought to explain the popularity of some information over other information via the uses-and-gratifications model. U&G is an approach that looks at media in terms of how it meets the social or psychological needs of the person using that medium. It assumes an active audience and states that an individual has an identifiable set of needs and that the individual uses the media to fill those needs^{xiv}

Four audience needs have been consistently found in U&G research: information, personal identity, a block consisting of integration and social interaction, and entertainment.^{xv} While traditional newspapers address most of those needs, citizen journalism appeals especially to the integration and social interaction block by allowing individual expression among a group of similar-minded people.

The Missouri research team tested this in 2006 by surveying people registered as authors on MyMissourian.com. The survey quizzed these citizen journalists about their lifestyles and uses of other media. The results showed a marked difference from normal newspaper audiences as measured in national studies. The citizen journalism participants had moderate consumption of local media, but very little use of national media.

The participants in the study were also highly driven by an interest in alternative political opinions and the desire to build community. This may be explained in part by the

fact that the majority of respondents were married Baby Boomers who grew up in the Peace Corps/Vietnam War era.^{xvi}

A rising explanation for the citizen journalism phenomenon is social capital theory. Social capital is a blanket term for the networks, norms and social trust that allow coordination and cooperation in society. The social capital model says that a person's involvement in local groups or organizations builds trust with others in the community. One invests social capital to earn standing, but that investment also enriches the community and encourages investment by others who benefit from the initial investment.^{xvii}

Robert Putnam linked this to the online phenomenon in his popular book, "Bowling Alone." Putnam theorized that the Internet is the new mechanism of "bridging and bonding" in society – bridging together people of different sorts while bonding or bringing together people of like backgrounds.

Unlike older models of community that relied on face-to-face communication, the Internet social capital model theorized a virtual community where people interact without ever seeing each other.^{xviii}

While Putnam did not specifically talk about citizen journalism, his social capital concept fits well with the 2006 Missouri study. Jeremy Littau, one of the graduate students who helped design MyMissourian, tested the social capital/citizen journalism link for his masters thesis and found that citizen journalism participation indeed predicted social capital production in the form of civic engagement, which can be measured as participation, volunteering, and activism. But the surprise was that there was no statistically significant difference between writers and readers on any of the measures, whether it was media use or community involvement. Citizen journalism seems to attract those highly involved in their communities both coming and going – readership and writership.^{xix}

Variations on theme

Citizen journalism sites and publications that attempt to distribute user-generated information throughout a community have flourished in the United States – though seldom with economic gusto. Dozens of independent sites ranging from the S.D. Fridge Door to the Daily Gotham operate with volunteers or minimum paid staffs. Traditional media organizations have also launched citizen journalism initiatives.

Like much of Internet-based media, citizen journalism sites have struggled to find a viable economic model. Part of this may be cultural – the notion of giving freely of your information does not lend itself to hardball advertising sales. Web sites as a group share a problem with screen real estate – there is much less space for advertising on a computer screen than on a newspaper page. Also, many of the early advocates of citizen journalism were looking for a social alternative to traditional news media so focused on grants and volunteers rather than revenue and employees.

The appeal of society-wide discussion is great, but the history of citizen journalism shows that social discussion has the greatest potential in a community small enough for an individual to comfortably identify with. The practice of drilling down to these small social, geographic or virtual communities has come to be known as "hyper-local journalism."

While CNN's iReport has a large following, the national citizen journalism sites have generally fared worse than the local sites. "We the Media" author Dan Gilmore's Bayosphere failed to attract a following and the ambitious citizen journalism chain Backfence.com found that its 13-city hyper-local strategy was just not hyper-local enough. While the opportunity to talk is appealing to Americans, the opportunity to talk specifically to your own people appears to have greater appeal.

Nevertheless, "citizen journalism" is now a broadly recognized term, certainly one heard often in newsrooms across the country. A Google search of the term produces hundreds of thousands of references.

Media organizations small and large have begun to integrate citizen journalism concepts into their fare. Perhaps the most obvious of these changes was the introduction of citizen comments about staff reports on the Web sites of newspapers and television stations. Media organizations have also revisited other online techniques for audience interaction.

Blogging: The invasion of the horde

While *ObmyNews*-style citizen journalism has theoretical and practical appeal, no discussion of where citizen journalism is going is possible without looking at the enormous impact of its cousins: blogging, photo sharing and social networking.

The simplicity of creating a blog site contributed heavily to the phenomenal growth in blog numbers. Livejournal, Blogger, WordPress and other platforms not only provide template-based software that allow anyone with simple word processing skills to establish a blog in minutes, but then provide free storage space and indexing for the sites.

Many journalists cling to the notion that blogs are inconsequential drivel. Pulitzer Prize winner Buzz Bissinger was livid in a televised discussion of blogging on HBO.

"I think that blogs are dedicated to cruelty, dedicated to journalistic dishonesty," Bissinger said in an emotional, profanity-laced blast against Deadspin founder Will Leitch. He later added "It is the complete dumbing down of our society."

But the curmudgeonly sportswriting icon also voiced the growing concern of traditional journalists as he parried with Leitch: "Maybe that's why I'm so heated and so angry. Because this guy [Leitch], whether we like it or not, is the future. I'm not the future."^{xx}

The numbers prove him right. Remember that Technorati estimates the number of blogs in the world is growing at 120,000 per day. If just 1¼ percent of those new blogs have "legitimate" journalistic content, that is as many new "real" publications each day as the existing 1,427 daily newspapers in the United States.^{xxi} Over a year's time, the mass of new content is beyond comprehension.

I once heard media economist Robert Picard explain the impact of blogging on newspapers in simple social terms. "Two-thirds of the readers have not liked newspapers for 100 years but had no other place to go," he said. Blogging and citizen journalism provide that outlet for the discontented.^{xxii}

Blogging lets people from all walks of life take the media into their own hands. But for all their popularity among writers, blogs are poorly read. A recent Synovate study estimated that 15% of Americans read blogs daily – about the same as those who consider them news sources. That said, casual readership of blogs is growing, with nearly 40% of Americans visiting a blog sometime during the month.^{xxiii}

The journalistic power in blogs, however, may stem less from their individual readership than from a characteristic of blog technology. Blog software employs “permalinks.” A permalink is a URL that points to a specific blog entry or post. It means that search engines and Web site need not send readers to an entire blog, but simply to a single post. This allows minor parts of otherwise unpopular blogs to bounce through the “blogosphere” quickly.

Those persistent links to blog posts played a large roll in the restructuring of a major news network. On Sept. 8, 2004, the CBS program *60 Minutes* aired an investigation by Dan Rather offering typed documents as proof President George W. Bush had evaded the draft. Later that evening Harry MacDougald, posting on FreeRepublic.com, challenged the validity of the documents based on the style of typeface. Other bloggers picked up the post and searched for examples of 1970s typewriters. The more popular Little Green Footballs and PowerlineBlog.com picked up the thread. The following day, the nationally known DrudgeReport.com linked to it – after which the Associated Press and the traditional media waded in.

After the investigation showed the documents were indeed forgeries, CBS issued a humbling apology, key staff were fired and Rather later retired.^{xxiv}

Most blogs, however, never touch politics or world events. Of the top 100 blogs indexed by Technorati, blogs focusing on culture are by far most popular (27). Technology blogs rank second (28) with only 16 dedicated to politics.^{xxv} No comprehensive analysis of blog themes is available, but other reviews show a similar trend toward social and technology content.^{xxvi}

Nowhere is this more obvious than the booming use of blogs by women. The 2008 Social Media Study by BlogHer and Compass Partners found that 36.2 million American women participate in the blogosphere each week, of which 21.1 million read or post comments to blogs and 15.1 million personally post to a blog.

And they are loyal to their new online community. The study found that 55% would give up alcohol before blogs and 42% would give up their iPod. And while 43% would give up reading newspapers or magazine, one passion held firm: Only 20% would give up chocolate.

For women, blogs are perceived as an avenue to relationships and friendships and access to “someone who cares about the same things they do.” Their biggest motivations to publish are for fun and to express themselves. Advocacy, persuasion and reaching a large audience are way down on the list.^{xxvii}

When millions of women write about fun topics to millions of others, is it journalism?

That question certainly is not restricted to text. Millions of people worldwide upload their digital photographs to Flickr, Photobucket, Picassa and similar sites. The photos are easily viewed by friends, family – or anyone else with an Internet connection. As of the end of 2007, Flickr alone reportedly hosted more the 2 billion images.

Most of these sites allow text messaging, “favorite” collecting and comments among members. Breaking news from natural disasters and civil unrest quickly make their way to the sites, but Flickr photos are more likely to depict children, pretty scenes and human faces. A growing trend is for groups, pools or galleries dedicated to niche subjects such as grandchildren, dogs or even manhole covers,

The photo sharing services integrate well into blogs and are often used by people as a visual means to meet the same ends. Photobucket, in particular, positions itself as a storage site to which photographers can link to illustrate blogs, websites or email. The photo sharing services also extensively use Creative Commons, a variation on copyright licensing that provides some protection for authors, photographers and other content producers yet allows others to use the works with attribution. It is a “share and share alike” system that reflects the general culture of the Internet.^{xxviii}

The most common reaction to the blogging boom by traditional journalism outlets was to create their own blogs for staff writers. This rapidly became so common that it is now more difficult to find newspapers without staff blogs than those with them.

But are they really blogs? Even a cursory look at most of these blogs show they have a striking resemblance to the columns of years past. While they employ casual language and often delve into topics foreign to the front page, they still reflect the thinking of paid professional journalists.

I put the question to the 20,000 bloggers registered on a Fox TV station’s system in St. Louis, MO. The “real” bloggers tended to humor me, but constantly reminded me that I wasn’t one of them.

And then came Facebook

Social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook are a phenomenon unto themselves, but share many of the attributes of citizen journalism.

A social networking site is a large collection of template-based personal Web sites. Each is established after the owner fills out a questionnaire about demographics, personality and history. The software allows quick links to people sharing similar characteristics, creating an instant community of lost or previously unknown “friends.”

MySpace, owned by global media giant Rupert Murdoch, has 110 million active users worldwide. Facebook, an upstart created by a team of Harvard students, has 60 million users but huge penetration among young people. It is also shares more photos than the dedicated photo sites like Flickr and Picassa.^{xxix}

Although social networking is primarily a place meet friends, it has a growing news media value. The University of Missouri citizen journalism research team recently examined the perceived credibility of news information found on Facebook. The

researchers found that Facebook users judged news content posted by their friends to be more credible than content posted on the site by traditional news organizations. The trend even held true for journalism students on Facebook.^{xxx}

Wither the journalist?

With bloggers by the million, photos on every computer and “friends” telling the news, what future is there for journalism?

A very good future, I believe. Rather than destroying journalism, citizen journalism and its cousins are improving it. The future of both citizen journalism and traditional journalism is the same: Just journalism with no preface.

The key difference between traditional journalism and citizen journalism in its various guises is the difference between “covering” and “sharing.”

A professional journalist assigned to a story will research the issues, talk to the people involved, check the facts and craft the results into a story. Then move on. The job of a journalist is to taste the world, one news bite at a time.

A citizen journalist or blogger, however, lives the story. It is neither a passing interest nor something he or she was assigned to investigate. Rather than taking that quick bite of the world, citizen journalists share a bit of their own lives.

Try as they might, that is a type of story telling that evades the professional journalist. The economics and logistics of full news coverage prevent reporters from experiencing each story before writing about it.

That, however, does not mean that traditional news organizations cannot be part of the Great Sharing.

The incomprehensible size of the World Wide Web is a success, but one that has created new challenges for journalists to meet. The Web simply offers too many choices for an individual to browse through with accuracy. As my media critic colleague Vin Crosbie explained, “The Internet is not a mass medium, it’s a massively delivered niche medium.”^{xxxix}

As content creators, journalists are now outgunned by millions of bloggers, citizen reporters, Flickr photographers and YouTube video producers. There will always be a place for the journalist who can craft a story better than anyone else, but there will be a bigger place for the journalist who helps media consumer find the information they want.

This is what I mean by dropping the citizen or traditional preamble to the term “journalism.” Good journalism in the 21st century is good information from whatever source available.

Wired Magazine contributing editor coined the term “crowdsourcing” to describe the new journalistic practice of going to the public for content.^{xxxii} The term could as easily be “blog cruising” or “Flickr mining.” The essence of the new journalism is to treat the Internet as a massive wire service upon which billions of stories run each day. Very much

like the wire editor at a newspaper, the new journalist can search through this mass to find content most appealing to his or her readers.

Success at this new journalism requires the skill to recognize value both in a note from neighbor about a housewarming and in a reporter's detailed examination of new legislation.

The journalist's "news nose" is still as important as ever – it just has a broader range of fragrances to sniff.

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