

**The call for ONE MILLION  
citizen journalists**  
*and the skills to make them successful*

# **Handbook for Citizen Journalists**



**Ron Ross & Susan Carson Cormier**

**Also -**

**31 Ways You Can Write, Produce and  
Distribute News About Your Community**

**Published by the National Association of Citizen Journalists**

## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the tens of thousands of citizen journalists around the world who are making a difference in their villages, towns, states and nations by picking up the slack left by the changing journalistic climate. While most citizen journalists operate without fear, many are forced by oppressive regimes to function undercover.

Whether free or censored, visible or invisible, we salute these brave entrepreneurs of news in the 21st century and call for one million more just like them.

*Wanted: One Million Citizen Journalists*

# Handbook for Citizen Journalists

**Ron Ross & Susan Carson Cormier**



National Association of Citizen Journalists  
Denver, Colorado  
[www.NACJ.us](http://www.NACJ.us)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Dan Gillmor, author of “We the Media” and one of the pioneers of the citizen journalism movement, for his inspiration and support.

A special thanks is also offered to John Gutierrez (www.MyPowerPad.com) for the incredible website he created for the National Association of Citizen Journalists.

Our biggest and loudest shout-out goes to all those citizen and professional journalists who walk streets, ask questions and demand answers in their quests to keep their communities informed. Thank you for your inspiration and keep up the good work!

- Ron Ross and Susan Carson Cormier

## PERSONAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*From Ron Ross* (primary author of Part 1)



First of all, a confession: I am not a journalist. My only true exposure to journalism came in my senior year at Abraham Lincoln High School in Council Bluffs, Iowa. I was taught by my journalism teacher, the late, H. Arthur Lee, how to write a lead paragraph and employ the inverted pyramid concept in my writing. Thank you, Mr. Lee. Since then, however, I have been only a consumer of journalism.

My knowledge and inspiration for this book arose out of a need for citizens to upload news to a hyperlocal news website I was attempting to fill with local news. Out of that need, someone used the phrase “citizen journalist,” and my curiosity was stimulated. Over the last two years, I have visited hundreds – maybe thousands - of websites, scrutinized countless blogs and read a variety of books on journalism. As a result, I have developed a broad knowledge of and a profound respect for the hard work, creativity and courage of both professional and citizen journalists around the world. I tip my hat to you all!

My primary acknowledgement for this book goes to my patient partner and journalist extraordinaire, Susan Carson Cormier. It simply could not have been done without her help. Susan, you’re the best.

And of course, many thanks and words of great fondness to my wife of over 46 years, Amy, for her encouragement, patience, love and approval throughout the duration of this compelling project.

- *Ron Ross*

*From Susan Carson Cormier* (primary author of Part 2)

Part 2, the skills chapters of this handbook could not have been written if I had not been so well trained at the University of Arizona’s Journalism Department in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I was privileged to receive instruction from professors like James W. Johnson, George W. Ridge and Rosalie Carroll Muldoon, and of course, my father and head of the department, Donald W. Carson.

These professors instilled in their students the importance of producing complete and accurate stories that were correct the first time. They



were not shy about giving students an automatic failing grade if they made a factual error or misspelled a name. They also made their students learn by doing. Not only did we hear lectures on how to cover a city council meeting, we had to go out and cover an actual city council meeting.

While my formal education and experience as a journalist were important for writing this book, the personal help from my father was invaluable. He opened his file cabinet of class lectures and was available at the spur of the moment to review and improve what I had written. Thank you, Dad, for sharing from your deep well of journalistic wisdom.

Although I have had a heartfelt interest in citizen journalism and personally experienced the frustrations of the role, this book and the National Association of Citizen Journalists would not have been formed without the vision and incentive of Ron Ross. His extensive research over the last two years has made my partner in this venture a leading expert in citizen journalism. Ron, thanks for your hope, inspiration and vision.

My ultimate expression of appreciation goes to my wonderful husband, Craig Cormier, for his patience, love and support while I spent hours upon hours writing, editing and rewriting copy for this handbook.

- ***Susan Carson Cormier***

# Table of Contents

## **Part 1 - Wanted: One Million Citizen Journalists**

Introduction	9
1. Citizen Journalism is Happening	15
2. Citizen Journalism - More Than a Passing Fad	29
3. Why be a Journalist?	45
4. The Similarities and Differences Between Citizen Journalists and Professional Journalists	51
5. Three Categories of Citizen Journalists	57
6. Challenges Facing Citizen Journalists	71
7. Six Questions to Determine if You Have What it Takes to Be a Citizen Journalist	83
8. <i>YOUR</i> Call to Citizen Journalism	95
9. Will You Answer the Call?	109

## **Part 2 - The Skills You Need to be a Successful Citizen Journalist**

10. Journalism 101 - Defining the News and How to Write It	117
11. How to Write Feature Articles	125
12. How to Write About Sports	133
13. How to Conduct an Interview	139
14. How to Generate Story Ideas	147
15. How to Edit Yourself	155
16. The Importance of Sourcing	159
17. How to Avoid Libel	163

## **Part 3 - Values - Methods - Resources**

18. Core Values of the National Association of Citizen Journalists	169
19. 31 Ways You Can Write, Produce and Distribute News About Your Community	187
20. Resources for Citizen Journalists	203

# Part 1



By Ron Ross



# Introduction

## Wanted: One Million Citizen Journalists

Every day in every town events happen and milestones are reached. People get hired and fired, promoted and laid off, old businesses close and new ones open. On the streets, crimes are committed and good deeds are done. On the sports fields, some teams win while others lose. Everywhere you look, life goes on and so does death – most of it unnoticed and, in the greater scheme of things, relatively unimportant.

But not for those involved. For them it is



# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

everything – at least in that moment of time or on that day or in that season. And much of it is worthy of a story or series of stories, maybe a photo, but at least a few lines of news to mark the event. But most of the time, that never happens.

However, it should happen. And more importantly, it could happen.

## *Important hyperlocal news events can be covered*



These important and many not-so-important hyperlocal news events can be covered – not by professional journalists, but by citizen journalists who live, work, play, worship and have coffee with the folks in their own town.

That is why the National Association of Citizen Journalists is calling for one million citizen journalists to step forward and cover this vast array of public and private activity so worthy of attention.

## *There is a tremendous amount of news to cover*

There are more than 25,000 cities, towns, counties, boroughs and municipalities in the United States. This does not account for suburbs, subdivisions, homeowner associations, etc.

Each community has an almost innumerable number of important businesses, governing agencies, notable institutions and interesting people. Take a close look. You'll find boards, commissions, libraries, schools, churches, colleges, associations, youth organizations, sports leagues, clubs, unions and political parties.

Then take a close look at the fascinating variety of folks in your town. You'll find the famous and infamous, rich and poor, weird and normal, lawbreakers and law abiders. And each one has a story.

# Introduction

*The closer you look, the greater the need for citizen journalists is revealed*

Take your local school district as an example. There are several schools – elementary, middle and high schools - each having a variety of stories of achievement that are worthy of recognition. They include sports teams, debate teams, drama clubs, choirs, proms and homecomings, just to name a few. And don't forget the other intrigue and activities that make schools such interesting and important parts of a community.

It is impossible for any newspaper or radio or television station to cover all the activities of any one school district. They need the help of citizen journalists and many are ready to use them.

*An uncountable number of stories need to be told*

Believe it when we tell you that on the afternoon the hometown high school girls' volleyball team won the state tournament, it was bigger news in that town than what happened at the state Capitol, in the halls of Congress or inside the largest sports arena in the land. Someone needs to talk to the girls, interview the coaches and get a quote from the proud parents. Someone needs to tell the story, publish a photo and give the girls their moment in the sun.

The evening that the same town's water board met and raised the rates of every household in town caused a greater stir among the citizenry than the news of a tsunami in the Pacific. Someone should have been at that water board meeting with a pen and notebook, a digital recorder and the courage to ask the water board members for an explanation. Someone needs to tell the story, publish a photo, render a quote and hold the board's feet to the fire.

Somewhere last week in a town just like yours, a small group of important people met and made decisions. Their decisions impact-

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

ed the pocketbooks of thousands of citizens – and yet no one was there to watch out for the regular folks, the taxpayers and ratepayers. Someone needed to be there to report on how the decisions were made, who brokered the deals and what facts were considered or rejected.

Someone – perhaps someone like you - needs to find those stories, take some pictures and write some news.

## *Newspapers would love to cover all this news but cannot*

Traditionally, this kind of news coverage and watchdogging was done by local newspapers. But in reality, newspapers could never afford to send a reporter to follow every high school sports team or attend every meeting of every board and commission.

Their ability to fully cover the news within a community is diminishing. In some communities, this situation has reached critical mass. Some newspapers have closed completely; others have had to cut back staff at every level due to decreases in advertising revenue and dwindling readership. Just getting the most significant news out is a job that demands extra hours by multi-tasking staff.

Not only are there too few staff to cover all the news in a community, there also are too few newspapers overall.

Many newspapers have to cover several or more towns and cities in their circulation area, and it's not physically or financially possible for them to cover all of the news. They need citizen journalists to attend meetings, do research, check facts, ask questions and write news.

## *Citizen journalism's growing influence*

Tens of thousands of citizen journalists around the world are discovering and developing a wide variety of ways to get the news out

# *Introduction*

about what is happening in their communities, states and nations. They are using all the latest tools of technology to write all kinds of news. With these new tools, they watchdog government, enlighten citizens, photograph and video events, tip news agencies, create graphs, charts and cartoons, use their expertise, and tell stories.

This grassroots journalism movement is worldwide and gains in popularity and influence with every new website that goes online, every blog that is created and with each digital photo or video that is uploaded.

Citizen journalists are doing this for two reasons: because they care and because they can. They care about what is happening in their communities and they are armed with inexpensive and easy-to-operate tools that make it possible to reach their town and even the world with a couple of clicks of a mouse.

Their work is varied in kind, quality and usefulness; nevertheless, it is changing the way the world gets its information.

We are calling for one million citizen journalists around the world - in communities large and small - to step forward and fill the gap left by fading newspapers and weakening local broadcast news teams.

Will you step forward? Will you accept the challenge? If you are interested, please read on.

Ron Ross & Susan Carson Cormier





Great accomplish-  
ments will be made  
in this transitional  
time in the world of

journalism. Stars will rise and fall,  
and some will shine so brightly that  
their glory will fairly  
blind you.



But nothing will  
match the influence  
of one million or 100 million  
small bright lights shining in every



community, state,  
nation and conti-  
nent around the  
world.



# Chapter 1

## Citizen Journalism is Happening

**C**itizen journalism is an amazing phenomenon. In less than a decade, tens of thousands - maybe hundreds of thousands and soon millions - of ordinary citizens from small villages in central India to bloodied demonstrators in the streets of Tehran to 70,000 registered citizen journalists in South Korea to the historical society in Silverton, Colo., are now writing and producing news in and about their communities.

It is happening spontaneously and with very little planning, training, testing



# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

or projecting of where it is going or what it will ultimately accomplish.

Consider this:

## *It is happening with no organized structure*

Look where you may, you will find no chief executive officer, chief financial officer or marketing director. Simply put, no one's in charge, and further more, there's no visible or unseen substructure at work.

There are no district managers, vice presidents or area supervisors who are monitoring or guiding the movement. No one reports to anyone, asks permission, puts in a request for travel, is told to do this story or don't do that story, or has stories edited, abbreviated, eliminated by someone else.

You can't flowchart the citizen journalism movement. It just happens.

## *It is happening with no inspirational luminary*

There is no one central figure that stands as a model or inspiration for other citizen journalists. There is no one champion, martyr or archetype that others look to for instruction or encouragement. Most citizen journalists act because they are self-motivated, rather than motivated by idol, fame or fortune.

Historically, movements have an iconic leader who challenges followers to give time, treasure and talent to a cause greater than themselves. It took the leadership of William Wilberforce, as a member of Parliament working in the halls of government and with antislavery activists within churches throughout England, to bring an end to the slave trade. It took a Mahatma Gandhi to lead the people of India in their fight for democracy.

But the citizen journalist movement, with tentacles worldwide,

# Chapter 1 - Citizen Journalism is Happening

has no iconic leader, no intellectual principal, no dominant organizer and no particular motivating ideology except one: the desire to write, produce and dispense news.

## *It is happening with no head, but also with no headquarters*

*The New York Times'* headquarters is located at 1 City Hall, New York City, New York. The headquarters for CNN is located in downtown Atlanta, Ga., at 1 CNN Center.

However, there is no place on Earth where you will find the base of operations or the nerve center of citizen journalist activity. You can't drive to the home office, visit the campus or drop in on the production studio.

There is no citizen journalist headquarters. The movement is enigmatic, amorphous, indiscernible and therefore incredibly durable.

## *It's happening with no formal training*

There is no fount of learning from whence the discipline of citizen journalism has burst forth. Only recently has there been available any university-level training for citizen journalists. And what has been offered, has been woefully inadequate. It has been more of an attempt to apply traditional journalism's practices on citizen journalists, than it has been an attempt to equip them for the kind of work citizen journalists want to do.

To our knowledge, no university offers a degree in citizen journalism. Indeed, most journalism schools scratch their heads and wonder how to respond to the movement. Some criticize it with nasty words, while others are seeking ways to tap into its potential.

YouTube.com hosts a channel specifically for citizen journalists ([www.YouTube.com/reporterscenter](http://www.YouTube.com/reporterscenter)). Training videos are posted there by professionals and other new media specialists. Training

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

videos created by the National Association of Citizen Journalists also are posted on YouTube at [www.YouTube.com/thecitizenjournalist](http://www.YouTube.com/thecitizenjournalist).

In addition, the National Association of Citizen Journalists has a comprehensive training program available for its members. It was launched in September of 2009 by the authors of this handbook, Ron Ross and Susan Carson Cormier. The NACJ training program includes mandated training webinars, scholarly writings, hints and tips, and social networking to facilitate quick and easy knowledge exchanges between members. The NACJ believes citizen journalists can be equipped to see, hear, understand and report news as well as professional journalists. You can find out more about the NACJ by visiting [www.NACJ.us](http://www.NACJ.us).

## *It's happening with no power center*

Each citizen journalist is assumed to be as knowledgeable and resourceful as the next. None is considered more authoritative, more important or more effectual than another. There is a universal assumption of social and professional equality within the movement.

## *It is happening with little or no funding*

You can visit 100 citizen journalism websites and see 100 variations of funding. Most citizen journalist enterprises are self-funded, especially those operating under cover from repressive governments. A few grants are available in the United States, but most citizen journalists worldwide operate out of their own pockets or out of what they can get through advertising (usually not much) or through donations.

# Chapter 1 - Citizen Journalism is Happening

## *It is happening with no government help*

The idea of citizen journalism didn't come from the halls of Congress or the offices of the executive. It does not exist because of government grants, although there have been some. It does not exist because of government oversight or government blessing. There is no citizen journalist czar yet appointed by the White House.

## *It is happening despite governmental interference*

In many cases, citizen journalists operate outside the approval of their governments and often with the threat of fine, imprisonment or death.

Governmental interference is likely to continue because all governments, present and future, are not likely to be pleased with the idea of an uncountable number of totally independent citizen journalists writing about this politician or photographing that public works project or investigating decisions made behind closed doors or in the wee hours of the night.



In the introduction of his book, “We the Media,” Dan Gillmor wrote:

“Governments are very uneasy about the free flow of information, and only allow it to a point. Legal clampdowns and technological measures to prevent copyright infringement could bring a day when we need permission to publish, or when publishing from the edge feels too risky.... Governments insist on the right to track everything we do, but more and more politicians and bureaucrats shut off access to what the public needs to know – information that increasingly surfaces through the efforts of nontraditional media.”

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

## *It is happening with no mass marketing strategy*

Most citizen journalists communicate within a community: member-to-member, citizen-to-citizen, peer-to-peer. How they communicate is up to them, depending on the tools they have available and the freedom they have to use them. Most thriving citizen journalist activities are the result of successful viral marketing.

The biggest boon to citizen journalism came with the development of two historic events: The London subway bombing in July 2005 and the clampdown on news and information coming out of Iran after the presidential elections in June 2009. Citizens sent photos, videos and communications of all kinds from inside these events, many as they happened.

Their notoriety and usefulness were trumpeted every time a citizen-produced video or photo appeared on a major news outlet with the accompanying disclaimer from the on-air news person that “this video is coming to us from a citizen on the streets of Tehran...”

This proves that one of the best ways to market a product is to get it covered in the news. In this case, the product and the news were one and the same.

## *It is happening with no fixed standards for formation or construction*

Both broadcast and print media require journalists to conform to certain standards. Many use “The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual,” referred to as ‘the journalist’s bible.’ It outlines clear news writing standards by providing journalists with rules on grammar, spelling, punctuation and usage. It also provides writers with the correct names of organizations, when and how to use brand names, and more.

Other fixed standards are in place for traditional journalists.



# *Chapter 1 - Citizen Journalism is Happening*

Newspapers have specifications for size, space and format; broadcast news has requirements of performance and limitations of time.

Both broadcast and print journalism have high standards for sourcing, quoting, privacy, treatment of victims and minors, protections from libel, etc.

Citizen journalists, however, operate outside of all those restraints. Many are quite good at following the conventions of traditional journalism and produce a quality product. However, far too many put forth copy that is poorly written and inadequately sourced, and with errors in punctuation and grammar. Others produce poor quality videos with either no or limited post-production editing before they are posted on a variety of video websites, such as YouTube.

This failure to abide by the accepted standards and practices of the traditional media has brought considerable (and some justifiable) criticism of stories produced by citizen journalists. However, these critics go largely unnoticed by those passionately chasing their next story or operating outside the permission of an oppressive government.

## *It is happening because of wild innovation*

Citizen journalists are information innovators, digital publishing pioneers, news trailblazers who are cutting a new media swath into the 21st century. They are aggressive trendsetters, media revolutionaries at work transforming the way news is written, produced and delivered.

Some work with limited tools. When resources or the latest technology are not available, they innovate ways to get their message out. They do what they can with what they have and without restraint of word or limitation of technique. They are the “Nike of

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

News” – they just do it.

Some of their innovations include new ways of presenting information made possible by the Internet. For instance at [www.Bakersfield.com](http://www.Bakersfield.com), citizens are asked to mark the presence of potholes on a map. Maps can provide a tremendous amount of information on a large variety of places and activities, including nightlife, churches, beaches, banks, gangs, etc. Many are powered through the efforts of citizen journalists.

Citizen journalists use their strengths to tell their stories. An innovation coming from the movement is the concept of “charticles”



– the use of text, photos and graphics to tell stories. Citizen journalists gifted with graphic skills and equipped with the latest graphics-creating software can generate incredible graphic displays that often tell stories better than wordy articles.

Another innovation made possible by the Internet is what are called “search and learn exercises,” such as those available at [www.everyblock.com](http://www.everyblock.com). On this website, users can find out what’s happening on their block and make additional comments right on the website.

Knowledge networks are being formed by and for citizen journalists giving them ways to participate in the news as never before. The well-designed website, [www.greatlakeswiki.org](http://www.greatlakeswiki.org), seeks information about organizations and activities on and around the Great Lakes. Citizen journalists are invited to contribute news, and post articles, photos and videos about their activities.

Another knowledge-sharing website is [www.learningtofinish](http://www.learningtofinish).

## Chapter 1 - Citizen Journalism is Happening

org, a website funded by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change. This site fosters collaboration between parents, educators, community members, researchers and students to lower the dropout rate. Users can create new articles and edit existing ones in their efforts to come up with innovative solutions for educational challenges.

### *It is happening in response to a perceived need*

In early 2009, Randy Miller, the owner of the *Silverton* (Colorado) *Standard*, was searching for a buyer of his weekly paper. Unable to find one, he donated the paper to the San Juan County Historical Society. The Historical Society had not planned to be in the newspaper business; but the *Standard* was itself a historical newspaper, as it is the oldest newspaper in continuous operation on the western slope of Colorado.

On May 1, 2009, the board of directors of the Historical Society assumed ownership of the paper, and suddenly, a handful of citizens were in the newspaper business – not as reporters, but as owners. Not because they planned to be, but because they wanted to preserve the newspaper's presence in their community.

The only employee, Mark Esper, continues to be the editor and publisher. He operates the paper with the help of one part-time advertising sales person and a few volunteer citizen journalists.

Vietnam vet and town madcap, Freddie Canfield, is the paper's weather guy who submits a weekly weather observation. Deputy Sheriff Bruce Conrad submits photos of activities and events he deems newsworthy. Other citizens provide announcements of events and other news from time to time. "The word is out in Silverton and folks just send us the news," said Esper.

Some observers and participants of the demonstrations in the streets of Tehran, Iran, after the June 2009 presidential elec-

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

tions became citizen journalists. Not because they planned to, but because they were present when momentous events took place and they had a digital video camera or a cell phone camera. Some who knew how to post their observations on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook or other places on the Web had their work viewed by millions of people around the world.

In the Philippines, considered to be one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists, there is a sizeable movement to recruit and train citizen journalists to be watchdogs for elections. Citizens, who may have never considered being a reporter, are moved to action because they want to preserve the integrity of the electoral process.

The motivations for citizen journalists vary in degree and in style. The motivation can be as simple as a soccer mom wanting to tell the story of her son's soccer league play or as grandiose as a blogger who is out to change his world.

## *It is happening because the tools are available*

The people on the Titanic had plenty of time to broadcast news of what was happening as the ship went down; they just didn't have the technology. Wouldn't it have been great to have regular "tweets" from the Unsinkable Molly Brown as she found her way off of the Titanic into a lifeboat and later to the rescue ship?

Now with even the simplest cell phone, you can take a photo and have it available to viewers around the world within seconds. With some of the more advanced phones, you can upload rather high-quality video and post it on your Facebook page or link it through Twitter or upload it to uReport on FoxNews.com, iReport on CNN.com or a dozen other video hosting websites.

It's also simple. Even the technologically challenged can have,

## *Chapter 1 - Citizen Journalism is Happening*

with only a little coaching, their own blog where they can post articles, opinions, photos, videos and hyperlinks to other websites.

Even old-fashioned traditional publishing is done easier now than ever before. Today's writers and publishers can create documents on their computers and upload them to their commercial printer where they can be downloaded, printed and made ready for distribution within the hour or day.

This availability of user-friendly technology has given voice to the voiceless and armed the common man with a weapon to use in his fight for his freedom to be heard.

### *It is happening because of man's natural yearning to be free*

You may have read or sung the poem that is engraved on the Statue of Liberty. It was written by Emma Lazarus, an American Jew, and is titled The New Colossus. She wrote, "Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free."

This wonderful song of Lady Liberty is sung for many citizen journalists around the world who are "yearning to breathe free" - free from jackbooted government thugs trying to stop them from telling the world about serious breaches of human rights within their countries.

It is a declaration to all the oppressors and persecutors and tyrannical rulers of the world that every man, woman and child is born with an undeniable yearning for freedom. And this hunger for freedom is as natural to every human as the hunger for food because it is part and parcel of the human soul given to it by the Creator.

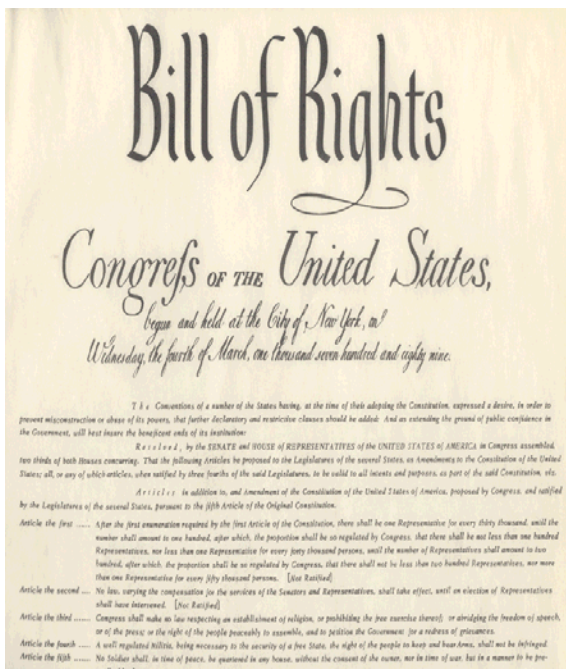
No wonder thousands - maybe hundreds of thousands - of citizen journalists willingly risk life, limb and property for the simple privilege of telling what's happening in their town.

# Handbook for Citizen Journalists

And for those of us blessed enough to be born in a land where freedom of the press is a given, citizen journalists are now writing, photographing and videotaping in an attempt to preserve that freedom.

Their work is important because a democracy depends on a free press for its preservation. If access to information is unavailable to the common voter, he or she cannot participate meaningfully in the process. If it is withheld because of censure by the government or by collusion of the government with the gatekeepers of news and information, a democracy may not survive.

Governments and a colluding media are not the only prob-



lems facing those attempting to preserve the freedom of the press. Economics also is a problem. Major media companies are consolidating their businesses, diversifying their investments and cutting their budgets. As audiences change and reading/viewing habits evolve, the quantity and quality of information available becomes more and more vulnerable to economic interests.

Here's where the citizen journalist enters with new tools

and new techniques. The barriers to entry into the media today are miniscule compared to those of decades past. No printing press or expensive studio equipment operated by trained professionals is necessary to get the message out.



# *Chapter 1 - Citizen Journalism is Happening*

As the marketplace of ideas and information expands, so does the likelihood of man's freedom.

## *Pay attention because it is happening*

We have covered some of the history of citizen journalism, but there is much more future to the movement than there is history. Citizen journalism is happening right now, even as you read these words.

Advancements in technology, changes in governmental controls, evolutions of communications systems and unforeseeable world-wide events are making citizen journalism impossible to keep up with. Some of what you have read in the previous paragraphs will be obsolete before this book goes to print.

It is not possible to adequately track this movement or to fully comprehend the scope of its influence, and that, we believe, is good.

## *Quote - End Quote*

“Media companies are merging to create ever-larger information and entertainment conglomerates. In too many cases serious journalism - and the public trust - continue to fall victim. All of this leaves a journalistic opening, and new journalists - especially citizen journalists - are filling the gap.”

- Dan Gillmor, “We the Media”

# Chapter 2

## Citizen Journalism - More Than a Passing Fad

“**T**he new interactive medium both threatens the status quo and promises an exciting new way of learning about the world,” wrote former Chicago Tribune Publisher Jack Fuller in his 1996 book “News Values.”

In this chapter, we will answer the question of whether citizen journalism is the fad of the hour or a full-fledged media revolution with lasting impact.

The short answer is, citizen journalism is here to stay. Why? Because newspapers continue to suffer catastrophic losses in both revenues and readers, and the broadcast media is now requesting stories from their viewers/listeners. So it appears to us that user-generated media is much more than a passing fancy or temporary distraction.



# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

Here are six reasons why citizen journalists will continually increase their presence and influence throughout the decades:

## ***Reason #1: Citizen journalists are hyperlocal***

The work-products of citizen journalists that are the most talked about are the videos or photos that get uploaded to and used by major media news outlets, such as those sent to the BBC by victims of the subway bombings of July 2005 and those uploaded by brave citizen journalists during the riots that followed the Iranian elections in mid-2009.

But these represent only a small portion of the work produced by citizen journalists around the world. In neighborhoods, villages, towns and cities with little or no news coverage, people are using the Internet and a variety of web-based tools to keep their fellow citizens informed about local events and to preserve or create a sense of community.

A good example of hyperlocal news websites and the quality work of citizen journalists is an online monthly journal called *Rye Reflections*, published by and for the approximately 5,000 citizens of Rye, N.H., at [www.RyeReflections.org](http://www.RyeReflections.org). It is operated by a group of volunteers who meet every Thursday in the basement of the Rye Library. According to the ad on the Town of Rye's website, volunteers who can write, edit and photograph are continually being sought – no experience necessary.

At this writing, the *Rye Reflections'* front page carried stories on the following: a farmers' market, a 4-H project that morphed into a goat business, Rye's selectmen holding half of their meetings behind closed doors, a profile on a local World War II veteran and a historical piece about the arrival of Spanish prisoners in Rye more than 111 years ago.

## *Chapter 2 - Citizen Journalism - More Than a Fad*

The same thing is happening in every country in the world. For example, India has a dynamic and growing cadre of citizen journalists. Jagannath Jha, a professional software developer and citizen journalist, wrote a story in late 2009 about villages in Bihar, India, that were about to get some needed animal shelters. It is certainly not a story that has any interest to people outside of the state of Bihar.

However, Jha's story is important to the villagers who will get the state-paid-for shelters because, according to the article, the 28 districts that will receive funds are affected by floods, and the shelters will make a significant difference in the lives of ordinary citizens. The story was posted on [www.merineews.com](http://www.merineews.com), a portal for Indian citizen journalists.

This new civic media is creating a whole new way people get their news. It's more of a conversation than anything else. It is comparable to two neighbors talking over the back fence, "Did you hear what the county commissioners did last night? Well I was there and this is what happened." And a conversation is begun. Many stories unravel over a period of time with a variety of postings that correct or amplify on the original posting.

Unlike traditional newspaper formulas, hyperlocal news websites feel no need to meet hard deadlines or publish on any particular schedule. Some of the items that hyperlocal websites cover are considered by professional journalists to be more gossip than news. Their complaint is well taken, and from the subjects posted on [RyeReflections.org](http://RyeReflections.org), you can see why some call it a fusion of news and schmooze.

However, those who post hyperlocal news items are not concerned with or constrained by long-standing journalistic conventions practiced by traditional journalists. They just want to tell what is happening in their own words and in their own time, and they do.

# Handbook for Citizen Journalists

As average citizens become directly engaged in issues impacting their daily lives, many John and Jane Doe journalists are being created. This kind of citizen involvement at the most local level ensures the long-term presence of citizen journalists.

## *Reason #2: Citizen journalists are narrowly focused*

Just as the *Rye Reflections* isn't interested in what's happening in Kittery Point or Little Boar's Head, most citizen journalists' efforts are narrowly focused; most are not news generalists - they are news specialists. Most don't provide their viewers/readers with a compendium of the day's or week's news, but rather take a more comprehensive look at the news of a particular geographic area or subject. They

select an area where they have special knowledge and interest, and blog or publish about it.

An example of this kind of focus can be found at [www.vocalminority.typepad.com](http://www.vocalminority.typepad.com) where a blogger, a Reform Jew who goes by the name of Eric the Red, says he is "fed up with



the destructive behavior of today's Democrats" and publishes news and commentary about "the fate of the Jewish people in the U.S. and Israel." His site is well developed, frequently updated and is full of links to other websites.

Sportsblog.org is another entry in the specialty news category where sports fans are provided with a front page full of links and ads related to every imaginable sport. The "About" page asks: "Tired of the usual coverage the media gives your sport/team?" Then it goes on

## ***Chapter 2 - Citizen Journalism - More Than a Fad***

to describe how readers can keep up-to-date on their favorite sports team “from the local fan’s perspective.”

The site claims that most of the content it provides “is actually written by average Joe who is so passionate about the team/sport that they write about it in their free time.” The operators of the website believe that the average Joe can provide enthusiastic coverage of his or her favorite team.

Neither vocal minority nor sportsblog will ever post any news that does not fit into their niche. The readers and advertisers of vocal minority would be shocked if suddenly Eric the Red started posting baseball box scores. And the fans of sportsblog would be startled if they started seeing stories about the problem of worldwide Jewish oppression.

On a more local level, you can find websites owned and operated by local citizens focusing on subjects that they are passionate about, whether it be knitting or knives, choirs or compost, mountain climbing or climbing hydrangea. The number of highly-focused, passionate website owners and bloggers worldwide is literally uncountable and undocumentable.

What will stop Eric the Red, the guys at sportsblog.com and the millions of other citizen bloggers, writers and photographers passionate about their subject matter from publishing the news they think is important? In most cases, only an act of God would drive them off the Internet.

### ***Reason #3: Citizen journalists are exceptionally persistent***

Citizen journalists can be more fixated in their pursuit of stories than either print or broadcast journalists. While the traditional media suffers from deadlines and viewer/reader competitions, citizen journalists suffer from obsessive-compulsive tendencies and the

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

ability to eschew profits or even audience in favor of the story. Citizen journalists have broken important news stories simply because they didn't quit.

A group of serious vegans (people who endeavor not to use or consume animal products of any kind) heard that several Los Angeles vegan restaurants were using food contaminated with animal by-products. A blog dedicated to animal rights ([www.quarrygirl.com](http://www.quarrygirl.com)) decided to do some investigative journalism.

The vegans made a plan, gathered supplies, sent out investigators, gathered evidence and then tested the evidence to prove which vegan restaurants were truly vegan and which were not. They tested for common non-vegan ingredients such as eggs, casein (a component of milk) and shellfish.

Their effort took time, money and logistical planning, but they figured if they could test their evidence using accepted scientific testing standards, they could break some real news, especially for vegan purists who want no animal by-products in their food whatsoever.

Their persistent efforts proved that many L.A. vegan restaurants actually scored quite well and only a couple of them had what the vegans considered to be an overload of meat by-products.

These citizen journalists were biased in their viewpoint, but they performed a scientifically serious examination of food from restaurants and let the unbiased scientific results tell the true story. It is an example of persistent citizen journalism at its best.

You can read the full story with all their evidence at [www.quarrygirl.com/2009/06/28/undercover-investigation-of-la-area-vegan-restaurants/](http://www.quarrygirl.com/2009/06/28/undercover-investigation-of-la-area-vegan-restaurants/)

## ***Reason #4: Citizen journalists are technologically savvy***

Today's grassroots journalists are using the latest user-friendly technology that is either inexpensive or free, and their stories are



## Chapter 2 - Citizen Journalism - More Than a Fad

immediately accessible to readers, listeners or viewers. No one in the traditional media has yet been able to create news in the new digital form in a way that makes financial sense, though many are experimenting with new business models.

The problem for the traditional media is that technological changes are happening at a breakneck speed. Change is happening so fast that no one is able to keep up with all the new ways to communicate. By the time one software program is purchased, learned and implemented, it is obsolete. Purchase a new computer or cell phone and it is out of date before you know it.

Rapid technological advances are real problems for many people in the traditional media. People who work for years within a long-established proven business model will resist changes that threaten their business or profession.

If you want some proof, read the angst concerning the uncertain future of the traditional media expressed by city editors, network broadcast journalists and journalism school professors. They are bewildered by rapid changes within their profession that have created sudden and numerous job losses, and imply a possible demise of their noble profession. They have a right to be worried.

There are many opinions as to why the mainstream media is losing readers and viewers, and why newspapers are closing and broadcast news organizations are laying off professionals. One reason is patently clear: today's technology is leaving them in the dust.

The 175-year-old *Eagle Times* in Claremont, N.H., filed for bankruptcy in July 2009. The news article about the closing said the paper's 100 employees were given their last paychecks and told their health insurance would be good until the end of the month. One employee mourned the fact that the Chapter 7 bankruptcy laws required immediate closure and gave the staff no opportunity to say goodbye

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

to the paper's 8,000 readers.

No doubt the owners and employees were proud to work for a newspaper with such a rich heritage, and it's a shame the paper had to close. However, the rich heritage had nothing to do with the delivery of the news to today's consumer.

It is likely that Claremont already has a variety of citizens who are creating websites, writing blogs, sending tweets, forwarding emails, creating podcasts, posting on Facebook and MySpace, and doing other things to keep each other informed about local business, politics, sports and other important activities.

And they are probably doing it without an enormous printing press, a ton or so of newsprint, drums of ink, multiple phone lines, a circulation department, an editorial staff and an advertising sales department. They are doing it with the efforts of a few concerned citizens - not the 100 newspaper employees that added up to an insupportable cost of operation.

## *Reason #5: Citizen journalists are remarkably ubiquitous*

Citizen journalists are everywhere. The granddaddy of all citizen journalist websites, [www.ohmynews.com](http://www.ohmynews.com) in South Korea, boasts more than 70,000 registered citizen journalists. In this small country, citizen journalists will be seen and heard, and their influence will be noteworthy.

Brave Iranian citizen journalists uploaded videos and still photos of government troops beating and even killing protestors of the reelection of President Ahmadinejad in June 2009. The government was able to shut down the mainstream media, but it couldn't stop the work of citizen journalists who were all over the place telling the brutal story to the world.

In the United States, *The Huffington Post* recruited more than

## Chapter 2 - Citizen Journalism - More Than a Fad

12,000 citizen journalists to snoop out stories during the 2008 elections. More recently, *The Post* called for its more than 13,000 citizen journalists to start “liveblogging the lobbyists” about health care reform.

Similar initiatives are being pursued with other projects. After only a month into its inception in 2009, ProPublica’s adopt a stimulus project had attracted more than 1,000 citizen journalists to do stories on how the economic stimulus money was being spent.

On a more local level, *The Denver Post* in Colorado published a citizen journalist’s photo of a tornado in Elbert County on its front page on June 16, 2009. The fabulous photo of the 100-yard-wide tornado was taken by Darrel Watson, who lives just west of Elbert. He could be on the scene with a camera as the tornado appeared, while professional journalists couldn’t reach the area until after the fact.

Another Denver example occurred during the early morning hours of Dec. 26, 2009, when numerous accidents were reported on an icy stretch of I-25 near Hampden Avenue. The first photos to make the news broadcast were shot by citizens who were caught in the pile-up and uploaded their photographs to several news stations.



If your community is average, your local city council or county school board has long had a direct relationship with the local news media; they know each other quite well. Sometimes the relationship is positive, sometimes it is negative, but it is always well defined. They have learned how to deal with each other to satisfy each of their needs.

And the system worked effectively until the media could no

## *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

longer afford to or were no longer interested in sending reporters to meetings to sit for hours and listen to politicians discuss matters that were not considered newsworthy.

Some city councils, water boards, county commissioners, zoning committees, etc., have been meeting without the presence of the watchdog media. But with the advent of citizen journalism, this is changing.

It was a citizen journalist with a cell phone who captured candidate Barack Obama telling supporters about residents of small town America who have been unemployed for a while saying, “And it’s not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.” Because of citizen journalists, public officials in meetings where the public is invited can no longer know for certain which member of the audience is a citizen journalist, but they better assume that at least one of them is.

Now in greater numbers than ever before, ordinary citizens who have the time, inquisitiveness and civic concern are attending these kinds of meetings and writing about them on their websites, blogs or Twitter accounts. Some are using cell phones and BlackBerries to post news, videos and photos as things happen – almost in real time.

The old days of the friendly, mutually beneficial and sometimes incestuous relationship between politicians and celebrities and the press has changed forever. Now, present in any audience at any venue, there may be a citizen journalist armed with a digital camera, cell phone camera or digital recorder ready to broadcast recorded remarks or report outrageous antics to the whole world via YouTube, Facebook or Twitter.

## *Chapter 2 - Citizen Journalism - More Than a Fad*

### *Reason #6: Citizen journalists are personally passionate*

Citizen journalists are passionate about two things: their specialty and freedom of the press.

First of all, citizen journalists are personally passionate about their specialty.

Citizen journalists are not like the beat reporter compelled by a city editor to cover the happenings at an obscure county government meeting. Citizen journalists are motivated by something more important than an 8 p.m. deadline or a few more inches of byline copy.

They have within them a compelling emotional call to do what they do. That so-called “obscure county government meeting” may have a profound economic impact on a particular group of people – and those people don’t consider it obscure at all. They consider it important that the deliberations be reported.

In most cases, citizen journalists know a great deal about a particular subject or are zealous about a certain cause or activity, and they want to tell others. So they work hard, sacrifice time and invest their own hard-earned money to spread the news about their passion.

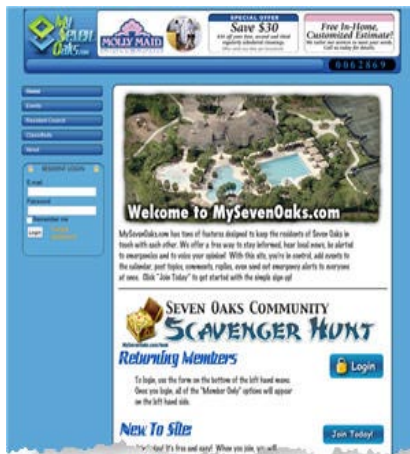
Check out the personal websites or the public postings of almost any citizen journalist and you will find behind their words and pictures a deep passion to make known to others the events they cover.

Citizen journalists’ passions can be seen as they cover such subjects as the Downtown Rotary Club or the John Kennedy Charter School or the mission trips of the Crossroads Church or the exciting Saturday soccer games of the Panda Bears – an 8-year-old girls’ soccer team.

“Why in the world do you do this?” someone once asked a citizen journalist who was taking a great deal of time and effort to post

# Handbook for Citizen Journalists

community news on her website that had very few real visitors and produced no income for her. Her answer expressed the single greatest motivation that anyone will ever have to do anything that takes personal time and sacrifice, “I do it because I want to.”



Passion powers people to do things that fame or fortune will not.

Secondly, citizen journalists also are passionate about freedom of the press.

The American Revolution produced many notable newsmen who wrote passionately in support of independence and who injected into their writings the idea of a free press. Many of their writings helped

develop the press freedoms that were written into the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

That is why the United States has been the world leader for press freedom for more than 200 years. The U.S. press earned the title of the “Fourth Estate” because it positioned itself as a watchdog over the government.

This privileged press status is not unique to the U.S. even though a majority of the world’s governments are just the opposite: watchdogs of the press. Journalists in two-thirds of the nations live in fear of censorship, restraint of publication, closure of press facilities, economic and ethical pressures, imprisonment and even execution.

According to a study released in May 2009 by Freedom House, a human rights organization that has been fighting tyranny around the world since 1941, journalists faced “an increasingly grim working environment in 2008, with global press freedom declining for a seventh straight year and deterioration occurring for the first time

## *Chapter 2 - Citizen Journalism - More Than a Fad*

in every region.” The study revealed twice as many losses as gains in press freedom in 2008 with notable declines in East Asia. Of special interest to citizen journalists is the finding that campaigns of intimidation targeting independent media are being waged in the former Soviet Union and the Middle East and North Africa.

The survey found that only 17 percent of the world’s population lives in countries that enjoy a free press. Of the 195 countries and territories covered in the study, 70 (36 percent) are rated ‘free,’ 61 (31 percent) are rated ‘partly free’ and 64 (33 percent) are rated ‘not free.’ This represents a modest decline from the survey released in 2008, in which 72 countries and territories were ‘free,’ 59 ‘partly free’ and 64 ‘not free.’

What do governments do to control the press? According to [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org), three things: they consolidate control, use violence and impunity, and create oppressive laws.

The report said that authoritarian regimes are increasingly consolidating control of the media. In the last five years, independent media outlets shrunk significantly in countries like Russia, Ethiopia and The Gambia.

Governments and non-state hooligans also use violence and physical harassment to frighten members of the media into silence, all without any fear of arrest or conviction. Many violent acts against members of the media go unsolved and therefore have a chilling effect, contributing to self-censorship.

Another way governments and private individuals continue to restrict media freedom is through laws that forbid “inciting hatred,” commenting on sensitive topics such as religion or ethnicity, or “endangering national security.” Libel and defamation laws remain a widespread way to punish the press.

There was a slight bit of good news in the Freedom House’s report.

## *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

It included an Internet freedom index, which revealed that new media outlets, such as bloggers and citizen journalists, are often freer than traditional media and have the potential to help open the more repressive media environments, such as China and Iran. However, as the new media gains influence, governments are beginning to crack down on Internet users by employing traditional means of repression.

Thomas Jefferson said, “Freedom of the press is one of the great bulwarks of liberty, and can never be restrained but by a despotic government.”

And it is truly amazing what governments will do to stop the world from discovering what they do behind closed doors. Even town councils and school boards in little towns can become despotic and try to hide their actions from the press.

On June 16, 2009, former CBS News Anchor Dan Rather wrote, “The proliferation of information technology and the phenomenon of citizen journalism have made it much harder now to turn the lights out than it was two decades ago.... It is too soon to know or to say how the situation in Iran will turn out, but there are lessons in this for our own country, for a democratic system more fragile than we at times like to believe. One of these lessons is the centrality of freedom of the press to the entire enterprise of democratic government: You cannot have one without the other. And the other is the lesson that citizen journalism is a way for the people to hold on to freedom of the press, even in times of oppression. In a turn of phrase that seems to be cropping up everywhere, the revolution may not be televised...but it very well could be Twittered.”

Citizen journalists believe that the best way to protect the public interest is for the sun to shine on all aspects of government. And



## *Chapter 2 - Citizen Journalism - More Than a Fad*

the second best way to protect the public interest is to get the public involved in the process, to get them involved in their communities by empowering them to write, produce and publish news about people and events that impact their daily lives. All they ask for is the freedom to do it.

But this freedom is not free and will need to be defended. Gillmor wrote about the challenge in “We the Media:”

“In short, we cannot just assume that self-publishing from the edges of our networks – the grassroots journalism we need so desperately – will survive, much less thrive. We will need to defend it, with the same vigor we defend our other liberties.” “

### *So is citizen journalism here to stay or is it just a passing fad?*

In the same book referenced above, Gillmor wrote: “This is tomorrow’s journalism, a partnership of sorts between professionals and the legions of gifted amateurs out there who can help us figure things out. It’s a positive development, and we’re still figuring out how it works.”

Few are as well informed about citizen journalism as Gillmor so we think he would agree that a half-decade after his book was written that citizen journalism has become today’s journalism and most of the citizens involved are quite successful at figuring it out as they go.

When the Founders wrote the First Amendment and included freedom of the press, none of them could have imagined massive printing presses, busy newsrooms, diligent reporters, high-tech television studios populated with blow-dried anchor persons frightened about their overnight Nielsen ratings. And they had no idea that enormously powerful publishing and broadcasting conglomerates with worldwide news outlets or 24-hour cable news stations would

## *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

ever emerge.

They were focused on the freedom of the people to watch what happens in their communities and to write about it and to publish what they write with impunity - with absolutely no fear that any government official, whether local, regional or national, will demand to edit, approve or otherwise inhibit the process. They were thinking about freedom.

The same fervor for freedom lies in the hearts of citizen journalists around the world. They are bravely reclaiming that freedom, whether guaranteed to them by a constitution or reclaimed by them despite the threat of life and limb. They are creating a civic media that is built with a new design that emphasizes citizen participation. What's so exciting is that the model can be adapted for every city, town and village around the world.

Our conclusion: Citizen journalists are not just threatening the status quo of the traditional media, they are changing the status.

# Chapter 3

## Why be a Journalist?

If you're seeking wealth and fame, journalism might not be your best choice. No one enters the field to get rich, and only a few ever become famous.

An entry-level journalist will barely earn enough to survive if a job is even available in today's shrinking journalism job market. Even experienced beat reporters don't live in the rich part of town. The only people receiving truly handsome wages in the news media today are celebrity journalists seen on network and cable television news stations.

Fame is also elusive for most journalists. Only a few become as renowned as Bob



# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the two *Washington Post* reporters who broke the story of the Watergate break-ins in the 1970s. Their front-page articles were responsible for President Richard Nixon's resignation.

But what other famous journalists can you name? They will likely be those who read the news on the nightly half-hour network television news broadcasts or who present the news or wag their opinions on one of the 24-hour cable news channels. Most people cannot name the editor of the local newspaper they've been reading for the last decade.

The point is wealth and fame are hard to come by in the field of journalism, just like they are in many professions. Over the years, thousands of dedicated journalists have worked with integrity and grace while receiving modest pay and little or no recognition. Their constant adherence to the ethics of their profession, the quality of their work and the generosity of their service to their communities have gone largely unnoticed.

So why would anyone want to become a journalist? Because journalism is an exciting and significant career that attracts people with certain characteristics.

## *Journalists have an insatiable curiosity*

Journalists have a unique opportunity to explore important issues. Throughout their careers, they will develop an understanding of how governments, businesses, organizations, economies and decision makers function. The more curious the journalist, the more successful he or she will be.

## *Journalists are skeptical without being cynical*

When journalists see a fire, they will wonder if it was arson. If they hear a sheriff explain the actions of a deputy, they will seek answers to additional questions. When a journalist sees a politician having lunch

## Chapter 3 - Why be a Journalist?

with a powerful businessperson, it makes him or her wonder which one is benefiting the most from the encounter.

### *Journalists have a nose for news*

Journalists are able to discern the important from the exciting and the serious from the frivolous. This requires resourcefulness, thoroughness, tenacity and a grasp of reality.



### *Journalists become insiders*

Journalists acquire interesting and important inside information on events and individuals and with greater context than those in other professions. They know the story behind the story.

### *Journalists enjoy a challenge*

Journalists often find themselves in situations where they are not welcome or in the presence of individuals or organizations that want to suppress certain information. This requires them to match wits with powerful forces and individuals to get the story and get it right.

### *Journalists want to inform people*

Journalists are sources of public information. Consumers depend on journalists to help them understand and organize their world by providing context and clarity concerning the events that are happening around them.

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

## *Journalists are not afraid to seek the truth*

Journalists have a strong desire to seek the truth and are willing to do research and meticulous fact checking before they write a story. Journalists have the ability to set aside their own prejudices and presuppositions in their pursuit of the truth.

## *Journalists know how to write*

Journalists love their notepad and keyboard because they represent the starting place of their labor. They love subjects, predicates, adverbs and adjectives that make up each sentence and paragraph they write. They love the flow of a thoroughly sourced and clearly told story.

## *Journalists like to see their name in print, voice on the air or face on television*

Every profession has its appeal to the ego; so does journalism. The



byline to a journalist is like a “sold” sign to a real estate agent; it is the symbol of success. Journalists are energized when they see their article published with their name as the byline.

## *Journalists know the importance of reliable and accurate information for the preservation of a vibrant democracy*

Journalists understand that the primary goal of journalism is to inform the public. They are convinced that a well-informed citizenry is necessary for a democracy to function.

Here’s the bottom line: When journalism is done right, people are informed, lives are changed, the power elites are held accountable, ignorance is diminished, creativity is cultivated, problems are solved and freedom is preserved.

## *Chapter 3 - Why be a Journalist?*

It is our firm belief that journalism is much more than a job or profession. It is a calling. It is calling you, or you would not have picked up this handbook.

Turn the page and answer 10 questions designed to help you determine if you have what it takes to be a successful journalist.

### **How does this apply to you? Score yourself.**

- Yes  No  1. Do you have an insatiable curiosity?
- Yes  No  2. Can you be skeptical without being cynical?
- Yes  No  3. Do you have a nose for news?
- Yes  No  4. Does becoming an insider appeal to you?
- Yes  No  5. Do you enjoy a challenge?
- Yes  No  6. Do you want to inform people?
- Yes  No  7. Are you willing to seek the truth wherever it takes you?
- Yes  No  8. Do you know how to write or are you willing to learn?
- Yes  No  9. Does seeing your name as a byline, hearing your voice on the air or seeing your face on television appeal to you?
- Yes  No  10. Do you believe that reliable and accurate information is essential for the preservation of a vibrant democracy?



# Chapter 4

## The Similarities and Differences Between Citizen Journalists and Professional Journalists

**W**henever a profession is challenged by amateurs, the pros get concerned. Many worry that citizen journalism will ultimately disenfranchise trained professionals.

We do not know what will happen to professional journalism throughout the 2000s. We do know that at this point in time, there are both similarities and differences between citizen journalists and professional journalists that are worthy of discussion.



# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

## *The Differences:*

### *Numbers*

No one knows the number of citizen journalists around the world, however, it is believed they significantly outnumber professional journalists. There are so many bloggers, citizen-operated news websites, Photobucket photographers, Twitter reporters and YouTube videographers that no one can count them.

### *Training*

Although numbers may result in a large quantity of news, it does not insure a good quality – training does. When it comes to training, there are substantial differences.

Professional journalists are trained in a variety of disciplines (research, interviewing, news writing, sourcing, etc.). Most major universities offer degrees in journalism that are earned by four or more years of study. You can earn a bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees in journalism.

Most citizen journalists are self-taught in the skills necessary to be effective news writers. Some take a few courses in a community college where they learn the fundamentals of journalism and then just start writing.

Those energetic self-taught and entrepreneurial types who, to borrow a term from Nike, just do it, are very special people. They are the ones filling the gap, writing the news and getting the job done.

Even so, their work-product is often sub-par, and it attracts substantial and often legitimate criticism from professional editors, reporters and consumers.

Unfortunately, you can't learn to write the news by reading a book on journalism. There is no "How to Be a Journalist in Five Easy

# Chapter 4 - Similarities and Differences

Lessons” course for you to take. Even this Handbook for Citizen Journalists is inadequate in and of itself.

Fortunately, journalism is not nuclear science. A mistake by a journalist has much less chance of doing serious damage than a mistake by an airline pilot. A journalist’s errors can be corrected in the next edition, or by updating a blog or an Internet site while an airline pilot’s mistakes might have to be buried.

Journalism is a set of learned skills and values that when universally applied to all areas of news gathering and reporting will result in a product that will achieve the purpose of the profession – whether practiced by professionals or average citizens.

University-level training provided by the National Association of Citizen Journalists is designed to equip NACJ members with the skills necessary and the values needed to grow into a valuable news source for their community.

## Editorial oversight

Professional journalists do their work under the supervision of editors who decide what stories to run and art to use. They edit the copy of their reporters and determine the importance and placement of each story in the newspaper or on the broadcast.

Most citizen journalists work without any editor telling them which story to pursue, which photo to use, which person to talk to, which facts are relevant, which quote to employ or which words are appropriate.

The image shows a page from a technical document, likely a Linux kernel source file, with extensive handwritten annotations in red ink. The document title is "Elementary TCP Sockets". The annotations include:

- At the top, a table with columns for "IPv4" and "IPv6" and rows for "IP address" and "TCP or UDP port".
- Handwritten notes: "calling host without specifying either the IP address or port is one way to avoid a firewall" and "the kernel does not".
- Text: "based on route required to reach the server (p. 737 of TCP/IPv2). If a TCP server does not bind an IP address to its socket, the kernel uses the destination IP address of the client's SYN as the server's source IP address (p. 943 of TCP/IPv2)." with a note "where is normally".
- Text: "The constant INADDR\_ANY (whose value is 0) specifies that the kernel is to choose the IP address. We saw the use of this in Figure 1.2 with the assignment `serv_addr.sin_addr.s_addr = htonl(INADDR_ANY);`" with a note "is normally".
- Text: "While this works with IPv4, where an IP address is a 32-bit value that can be represented as a simple numeric constant, we cannot use this technique with IPv6, since the 128-bit IPv6 address is stored in a structure. (There is no way in C to represent a constant structure on the right hand side of an assignment.) To solve this problem, we write" followed by code: 

```
struct sockaddr_in serv;
network struct sockaddr_in *serv_addr;
serv.sin_addr = htonl(0);
```
- Text: "The system allocates and initializes the `serv_addr` variable." with a note "cast to 0".
- Text: "Notice that the value 0 is the same in either network or host byte order, so the use of `htonl` with `INADDR_ANY` is not really required. But since the `INADDR_` constants are defined in host byte order in the `netinet/in.h` header, we should use `htonl` with any of these constants." with a note "we specify either".
- Text: "The `bind` function fills in the local-side and local-process elements of the association tuple. Note that `bind` does not return these values in the case of the kernel choosing an ephemeral port number, for example. If we call `bind` with a port number of 0, and then want to know what ephemeral port the kernel assigned, we must call `getsockname` to return the protocol address." with a note "we specify either".
- Text: "There are two common reasons for a process to bind a nonwildcard IP address to a socket." with a note "instead, it cannot return them since the second argument has to be const sockaddr".
- List item: "1. A firewall gateway [Cherwick and Belloni 1994] is misconfigured with one" with a note "instead, it cannot return them since the second argument has to be const sockaddr".
- Text: "If we tell the kernel to choose either the IP address or port, note that the current value of the IP address and port assigned to a socket are returned by the `getsockname` function [Eric...]" with a note "instead, it cannot return them since the second argument has to be const sockaddr".

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

This independence is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because the citizen journalist is not forced to do a story he or she does not want to do because of deadline pressures, nor is the citizen journalist pulled off a story because it might impact advertising revenues or offend powerful people.

It is a weakness because the citizen journalist does not have the wisdom of experience and history that an editor brings to a story, nor does he or she have the ability to edit – that is, to correct, to tidy up, to significantly improve his or her own work.

Some citizen journalists think that submitting their work to an editor is an insult to their writing skills and an infringement on their freedom. A newsroom editor may indeed be a “gatekeeper” who tells a reporter that the story isn’t fit to print or that it does not meet the newspaper’s news needs at the moment so the story is killed. But an editor also is the person who points out the fallacy of an argument, the falsity of a “fact,” the misuse of a pronoun or the misspelling of a word.

## *Remuneration*

While the pay for professional journalists isn’t that great, the pay for citizen journalists is even less – often nil. Citizen journalists are, in most cases, unpaid volunteers who do the hard work no one else will do.

Some citizen journalists have found ways to monetize their work, but that effort in and of itself, is a distraction from what they really want to do – find the news, write the truth and inform the public.

The National Association of Citizen Journalists will help find ways for citizen journalists to be paid for their work by sharing success stories of other citizen journalists with their fellow members.

## *Chapter 4 - Similarities and Differences*

### *The similarities*

#### *Driving forces*

There should be no difference in the driving forces motivating a professional or citizen journalist: truth matters; information is important; freedom is essential.

#### *Common values*

Citizen journalists should own the long-accepted values of good journalism. Just as a high school football team must abide by the nearly identical rules as a professional football team, so must a citizen journalist abide by the rules of good journalism. The integrity of the game is at stake at all levels.

#### *Importance of the task*

There is also no difference in what is at stake. The free flow of information must not be inhibited because of laws, economic conditions, changing technologies or failing systems. Yet they are all happening at the same time.

Laws are being proposed to restrict free speech, economic conditions have caused cutbacks in news media budgets and have resulted in the closing of some great newspapers, and changing technologies have altered the way the news is produced and delivered. As old business models fail, creative thought is being given to new production and distribution methods.

#### *Common mission*

So whether a professional journalist with a graduate degree in journalism or a citizen journalist with a heart to do something important for society, the mission is the same: find the story - write

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

the truth – inform the public.

## *The real difference*

Many bloggers and citizen journalists have created a post or published an inaccurate report. But trained and experienced professional journalists have also provided consumers with a variety of well-documented bad journalism. “60 Minutes” broadcast a report on President Bush’s National Guard service that was immediately discredited. *Newsweek* had to retract its account of American interrogators at Guantanamo Bay flushing a Quran down the toilet – a mistake that cost some people their lives. Even *The New York Times* has had its embarrassing moments, including its problems with Jayson Blair, who was criticized for continual errors and for plagiarism before he resigned in May of 2003.

We believe that it is possible too many people are applying the wrong preamble to the term “journalism.” The question should not be: What is the difference between professional journalism and citizen journalism? The questions should deal with quality of the product, not the producer.

We propose the question should be: “What is the difference between good journalism and bad journalism?” In the 21st century, consumers want reliable information and they will take it from whatever source they deem most trustworthy.

# Chapter 5

## The Three Categories of Citizen Journalists

**T**he National Association of Citizen Journalists makes a distinction between accidental journalists, advocacy citizen journalists and citizen journalists. Just because someone uses a cell phone camera to photograph an incident and then uploads it to Flickr or Facebook, it does not make that person a citizen journalist. Just because somebody has a blog and bloats about his or her favorite subject, it should not be misconstrued that the individual is a citizen journalist.



# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

## *Accidental Journalists*

Accidental journalists are people who are caught unexpectedly in the middle of an event and take photos or videos and upload them to either social networking websites such as Facebook, MySpace or Twitter, or news websites such as CNN's iReport or Fox News' uReport.

Here are some examples of accidental journalists:

### *Flight 1549 witness*

Janis Krums from Sarasota, Fla., is reportedly the first person to post a photo of the U.S. Airways Flight 1549 that landed in the Hudson River in mid-January of 2009. Only 34 minutes after Krums posted his photo on Twitter, MSNBC interviewed him live on TV as a witness.

### *Witnesses and victims of the London suicide bombers*

On July 7, 2005, a series of coordinated suicide bombs were unleashed in four different parts of the UK transport system during rush hour, killing 52 innocent people and four British-born Muslim extremists, and injuring 700 people.

BBC News Director Helen Boaden said 50 photographs and video clips taken with mobile phones arrived in the first hour of the blasts. Within 24 hours of the attacks, the BBC had received 100 stills and videos, 3,000 texts and 20,000 emails. In the days that followed the bombing, about 3,000 people posted still and video images to a site called [www.Moblog.net](http://www.Moblog.net). Boaden said the London Tube bombings brought the realization that "news gathering had changed forever."

### *Witnesses and victims of the Virginia Tech shootings*

Students with cell phone cameras on the scene provided most of



## *Chapter 5 - Three Categories of Citizen Journalists*

the eyewitness images of the Virginia Tech shootings in April of 2007 when 33 people, including the gunman, died. Their images went to blogs, Twitter, Flickr, photo collections and a variety of other websites.

Jamal Albarghouti, a graduate student, supplied CNN with video of the shootings taken with his cell phone. The sounds of multiple shots could be heard on the video. CNN had an entire slide show of eyewitness photographs on its website.

### *Calling accidental journalists citizen journalists is a mistake*

The Fort Hood murders on Nov. 5, 2009, made famous a soldier by the name of Tera Moore. She was inside the hospital where some of the Fort Hood shooting victims were taken. From her vantage point, she tweeted minute-by-minute reports and sent photos as the wounded passed by.

Some criticized her for making the reports. She was disparaged for getting some of her facts wrong, and some critics say that she should have either gotten out of the way or set down her cell phone and helped out. Many think she never should have pointed her cell phone camera at the victims and then uploaded them to the Internet.

Some of the critics have used Moore's tweets as an opportunity to criticize citizen journalism. But Moore was neither a journalist nor a citizen journalist, as the nature of her tweets have revealed. Her tweets were only what she intended them to be – her immediate reactions to the horror she was witnessing. She was only a citizen who happened to be on the spot where news was happening and she shared what she saw with a few people who followed her on Twitter. That's not journalism of any kind.

And for those who criticized Moore for getting her facts wrong,

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

give her a break. She probably got her information from the cable news outlets that were, at about the same time, broadcasting, “the Fort Hood shooter is dead.” In the midst of the pandemonium of the moment, even trained and experienced professional journalists sometimes get the facts wrong.

## *Accidental journalists are not citizen journalists*

Some think these were landmark events for citizen journalism. We don’t agree with that conclusion. Few, if any, of those who tweet-ed, blogged or uploaded photos or videos at these events did it as an act of journalism.

They did it because they could; the technology to do so was clipped to their belt or residing in their purse. They simply got out their tool and started shooting or texting or tweeting the events as they saw them happen. They knew something significant was occurring, and they wanted others to know about it. They were accidental journalists – or to use more ancient terminology – eyewitnesses.

Accidental journalists are not citizen journalists because, in most cases, they had no expectation that they would ever provide photos, videos or eyewitness reports of any event to any news entity. But once trapped or in sight of a significant event, they took action and committed what many are now calling random acts of journalism. For most accidental journalists, their first appearance as a “journalist” is also their last.

## *Citizen Advocacy Journalists*

Advocacy journalism is a genre of journalism that adopts a viewpoint for the sake of advocating on behalf of a social, political, business or religious purpose. It is journalism with an intentional and transparent bias.

## Chapter 5 - Three Categories of Citizen Journalists

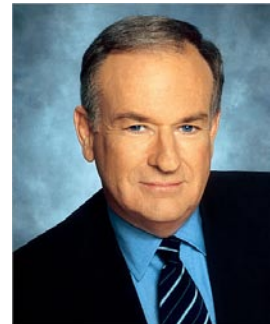
What makes it journalism instead of propaganda is the use of supportable, independently verifiable facts that support the presuppositions of the writer, publication, blog or website.

Regular news reporters attempt to apply objectivity to their reporting. Their biases are supposed to be set aside so they can present the facts to the reader. Advocacy journalists, on the other hand, admit their biases to their audience and freely write or speak their opinions.

Here are some examples of advocacy journalists:

### *Bill O'Reilly*

The singularly most listened to advocacy journalist on cable TV is Bill O'Reilly. Although he has a hard news background, he is now an advocate for traditional American values who argues, writes and speaks to that end.



### *Christopher Hitchens*

Christopher Hitchens, an English-American author, does pretty much the same thing as O'Reilly, but in the exact opposite direction. He is the author of "God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything," a case for atheism. He is also a prominent writer for *Vanity Fair*, *Slate*, *The Atlantic*, *The Nation* and other left-leaning publications and news websites. When introduced, he is often referred to as a journalist. In fact, he should be introduced as an advocate and, like O'Reilly, boldly declares himself so.



# Handbook for Citizen Journalists

## Lou Dobbs

Lou Dobbs, veteran reporter and news anchor, recently concluded his long career at CNN. On the last night of his broadcast, he told his viewers, “Some leaders in media, politics and business have been urging me to go beyond the role here at CNN and to engage in constructive problem solving as well as to contribute positively to the great understanding of the issues of our day.” Later he said he wants to become an advocacy journalist.



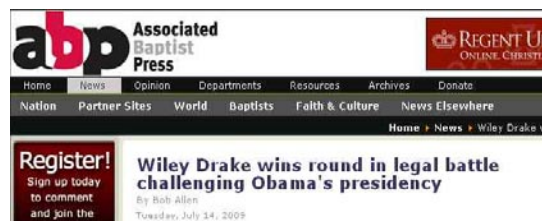
## The Huffington Post

*The Huffington Post*, often referred to as HuffPo and found at [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com), is defined by Wikipedia as “an American liberal news website.” It was co-founded by Arianna Huffington as a commentary outlet and liberal answer to conservative news aggregators like the *Drudge Report*. Both *The Huffington Post* and the *Drudge Report* are examples of advocacy journalism.



## Associated Baptist Press - ABPnews.com

The Associated Baptist Press is a non-profit, member-supported news organization for Baptists. The “About Us” page says, “Our vision is to be

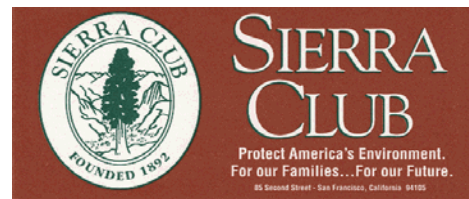


## Chapter 5 - Three Categories of Citizen Journalists

the leading source of news, features and commentary for the global community of Baptists and other Christians.” Any reader would know by the name that the ABP advocates on behalf of Baptists.

### *The Sierra Club*

The Sierra Club is an advocate for environmental issues. It stands against the expansion of nuclear energy, lobbies against the expansion of coal-fired electric generating plants, and advocates for solar, wind and other renewable resources. Sierra Club press releases and communications to the public will always conclude that the restructuring of energy markets to favor green technologies is a good thing to do.



### *Many others*

Every professional and industry association uses advocacy journalists to write and speak on their behalf. They make use of publications, websites, e-zines, press conferences, photo-ops and documentaries to get out their message. They all seek press coverage of one kind or another to inform the public of their particular position on issues that impact their members.

### *If you want to be an advocate*

Many citizens want to become journalists so they can focus their writing on a political, social or economic issue with the intent to “get the truth out” about their candidate, conviction or concern. They are driven by their passion. They decide whether they want to become a legitimate citizen journalist who writes dispassionately about their area of expertise or become an advocate for their cause.

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

Which do you want to do? Either way, it's okay, but you must decide whether to be an advocate or a dispassionate reporter of news. One is a citizen advocacy journalist; the other is a citizen journalist.

## *The difference between advocacy and propaganda*

If you choose to become a citizen advocacy journalist, please remember there is a big difference between being an honest advocate and a propagandist. Advocates argue for a person or a cause, using reliable facts and data that make the case for their point of view. A propagandist deliberately spreads rumors, spins facts, alters data and abuses rivals in an attempt to promote a position, puff a person or a cause, or destroy an enemy.

Here are some descriptive differences. You decide which one offers the most to a news-hungry audience.

- An honest advocate willingly acknowledges his or her bias while a propagandist claims objectivity and hides his or her bias in an attempt to fool the consumer.
- An honest advocate knows his or her position and can defend it with integrity. A propagandist spins the facts to make them all appear to work in favor of a particular point of view even when they do not.
- An honest advocate seeks the truth and is willing to change if the truth requires it. A propagandist changes the truth to fit his or her presuppositions.
- An honest advocate desires accuracy. An honest advocate does not take quotes or “facts” out of context. He or she does not fabricate facts, generate false documents or misrepresent information. An honest advocate does not suppress embarrassing information or present half-truths. Propagandists have no

## Chapter 5 - Three Categories of Citizen Journalists

problem hiding uncomfortable truths, dodging embarrassing questions or falsifying or destroying documents that disprove their thesis.

- An honest advocate faces opposition with confidence. He or she is willing to listen to the arguments of others and is willing to discuss issues intelligently and with respect. A propagandist either avoids the opposition or uses ridicule, name-calling and insults to make a point.
- An honest advocate demands meaningful responses to legitimate questions from people on the advocate's side of an issue. Critical questions are asked and embarrassing issues are explored completely. An honest advocate pursues a legitimate story even if it brings discredit to his or her cause. A propagandist overlooks the concern, minimizes its impact, lies about it or distracts attention to something else.
- An honest advocate defines and clarifies complex issues and seeks common ground. A propagandist confuses, rants and divides people.
- An honest advocate treats all people with respect. A propagandist treats all those who disagree as a threat.
- An honest advocate seeks a variety of sources to defend a position and to establish facts. An honest advocate is unafraid to seek out neutral sources for information that will either endorse or refute his or her bias. A propagandist seeks verification only from sources predisposed to endorse a point of view.

“If you want to advocate for something – first be an advocate for truth.” - Ron Ross

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

## *Citizen Journalists*

Citizen journalism is a rapidly evolving form of journalism where common citizens take the initiative to report news or express views about happenings within their community. It is news of the people, by the people and for the people.

Citizen journalists are independent, freelancing citizen reporters. They are not constrained by conventional journalistic processes or methodologies, and they usually function without editorial oversight. Citizen journalists gather, process, research, report, analyze and publish news and information, most often utilizing a variety of technologies made possible by the Internet.

Citizen-generated news is part of an energetic worldwide revolution that is reconnecting the media with the people. It takes civic participation to a new level. It is a bottom-up phenomenon where citizens don't just attend a city council meeting and then voice their opinion to the few gathered there. They don't just write a letter to the editor and hope it gets printed. Instead, they may:

- Write a blog.
- Email everyone in their address book.
- Develop a local news website.
- Go on Twitter and comment.
- Post messages on Facebook or MySpace pages.
- Text message people they hope to influence.
- Use one or more of the ever-expanding digital platforms available at low or no cost to anyone willing to invest some time and energy to learn them.



## Chapter 5 - Three Categories of Citizen Journalists

### *The origins of citizen journalism*

This movement is the latest expression of a 2000+ year transformation of journalism. News production and reporting began around 59 BC when Julius Caesar wanted to inform the public about important social and political happenings in Rome. He published the *Acta Diurna*, the earliest recorded “newspaper” in the world printed on large white boards and displayed in popular places like the Baths. Caesar used the *Acta* to keep citizens informed about government scandals, military campaigns, trials and executions. In eighth century China, the first newspapers appeared as handwritten news sheets in the streets of Beijing.

Using movable type, the Guttenberg Press revolutionized printing in the mid-1400s. Its impact on journalism (at that time not a defined profession) was slow, partly because the printing process was not capable of producing large numbers of copies necessary for broad distribution.

In 1814, *The Times of London* purchased two steam-powered presses capable of printing 1,100 impressions per hour. Thus newspapers slowly became available to the masses, literacy increased and the work of news writing evolved into a serious profession. The disciplines of journalism evolved as the movable type press evolved.

For more than 200 years, journalists have written and produced news in a largely essay format, using the famous inverted pyramid that features the lead paragraph followed by a nut graph (a short summary of the story or information providing context), then important information, followed by more information, quotes, history and content of increasingly less importance. This essay format continues to be taught in journalism schools and employed in newsrooms everywhere.

Some changes to the way news was written and produced

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

happened with the invention of the radio and the advent of broadcast journalism. The first significant live news broadcast on the radio happened when the Titanic sank on April 15, 1912. But it wasn't until 1938 when Edward R. Murrow produced the first regular broadcast of daily news on the radio. It ran on the CBS network for 15 minutes every evening.



Only 10 years later, Douglas Edwards began the “CBS TV News,” produced by television news legend Don Hewitt. For more than six decades, Americans ate their evening meal with Walter Cronkite, Chet Huntley and David Brinkley and other well-respected broadcast news journalists. But they gave viewers less than 30 minutes worth of news, so newspapers continued to be the major source of news.

The volume of news available to the public took a great leap forward when CNN went on the air in 1980, beginning the first 24 hours/7 days a week news station. Since then, other 24-hour cable news, business, sports and public service channels have been started, creating a more focused news product and providing an increase in volume and variety of information available.



## *Citizen journalism is the newest expression of journalism*

Over the last two centuries, journalism has undergone many transitions. Today many journalism schools and professional journalists are agonizing over the future of their profession. While we do not know what will happen in the future, we do know that citizen journalism currently is the most recent expression of the craft.

## *Chapter 5 - Three Categories of Citizen Journalists*

Citizen journalism uses a combination of all the expressions that journalism has had over the centuries – the written word (printed and digital formats), graphics, photos, videos, interviews, inquiries, debates, discussion, observation and confrontation.

Some citizen journalists are interested in more than gathering, disseminating and reading the news. Many relish the conversation between citizens, newsmakers, and news reporters. The one-way journalism of the 15th through the 20th centuries is now dead, thanks to millions of citizens around the world who have created this entirely new category of journalism. The news is no longer a product owned, filtered and disseminated by the powerful. It is now a dialogue between people.

Tom Rosenstiel, director of Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, told members of Minnesota Public Broadcasting on Nov. 19, 2009, "The purpose of journalism is to inspire discussion." And no one does it better than citizen journalists – and their neighbors!

### *What do citizen journalists do?*

Citizen journalism is what happens when ordinary citizens serve their communities with honesty, integrity and fairness when they work as journalists - honorable and trustworthy journalists - who report the news as it is.

- They write about, photograph, record and videotape what they see happening, serving as eyewitnesses that verify the facts.
- They clarify, amplify and analyze events.
- They authenticate statements, documents and details.
- They share their expertise.
- They ask questions with boldness and respect.

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

- They get active in the arenas that interest them most.
- They don't wait for the local news media to cover an event; they cover it themselves.
- They use the latest technology to get the news to their audience.

## *What about professional journalism?*

Professional journalists are still out there and continue to play an important role in our society. They are necessary because there are many places that ordinary citizens cannot or will not go to get a story.

But citizen journalists have joined the field of play and are making a dramatic difference around the world. News writing is no longer a mystery revealed only to a few insiders who attend journalism schools. It is a craft that any reasonably intelligent person can learn and employ.

## *Demystifying journalism*

The National Association of Citizen Journalists is out to demystify journalism and to recruit, train and motivate one million citizen journalists to discover, write and report news in their communities.

## *Which one are you?*

Are you an accidental journalist who now wants to inquire about a greater role as a journalist? Then read on.

Perhaps you are an advocate for an idea, person or issue.

Or maybe you are ready to learn what it takes to become a certified citizen journalist.

No matter where you are in the process, this handbook provides you with the fundamental tools you need.

# Chapter 6

## Challenges Facing Citizen Journalists

Citizen journalists have several significant challenges and negative perceptions to overcome as they begin their quest to inform their communities. Let's take a look at some of the biggest obstacles many face:

### *Junk journalism*

Citizen journalists are often criticized by professional journalists for what some call "junk journalism." Here are two examples:

In May of 2009, many were concerned about the swine flu outbreak. Those who searched the Internet for advice could have stumbled across a column by Kim Evans



## *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

with the promising title: Swine Flu: Protect Yourself and Your Loved Ones. In the article, the author proposed a unique prescription for swine flu, one she believed could “save your life.” What was her proposed cure? Deep-cleansing enemas.

She wrote: “Most estimates are that the average person has ten or more pounds of stored waste just in their colon. In any case, many people have found that disease disappears when this waste is gone, and that when the body is clean it’s much more difficult for new problems, like viruses, to take hold in the first place. And it’s my understanding that many people who took regular enemas instead of vaccines during the 1918 pandemic made it out on the other side as well.”

While there may be some value to colon cleansing, there is no proof that a cleansing program will prevent influenza. In fact, Evans’ opinion disagrees with basic germ theory. Influenza infection is transmitted through respiratory channels and not through contact with fecal matter deep within the gastrointestinal system.

Another reason to wonder about the voracity of her claims is that her bio gave no evidence of any training in science, health care or related fields. The only evidence she offered to make her case was anecdotal.

Evans’ column elicited an interesting response from one reader who posted the following:

“Just because you throw in some good flu avoidance advice you lifted from a Yahoo news piece, doesn’t mean your ‘colon blow’ technique has any validity. How does HuffPo look itself in the mirror after having you as a contributor? Nice try advertising for your book, though.”

The column is still available on *The Huffington Post* at [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com).

Another HuffPo blogger is a Dr. Srinivasan Pillay. According to his biography, Pillay is a very versatile doctor. He claims to be a psychiatrist,

## Chapter 6 - Challenges Facing Citizen Journalists

certified master coach, brain-imaging researcher and public speaker who focuses “on the fields of personal and organizational transformation.”

In March 2009, *The Huffington Post* published a Pillay piece titled, *The Science of Distant Healing*, where he cites a “well-designed study” that proves that people, by using their thoughts, can heal (or harm) others who are sick in other locations.

His piece began with the following question and bold claim: “There is much written about how our good intentions help others. But can your good intentions really reach someone who is not physically present, and how do we know this? In this column, I will present the current evidence that discusses this phenomenon and provide some explanations as to why distant healing has a place in modern scientific thinking.”

Pillay did not cite that “well-designed” study nor did he provide his readers with any particular evidence to prove his point. He was selling snake oil, not good medicine – not even good alternative medicine.

Junk science when reported as news becomes junk journalism. Junk journalism is avoided when journalists rely on good research, reliable sources, careful fact checking, and avoid promoting people, products or services.

### ***Product quality***

Many mainstream journalists are critical of the work of citizen journalists. And rightly so. Some of it, while being adequately researched and sourced, is poorly written.

A citizen journalist in one community submitted a series of stories to a hyperlocal news website about major changes on a section of main street. Unfortunately, she often got her statistics wrong and presented her facts in a manner inconsistent with traditional news stories.

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

She did the best she could. She wrote about detour signs, closed streets and sidewalks, sewer and water shut-offs, project delays and progress, etc. She quoted the mayor, project managers, business owners and customers. But her facts were out of order, her quotes badly chosen and her stories were sometimes incoherent.

It happened because she did not know how to gather information and then organize it into an interesting and helpful news story. She had the best interests of her community at heart. She had credible sources within city government and the business community, and she knew how the businesses and consumers would be inconvenienced by the project. With a little training on how news is written, this citizen journalist could become a major source of information for her readers.

## *The first step to good writing skills*

So many people say, “I want to write,” yet so few do. If you are among those who want to write, nothing is stopping you except you. So start. Start today. Get a tablet and a pen and start taking notes or open up a document on your computer and start typing. Don’t know what to write about? Here are four writing exercises you can do today:

- Write your birth story. If you don’t know all the details, ask your mother or father and then organize the information into six or seven paragraphs. Before you know it, you will have completed your first essay and you will have made a very nice contribution to your family history.
- Write a few short paragraphs describing someone interesting that you know. Use colorful, descriptive words to brighten up your story.
- Write a news story about a significant accomplishment or interesting event in your life. As you write, imitate the style a



## Chapter 6 - Challenges Facing Citizen Journalists

news reporter would use in writing about the event.

- Start keeping a journal. Journaling is one of the best ways to practice writing your thoughts and feelings – and do it every-day. Try to improve your writing style with each entry. Your entries do not have to be more than one or two paragraphs each day, but the consistent act of putting pen to paper makes you a – let’s say it all together – a WRITER!

### *Get some training in the art of writing*

Your library no doubt has a dozen or so books about writing. Check out a couple of them and read them.

Ask your librarians if they know of a writers’ group that you can join to get training, peer review and encouragement from people just like you.

News writing is a field that requires some specialized training and the application of certain long-accepted principles. This handbook will provide you with the fundamental elements of proper news writing.

In addition to this book, the National Association of Citizen Journalists also offers university-level online training in the fundamentals of journalism. With NACJ training, you will learn how to write and report news in a way that readers, listeners and viewers expect it.



### *Credibility*

Credibility is another challenge for a citizen journalist. It can be illustrated by two questions often asked of citizen journalists: “Why should I talk to you?” And, “Why should I read what you write?”

The question, “Why should I talk to you?” could be asked by a govern-

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

ment official, business owner or any person on the street that a citizen journalist might approach in the process of getting a story.

If CNN's Wolf Blitzer would call your local chief of police and ask for an interview concerning crime in the community, the chief would instantly recognize the name and news channel as a legitimate news inquiry. However, if John Doe, an unknown citizen journalist, calls and asks for the same courtesy, the chief would likely ask, "Why should I talk to him?"

If a local TV station crew is at a festival getting shots for its evening news broadcast, the crew has the station's logo on everything, including shirts, jackets, ball caps, vehicles, cameras and microphones. People being interviewed know exactly what they are getting into. When a reporter points a video camera at them and sticks a microphone their face, the interviewee does not wonder, "Who are you and why are you invading my space?" The station's logo, press ID badges and professional demeanor give the station's staff all the credibility it needs.

If a citizen journalist with no identification, no logo and a tiny Flip Video camera were to do the same thing, the interviewee could recoil in alarm and ask that the darn thing be shut off and that the busybody mind his or her own business.

## *Citizen journalists need something to establish their credibility*

Effective citizen journalists have identifiable credibility. They carry some form of identification that separates them from a meddlesome amateur or just someone looking for a clip to send to America's Funniest Home Videos or to edit and upload to YouTube for their own amusement.

During a 2008 political campaign event in Denver, two supporters of opposing senatorial candidates were involved in a shoving match and nearly came to blows. The police were called to settle tempers.

## *Chapter 6 - Challenges Facing Citizen Journalists*

When they arrived, a spectator with a small video camera was shooting footage as the officer attempted to sort out what happened.

The officer, obviously annoyed by the intruding camera, turned to the citizen and asked, "Are you a member of the media? Who are you shooting for?" The citizen answered, "No I'm not. I'm just videotaping what's happening." The policeman ordered him to stop filming. (Whether or not he had the authority to do that is not what we are discussing here.)

However, if the guy with the camera had a press badge hanging around his neck, it's likely the policeman still would have been annoyed but would not have challenged his right to videotape the encounter. That's called credibility, and a citizen journalist has it when he or she can say, "I'm a member of the media reporting for ...." And they have a press ID badge to back them up.

### *One way to gain credibility*

Obviously, citizen journalists who work for a newspaper or other recognized news entities have a credibility advantage. So how can individuals gain credibility on their own? They can create their own news website for only a few dollars by using [www.godaddy.com](http://www.godaddy.com) and its free WebSite Tonight service or they can set up a blog for free by using a variety of free blog hosting services, such as [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com), [www.vox.com](http://www.vox.com) and many others.

So if you have to operate as an independent news source, create your own website or blog and give it an important sounding name, such as [thememphiscitizen.com](http://thememphiscitizen.com) or [wewatchsouthseattle.com](http://wewatchsouthseattle.com), etc.

### *Why should anyone read what you write?*

The other question of credibility comes from the consumers of the work-product of a citizen journalist, who may ask: "Why should

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

I read what you write or pay any attention to your video or audio news report?”

Again, a citizen journalist who is a stringer for a local newspaper or radio or television station has the credibility that comes from working for that news entity. But when citizen journalists operate alone, they have a greater challenge to demonstrate to their audience that their reports are credible, reliable and worthy of attention.

This kind of credibility comes only with consistent, accurate, and well-written and produced pieces. Quality writing and production will attract an audience, although it may take some time.

## *Credibility provided by membership in the NACJ*

The National Association of Citizen Journalists offers its members a way to earn a press ID badge that declares them qualified to ask questions, seek information, observe events, photograph incidents, and interview officials and witnesses. The training in the art and science of journalism provided to members of the NACJ will enable a citizen journalist to write and report news with as much integrity and proficiency as any trained professional journalist.

## *Motivation*

Citizen journalism can be a lonely calling. Citizen journalists have no newsroom culture to enjoy (or endure); they have no one assigning them their next story or encouraging them to finish the one under construction. They don't receive the congratulatory comments that come from a front-page story or get suggestions from fellow reporters for a different angle when writer's block sets in.



## ***Chapter 6 - Challenges Facing Citizen Journalists***

### ***Citizen journalists must be self-disciplined***

Because most citizen journalists work alone, they must be self-motivated and self-disciplined, or life's distractions will keep them from their important work. One of the advantages of membership in the National Association of Citizen Journalists is that members are connected with other citizen journalists in a social network where they encourage and challenge each other.

### ***Citizen journalists must be good time managers***

Professional journalists understand deadlines. Their editors may give them three stories to cover for the next edition, and they know the deadline for the submission of copy and photographs is real. They learn to write with an eye on the clock.

Citizen journalists also must deal with the issue of time. Their issue, however, is usually very different from a professional journalist who works 40+ hours a week researching, interviewing, writing and rewriting stories.

Most citizen journalists are volunteer journalists who have to squeeze their researching, interviewing and writing in between a full-time job, home duties, family activities, social events and a few hours of sleep.

### ***Citizen journalists need financial backing***

Of all the complaints we hear about citizen journalism, this is the one we hear the most: "I'm putting in all these hours and I'm not getting paid."

We know what you're talking about. Both authors of this book have given away hundreds - even thousands - of hours writing and rewriting columns, news stories, press releases, books, articles, circulars, advertisements, sales pitches, business plans, promotional piec-

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

es, restaurant reviews and more. Most of the time we have not been paid for our work – beyond a few pats on the back, a free lunch or two and some very nice expressions of appreciation.

One thing citizen journalists must deal with is that their careers



will not be greased along with a continually increasing flow of cash into their bank accounts. It may be just the opposite. In most cases, they will be required to pay for their own gas to attend an event, supply their own mobile phone and Internet connections, and pay for their own office space and website expenses.

Many are exploring a variety of ways to monetize the work of citizen journalists. As members of the traditional media see the quality of the work improve, they will be more likely to pay citizen journalists for their services. Some smaller newspapers are already paying citizen journalists for their stories.

## *Citizen journalists need career development opportunities*

Learning never stops for the success-oriented citizen journalist. However, there are not a lot of career development programs available for citizen journalists. The National Association of Citizen Journalists was created to fill this void.

The NACJ offers its members a variety of teleseminars, webinars and Internet conferencing events. Our live events feature professional journalists, editors, consultants, Web experts, bloggers, writers, photographers, videographers and more. Each event is intended to develop the skills and expand the horizons of citizen journalists. NACJ webinars are available online 24/7 to our members for viewing and refreshing their fundamentals of journalism.

## *Chapter 6 - Challenges Facing Citizen Journalists*

The NACJ also offers peer-to-peer mentoring by connecting citizen journalists to other citizen journalists for their mutual growth, encouragement and friendship.

Technological advancements are almost impossible to keep up with. The NACJ brain trust does not have all the answers, but the members represent the frontline of technological development most useful for citizen journalists. The NACJ constantly invites them to share their knowledge with their fellow members via webinars, tele-seminars and interactive Web conferences.

At the National Association of Citizen Journalists, we are always seeking to discover new and innovative ways for citizen journalists to get training and overcome obstacles. Please send any information you have to [info@nacj.us](mailto:info@nacj.us) so we can add it to our database and let other citizen journalists gain from it.

### *Quote - End Quote*

Jay Rosen, NYU Journalism Institute professor, directing his words to the traditional media wrote in his blog,

“You don’t own the eyeballs. You don’t own the press, which is now divided into pro and amateur zones. You don’t control production on the new platform, which isn’t one-way.

“There’s a new balance of power between you and us. The people formerly known as the audience are simply the public made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable. You should welcome that, media people. But whether you do or not we want you to know we’re here.”



# Chapter 7

## Six Questions to Determine if You Have What it Takes to be a Successful Citizen Journalist

**C**itizen journalism is not for everyone. To accept the challenge of covering news in your community requires some serious introspection into the skills you have, the ones you are ready to learn and motivation to keep going once you've begun. So we looked closely at the successful citizen journalists out there and put together six questions. Your answers to these six questions will help you determine if you have what it takes to be a successful citizen journalist.



# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

## *#1 Do you know what is happening in your community?*

Successful citizen journalists are very aware of what is happening in their communities. Some are well connected because of their work, their time in the community or their interest in a certain cause or subject.

On May 16, 2009, the last print edition of the *Tucson Citizen* newspaper rolled off the press, but the *Citizen* continues in digital form. It has morphed into a community blog site, and the owners are recruiting Tucsonans to report the news.

Take a minute and check out [www.TucsonCitizen.com](http://www.TucsonCitizen.com). According to the “About Us” page, TucsonCitizen.com is “a compendium of blogs that serves as The Voice of Tucson, written by Tucsonans for Tucsonans. The bloggers and citizen journalists here provide news, information, opinion, commentary and perspective on the issues, interests and events that affect daily life in the Old Pueblo.”

According to an online article on [azstarnet.com](http://azstarnet.com), “TucsonCitizen.com will help fill in the holes by empowering Tucson’s citizens to tell their own stories and to report the news of their communities, their groups, organizations and interests. Citizen journalism is the wave of the future. Come ride it at TucsonCitizen.com.”

Sounds exciting, doesn’t it? This is being repeated in community after community all around the world. Citizens are getting involved in producing the news, and the community is better because of it.

If you’re not necessarily connected within your community or in the area of interest you have chosen, can you get connected? Can you find your way around? Are you brave enough to walk into a strange office and ask for the information you need? Can you walk up to a stranger and ask for an interview? If you can, you can be a successful citizen journalist in a short period of time.

Citizen journalists are inquisitive people. They love to ask questions and find out who, what, when, where, why and how. Just ask a few ques-

## *Chapter 7 - Do You Have What it Takes?*

tions of the people who have the answers and you'll soon be the best informed person in town.

### *#2 Can you attend meetings, ask questions and do research?*

Citizen journalists can learn a lot about their communities by attending long and sometimes boring meetings, or doing research at their own workstation or in the library. News happens at public hearings, meetings of civic boards and committees, social gatherings, sporting events, neighborhood festivals, business get-togethers, school activities, and all kinds of networking groups.

Also, information is exchanged at these events. Citizen journalists get to know people, places and power points within their community because they are an active and important part of it. They get tips on interesting stories, meet fascinating people and make important connections because they are where things happen.

A citizen journalist who was making a name for himself responded to an invitation for members of the media to attend an open house at the county sheriff's department. Less than a dozen members of the media showed up at the event so this citizen journalist got to ask many questions about the department, see the inside workings of the county jail, talk to deputies and other important people, including the sheriff himself.

The net result is that anytime this citizen journalist wants any information, a quote, or any other kind of help from the public information officer or even the sheriff, his calls are returned and his requests get top priority. Why? Because he showed up, was interested, asked questions and made friends with important people.

Research is also a most important aspect of the work a citizen journalist must do. Some news items require substantial research to verify facts and to get background information so a fair and complete article

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

can be written.

This may mean searching for information on the Internet or using the other more traditional methods of research, such as libraries, newspaper archives, phone calls and interviews with experts.

Good research will increase your viability as a citizen journalist. When you have the facts and you have them right, you will be a trusted source of news. The more informed you are, the more informing you become to your readers/viewers.

A well-informed, well-prepared citizen journalist does not have to take a back seat to any professional journalist. Your observations and your conclusions are as legitimate as any paid journalist.

### *#3 Can you set aside your prejudices in pursuit of the truth?*

You may not like the mayor or the high school football coach or the executive director of the chamber of commerce. You may be a Republican in a decidedly Democratic community or vice versa. But that should not be allowed to interfere with a fair and objective report of newsworthy actions or events.

There is a big difference between a biased reporter and a biased report. Citizen journalists must be able to separate their prejudices from their reports. They must be able to admit their bias, set it aside and write a story with as much fairness and accuracy as possible.

This is not always easy because we all carry some prejudices. In fact, look at all the prejudices that are out there:

*Religious prejudices:* Catholic, protestant, evangelical, atheist, pro-life, pro-choice

*Ethnic prejudices:* Italians, Jews, Arabs, Yankees and a thousand others

*Political prejudices:* Republican, Democratic, Libertarian, Independent

## Chapter 7 - Do You Have What it Takes?

*Social prejudices:* pro-gay marriage, anti-gay marriage, pro-family values, pro-life, pro-choice, etc.

*Sports prejudices:* The Broncos hate the Raiders, the Florida State Seminoles hate Florida University Gators, one high school despises another, and on and on and on.

Good reporters know their biases and deal with them properly so they do not write biased reports – but news, honest news, fair news that tells the complete story and leaves their bias out of it.



### **#4 Can you write a simple declarative sentence?**

Citizen journalists must have the ability to tell a story. To tell a story requires the ability to form a simple declarative sentence.

“Oh look! See Spot run. Run, run, run.” You no doubt remember that important sentence from your first grade reading class. There’s a whole story in those few words. If you can observe life as well as Dick and Jane did, you can be an effective citizen journalist.

Let’s say you attended the girls’ basketball game between Central High School and Jefferson High. You watched as Jefferson beat Central, so your lead sentence would read, “The Jefferson High School girls’ basketball team beat the Central girls 55 to 47 on Wednesday at the Central High gym.”

How hard is that? Now, what about the upcoming Downtown Kiwanis Club’s annual fundraising golf tournament? It would probably read, “The Downtown Kiwanis Club will hold its annual fundraising golf tournament at the Riverside Country Club on June 14.”

If you can write a simple declarative sentence, you can be a successful citizen journalist. Of course there’s much more to report

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

ing a complete story, but that is where it begins.

## ***#5 Do you have basic computer skills?***

In today's digital world, you can't be much of a citizen journalist without computer skills. With them, the world is at your doorstep. The most basic computer skills you need are as follows:

1. The ability to create a Word document, write and send an email and attach a document to an email.
2. The ability to go to an online website and post your story and/or photo.



Once you've learned those basic skills, you are on your way to wealth and fame, well maybe some loose change and nominal notoriety.

Of course, all of this presumes you have an Internet connection in the first place – and preferably a high-speed connection. In all likelihood, that's how your stories will be forwarded and published in the early part of your career.

## ***#6 Do you care enough to do something?***

Ultimately, whether or not you become a significant citizen journalist will depend on your own personal passion. Do you care enough about what is happening in your community to do something about it?

It's truly amazing how influential a citizen journalist can be. Here is part of a story about Jennifer Connic, a citizen journalist in Millburn, N.J., that was in the online edition of [www.NJ.com](http://www.NJ.com):

## Chapter 7 - Do You Have What it Takes?

### Millburn is Jennifer Connic's Metropolis

When not combing the streets of this affluent Essex County suburb, she's likely to be found at the town Starbucks, laptop open, firing off a report on the latest board of education meeting. Or a fender bender on Main Street. Or a historic tour of the corner cemetery.

As the editor of a "hyperlocal" news website called Millburn.Patch.com, Connic has earned the trust of local officials and gained the sort of access all reporters crave.

On a recent afternoon, she boldly parked herself at the fire chief's desk in his absence, leafing through incident reports while joking with another firefighter, with whom



she's friends on Facebook.

"That's the difference between community journalism and national journalism," said Connic, 32, who has been covering Millburn since February (2009) after leaving a web producer job at the Record and Herald News

in Bergen County. "I don't have sterile conversations with people I cover on a daily basis. If you're not connecting with them on a personal level, how can you cover them?"

Those connections helped her land her biggest story last month, when a hazing incident at Millburn High School put the town in the national spotlight. After being the only reporter to get her hands on a "slut list" circulated by seniors at the school, she wrote an explosive story of

## *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

how the list targeted incoming freshmen girls.

“These people are very picky,” Connic said of residents. “It takes the right person to cover these things.”

The story quickly faded from headlines, but it drove home how places like Millburn and a handful of other choice New Jersey towns are at the center of a new type of media turf war — one that largely excludes newspapers.

A steep drop in advertising revenue has forced large dailies to retreat, closing local bureaus and cutting back on the number of municipal beat reporters. Stepping into that news hole has been a mix of online community reporters, bloggers, political gadflies and citizen journalists.

What is your answer? Do you have what it takes to be a citizen journalist? Would you like to step into that “news hole” and write some news about your community? You can do it, if you want to bad enough.

If you do, you will help create “community” in your community. You’ll help make your town more than an ad-hoc assemblage of houses, buildings, neighborhoods, ethnic groups, religious factions and political parties. You’ll make it a true community – a hometown where people care for each other and work to have a safe and pleasant place to live.

It won’t be easy, but it will be worth it. Sometimes it may even be quite exciting. You’ll gain prestige, respect and even awe from people who previously saw you only as one more face in the crowd.

***Here are three factors that will help you succeed as a citizen journalist: passion, push and perseverance.***

***Passion:*** You must find within yourself a compelling emotional call to do something significant, to be someone special, to live with purpose



## *Chapter 7 - Do You Have What it Takes?*

so you will one day bequeath to others something more than a brief eulogy and a nice headstone. The most successful citizen journalists have a deep and abiding passion for the work they do, the people they cover, the news they write. They are out there in the first place because they care.

We suggest you begin your citizen journalism career by writing about something you care deeply about, something that touches your heart, makes you angry, causes you to laugh or creates wonder.

Passion is an empowering force.

Passion makes you write more frequently; you might see more angles to the same topic and you'll want to write more stories.

Passion makes you write better. You will do better research, find better sources, invest more of yourself into a story.

Passion makes you write with a greater sense of freedom. When you are passionate about something, you don't care what people think. You do it because you feel strongly about it.

Passion will cause you to grow personally. When you are passionate about something, you don't mind the disciplines that the passion requires. You will grow in knowledge and understanding of your chosen subject, and you will change as your subject changes and as the information you learn changes you.

Another great benefit that comes when you write about your passions is that you become known as the expert in that subject. You won't be fooled by frauds or bamboozled by so-called experts. Because you will be the expert, you will be seen as a resource and people will come to you for information and answers.

When you feel strongly about what you are doing, there is no limit to what you can accomplish. Former British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli said, "Man is only truly great when he acts from his passions."

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

**Push:** This is the “hard work” part of a citizen journalist. The best golfer is not the one who reads the most golf magazines or who has the finest clubs, but is the one who spends the most time on the driving range. The best singer isn’t the one who owns the most CDs or downloads the most music to an iPod. It’s the one who takes voice training, practices with diligence and performs frequently. The best citizen journalist isn’t the one who takes no for an answer or doesn’t want to make one more phone call or attend one more meeting.

Antiphanes, a Greek writer who lived 400 years BC said, “Everything yields to diligence.” That’s push, and you must have it if you are to be a successful citizen journalist.

**Perseverance:** We live in a world of instant gratification. Therefore, few people are willing to put in the hard work (push) and the long hours (perseverance) required to accomplish anything significant. We want it now, and if we can’t get it now we give up.

Steven Jobs, the brilliant co-founder and CEO of Apple Computer, said, “I’m convinced that about half of what separates the successful entrepreneurs from the unsuccessful ones is pure perseverance.” What’s really interesting is you don’t have to be particularly great to push and persevere. You just have to do it.

Passion expressed with push and perseverance is what makes ordinary people realize extraordinary accomplishments. The best part of it all: the joy of those accomplishments nearly always exceeds the pain.



## *Chapter 7 - Do You Have What it Takes?*

How do YOU answer these six questions?

1. Do you know what's happening in your community?
2. Can you attend meetings, ask questions and do research?
3. Can you set aside your prejudices in pursuit of the truth?
4. Can you write a simple declarative sentence?
5. Do you have basic computer skills?
6. Do you care?

Some of the answers may require some training, but most of them require an answer from the heart. You must answer the questions of the heart, but Part 2 of this handbook can help you with the skills you have to learn.

*Quote - End Quote*

“Take the attitude of a student, never be too big to ask questions, never know too much to learn something new.” - Og Mandino

# Chapter 8

## *YOUR* Call to Citizen Journalism

**T**his book is intended to appeal to bright, intelligent, civic-minded people to enter the interesting and exciting world of citizen journalism. We are concerned that if you've gotten this far in the book, you might be more overwhelmed than anything else.

Chapters 8 and 9 are designed to bring you back to Earth a bit and then to challenge you to get involved. And why not? After all, citizens just like you are picking up the slack left by the demise of newspapers and staff reductions in broadcast media outlets. It's exciting; it's positive; it's possible! So take a deep breath and read on.



# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

## ***You can do this!***

Every new vocation, avocation or skill looks overwhelming at first. But once you learn the system, perfect the techniques and discover the short cuts, things get easier. With a little training and practice, you can learn how to do almost anything.

The same is true of the activities and responsibilities of a citizen journalist. While it may look overwhelming now, it is not rocket science and no one will be hurt if you make a mistake or don't get everything in the right sequence.

You are fully capable of becoming an effective citizen journalist. Whether you are young or old, rich or poor, important or unpretentious, introvert or extrovert, it doesn't matter. All you need is a passion for the cause, and a little training and some mentoring along the way.

## ***You can do this because it's simple***

### *Use your digital camera*



You can do this because sometimes being a citizen journalism is as simple as using your digital camera when you see something happening.

An alert citizen journalist who photographed two sleeping security guards on the vitally important George Washington Bridge in September 2009 may have saved many lives by simply taking a picture and posting it on a website.

Joey Lepore, who owns a bicycle touring company and often crosses the bridge on his bicycle, noticed the two security guards fast asleep – and on several occasions. Concerned about the safety of the tens of thousands who cross the bridge every day, he

## Chapter 8 - YOUR Call to Citizen Journalism

snapped several photos of the sleeping sentries and posted them on a local news website ([www.cliffviewpilot.com](http://www.cliffviewpilot.com)).

Next, the story was picked up by the local Fox television station (MyFox New York) and then by Fox News (24-hour cable news). A few days later, the Port Authority was forced to take action and terminate the guards.

It was all done with a digital camera, a popular local news website and a little effort by a citizen who cared.

Was it important? We think so. After all, the George Washington Bridge crosses the Hudson River, connecting Manhattan, N.Y., with Fort Lee, N.J., and is considered one of the busiest bridges in the world, according to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. According to the Port Authority, nearly 108 million vehicles crossed the bridge in 2007. That's why law enforcement people consider it a prime target of terrorists.

### *Use your video camera*

You can do this because sometimes being a citizen journalist is as simple as using your digital video camera to record an event you are witnessing.

The NewarkAdvocate.com reported on Dec. 1, 2009, that in late September 2009 a citizen journalist posted a camera-phone video on CNN's iReport web page. It depicted an attack on a 15-year-old girl who was being followed, harassed and confronted by numerous teenagers for several blocks after which she was punched by those stalking her.

After the girl's mother reported the incident, the Newark police interviewed the victim and noted her injuries. The girl who punched the 15-year-old was referred to juvenile court. The citizen's video enabled the police to identify the perpetrators.

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

## *Use your cell phone, BlackBerry or iPhone*

From Finland, Andrea Vascellari tells an interesting tale of citizen journalism. A few years ago, he was out and about in town when he noticed police cars around a school so he called his office and learned there had been a major school shooting.

Using his phone, he posted a short blog about what he was witnessing and soon had several interview requests from the BBC and other international media. He began doing phone interviews from the site and, thanks to Finland's advanced mobile communications and wireless infrastructure, uploaded pictures and videos directly from his site to international broadcasters.

## *Pay attention to what is happening around you*

You can do this because sometimes it is as simple as paying attention to what happens in your community.

In Asheville, N.C., citizens are an active part of providing news for the MountainXpress ([www.MountainX.com](http://www.MountainX.com)), a news website powered by citizens. Managing Editor Jon Elliston writes, "Amid all the lofty abstractions about citizen journalism, we're talking about something concrete: a functional model in which every concerned reader has the potential to generate and share the news. And in fact, many of you are doing so already.



You're blogging. You're tweeting. You're on Facebook, Flickr and YouTube. You have the tools, and you're using them to send and shape your own news."

After discussing the variety of technologies they are applying to



## Chapter 8 - YOUR Call to Citizen Journalism

get folks involved, he concludes: “But we won’t cling to the outmoded approach that delivers news top-down, strictly from us to you. Maybe not everyone wants to be a journalist, but we’re rapidly approaching an era when anyone can be a journalist of one sort or another. And as the impacts of these fundamental changes spread, we want to be able to say that Xpress helped pave the way for a new kind of journalism that’s richer, more diffuse, more responsive and more empowering than the way we used to do it. Here’s hoping you’ll join us and share in the exciting evolution of the way local matters become local news.” [http://www.mountainx.com/opinion/2009/122309the\\_news\\_we\\_all\\_make](http://www.mountainx.com/opinion/2009/122309the_news_we_all_make)

### *Look for the unusual and report on it*

Is there something happening in your community that doesn’t seem quite right or is a major accomplishment? Maybe it is something being done by a government agency, a business, an industry or an individual.

John Averell, a retired nuclear physicist, has been writing stories for years for the *Melrose Mirror*, an online monthly magazine. One of his recent articles was about the rebuilding of Temple Beth Shalom, which took several years to complete. His story included a progression of photos and interviews with those involved in the project. His article celebrated the completion of the project and its rededication on Oct. 4, 2009.

Averell is just one of the Silver Stringers, a group of seniors who write for the *Melrose Mirror*, a project developed in 1996 in conjunction with The News-in-the-Future Consortium of the MIT Media Lab and now operated by senior citizens who live in the Melrose, Mass., area. <http://melrosemirror.media.mit.edu/>

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

Follow the examples of Joey Lepore, Jennifer Connic, Andrea Vascellari, John Averell and others. Although some of these folks are accidental citizen journalists, they illustrate what individuals can do when they keep their eyes and ears open in their communities. Who knows? That first story – the one you came across accidentally – may prove to you that you have the skills and talent that it takes to regularly report about topics of interest to you.

So, keep your digital camera (video or still) handy to take some pictures or videotape an event. Always have a pen and notepad with you when you go somewhere. You never know when you'll be someplace where news is being made.

Then post your photos, videos, observations and comments on a website or email them to people you know or tweet them or Facebook them! You could make a difference in your community because you, a citizen journalist, were watchful and ready to take action.

## *You can do this because it's fun*

Citizen journalists who focus their news writing on a specific area of interest or expertise probably have the most fun.



### *OutdoorsWithHank.com*

A website launched in 2009 to focus on hunting and fishing in Iowa and neighboring states is [www.OutdoorsWithHank.com](http://www.OutdoorsWithHank.com). The blogger uses the pseudonym of Hank Huntington. According to his website, Huntington is a native of southwest Iowa, health care professional, entrepreneur, accomplished pilot, hunting and fishing enthusiast, connoisseur, father and husband.

## Chapter 8 - YOUR Call to Citizen Journalism

He developed his website so he could share the fun and excitement he enjoys in the great outdoors. As he puts it: “The best part of this hobby is that after a successful hunting or fishing trip I am able to dine on fresh game or fish.” Then, taking a shot at his friends who golf, he asks, “After all, how do you eat a golf ball?”

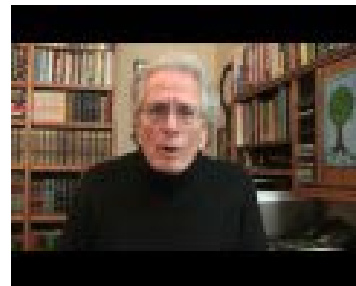
Do you think “Hank” is having fun? Yes he is. But in the process, he is keeping other outdoorsmen informed about hunting and fishing in the central states and in the process building quite a following.

### *Mac-centric news*

We don’t know who exactly operates [www.prmac.vox.com](http://www.prmac.vox.com), but it is clear that it is a blog about the ever-expanding and fascinating Mac world. The blog says that prMac’s aim is “enhancing the visibility of press releases in the Mac world, offering Mac-centric news media distribution services as well as top-notch RSS feeds.” No doubt the blogger is writing in his area of expertise and providing a significant service to Mac users at the same time.

### *Mile High Motivator*

Co-author of this book, Ron Ross, always wanted to be a motivational writer and speaker. Several years ago, he started writing a weekly motivational and inspirational column for the weekly paper that he owned. (It’s easy to get your stuff published when you own the paper!) The columns have been picked up by several other papers and now reach a wide audience.



In 2009, he began repurposing the columns into short videos that you can now watch on [YouTube.com/ronalddross](https://www.youtube.com/ronalddross). He also sends out

# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

a weekly Motivation Moment to hundreds of people on his email list with a link to his video.

He spends every Sunday afternoon in his office writing his column and making the short videos. He doesn't do it for the money. He does it because he wants to. And along the way, many people have been inspired and encouraged. This is all the pay he needs.

## *What is your hobby or area of expertise?*

The easiest and most gratifying topic to write about is something you know and care a lot about. So, what's your area of expertise? What are you vitally interested in? What is your passion, your hobby or your cause? Chances are there are many people in your sphere of influence interested in the same thing and they are out there waiting to hear from you.

Don't wait until you have everything figured out. Don't wait until you are the world's greatest writer. Just start writing about what interests you. Then keep working to improve your skills and soon you'll have a following that will astound you.

## *You can do this because the tools are available*

Few generations and few societies offer their members the opportunity to do something like citizen journalism. Look at what is available to you:

### *The tools of technology*

You have the tools and technology to publish news and views and make them available around the world.

When U.S. Founding Father Thomas Paine wrote the pamphlet called "Common Sense" in 1776, he had only a labor-intensive press

## Chapter 8 - YOUR Call to Citizen Journalism

upon which multiple copies could be printed. Distribution was even a bigger challenge as the U.S. Post Office was in its infancy and there were no means of mass communications. Even so, “Common Sense” had the largest sale and circulation of any book in American history at that time.

Today, using the Internet, you can take 10 minutes and start your own blog, post your first entry and have a publication that can instantly be read around the world.

Digital photography is also instantly usable. Take a picture or a video this minute with your cell phone and in the next minute it can appear on a website for the entire world to view. It happens daily.

Internet radio and Internet television is yet another way you can broadcast live to every time zone in the world – and you don’t need a million dollar studio to do it. A \$30 webcam makes it all possible.

You can write a book, article or pamphlet, print it to a pdf file, upload it to your website and people 10,000 miles away can download it and read it while you sleep.

You can print a newsletter or small magazine in full color within minutes or a day at your local print store.

These and other technological tools are at your disposal. Others are being developed as you read these words. Most of them are quite user-friendly so learn to use them.

Journalist A. J. Liebling said back in the early 1930s, “Freedom of the press is limited to those who own one.” Not any more. Never before in the history of humanity have this many powerful tools been



# Handbook for Citizen Journalists

available to the people.

And by the way, you don't have to learn how to use all of them – just the ones that will enable you to get your message out. These are your tools. You can do this.

## Websites begging for your participation

Hundreds, if not thousands, of websites exist today to help citizens stay informed about their communities, their interests or whatever. They provide the platform, and citizen journalists provide the news. Here are just a handful:

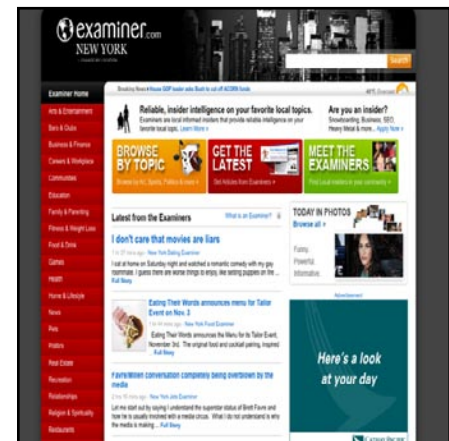


NowPublic.com is a crowd-sourced, participatory news network that mobilizes reporters around the world and invites them to upload videos, photos and news stories. It claims to be the largest news organization of its kind with contributing reporters in more than 5,500 cities and 160 countries. *The Guardian* has named NowPublic.com one of the top five most useful news sites on the Web and *Time Magazine* named it one of the

“Top 50 Websites for 2007.”

Examiner.com is a national website with a local perspective. It seeks writers who have in-depth knowledge or passion about a particular topic and a desire to share their insights with others.

YourNews.com is yet another hyperlocal website where you can start uploading local news and photos within minutes. Just hit the website, type in your zip code and you'll find a hyperlocal news page ready and waiting for



## Chapter 8 - YOUR Call to Citizen Journalism

you to utilize.

Internationally, there are many more, including: [www.OhmyNews.com](http://www.OhmyNews.com)



[www.The-Latest.com](http://www.The-Latest.com) in the UK, [www.citizenjournalisminafrica.com](http://www.citizenjournalisminafrica.com) in central Africa and [www.AsianCorrespondent.com](http://www.AsianCorrespondent.com) in Asia.

The list of sites is endless and growing everyday. We are compiling a list for the National Association of Citizen Journalists, so please submit any relevant citizen journalist url to [info@nacj.us](mailto:info@nacj.us)

***You must do this because your community needs you!***

The crisis in journalism has reached your community. Newspapers are suffering, news radio stations are cutting back on staff and local broadcast television news departments are shrinking as ad revenues weaken.

In 2006, the J-Lab ([www.jlab.org](http://www.jlab.org)) conducted research funded by the Ford Foundation and discovered more than 500 citizen journalism websites. Hundreds and possibly thousands more sites have gone online since then and more are being developed every day.

In the report, J-Lab Executive Director Jan Schaffer said the following: “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.”

Look around your community. What bothers you? What makes you



# Handbook for Citizen Journalists

proud? Do you have interesting events or people that deserve some attention? Find them, photograph them and write about them. Whether you report on police activity, potholes or family-oriented events in your community, you can be a person of influence. You can make your community a better place to live.

***You must do this your country needs you!***

We are confident that citizen journalists are working in every country and every major city in the world. Many are making significant impacts on their country's culture, politics and business.

No list of community news websites and blogs would ever be complete as the number keeps changing because more and more citizens are getting involved. Here are two successful sites from around the globe:

OhMymews.com in South Korea is considered the granddaddy of all citizen journalism websites. Established in February 2000 by former



investigative magazine journalist Yeon Ho Oh, it is an online newspaper with the motto “every citizen is a reporter.” The site accepts, edits and publishes articles from its readers, and racks up an average of 2.5 million page views a day, placing OhmyNews in the top 30 traffic generators among Korean websites, according to Jean K. Min, communications director for OhmyNews’ international division.

More than 70,000 citizens contribute to the Korean site and 6,000 write for its English-language sister site, OhmyNews International.



## *Chapter 8 - YOUR Call to Citizen Journalism*

Citizenjournalismafrica.org is the result of a citizen journalism in Africa project, a partnership between SANGONeT and Hivos that started in 2007 and is supported by the European Union. According to the website, it aims to build “the capacity of civil society organizations to use online and offline citizen journalism as a means of publication, lobby, networking and knowledge sharing with their constituencies.” The focus is on both traditional and new media with special attention being given to “the development of sound and ethical journalistic, lobby, networking and publication skills.” The project covers Tanzania, Zambia, South Africa, Uganda, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

Obviously, a single citizen journalist cannot be expected to take advantage of all the opportunities or solve all the problems within their communities. But they can do what they can. And that’s what we’re asking you to consider – doing what you can do.

### *Quote - End Quote*

“To make informed decisions, free men and women require honest and reliable news about events affecting their countries and their lives. Whether the newspaper of the future is delivered with electrons or dead trees is ultimately not that important. What is most important is that the news industry remains free, independent - and competitive.” - Rupert Murdoch

# Chapter 9

## Will You Answer the Call?

**C**itizens like you have a significant role to play in the midst of this crisis in journalism. While academics agonize about the situation and hold conferences and symposiums, and while editors deal with severe staff cutbacks, citizen journalists by the tens of thousands are stepping up to fill the gap.

And more are needed. Journalism needs champions of truth - men and women who favor honesty over partisanship, integrity over prejudice and clarity over obfuscation.

If you say yes to this call, here's what will happen to you:



# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

## *You will be forced out of your comfort zone*

You will be out on the streets at unusual times attending interesting meetings where you will encounter fascinating people. Most of the time you'll be safe and with nice people, but sometimes you'll find yourself in strange places and in uncomfortable situations and sometimes even in danger.

Citizen journalists do not hide in their basements or spend all day surfing the Internet. They are where the action is because that's where the really good stories are found. To get the good stories, citizen journalists must talk to people they don't like, consider viewpoints they don't agree with and go places they would not ordinarily go.

Citizen journalists are forced out of their comfort zone in other ways. You may have to learn some new technology or take a course to hone your skills. Leadership guru and author John Maxwell says, "If we're growing, we're always going to be out of our comfort zone." Which brings us to the next thing that will happen to you if you accept this call.

## *You will grow deeply*

The more you research and write on any subject, the smarter you become. In the process you become a person of depth and discernment. You will not be easily fooled or led astray by false facts or fast-talking phonies because you will know your subject well.

Everywhere you go you'll ask, "What's the story here?" And soon you'll be looking for the story behind the story or the personalities that made the story happen. Your nose for news will become hypersensitive and little or nothing will escape your searching eye.

You'll ask questions – not so you can gossip, but so you can discover what's happening and why. You'll want to know who the players are, what events are significant, how the events impact your community and

## *Chapter 9 - Will YOU Answer the Call?*

a dozen other questions for which an active newshound wants some real answers.

### *You will be a person of influence*

The result of being forced out of your comfort zone and becoming well informed is that you become a person of influence. Because of the questions you ask and the information you learn through your sources and research, you will become the go-to person for what is happening in your area of interest. Information is power, and the person that has the information is a powerful person.

And what is really cool about being a well-trained and credentialed citizen journalist is that you have the confidence and credibility it takes to ask the right questions to get to the heart of an issue. As time goes by, people will come to you with their questions because they know you have the information they need.

This is the journalism of the future, according to journalist, author and researcher Tom Rosenstiel. In a November 2009 speech to Minnesota Public Broadcasting principles and guests, he said this:

“Journalism has shifted from being a product, our stories, our stuff, to being a service. The journalist of the 21st century is the one who can say, ‘How can I answer your questions? How can I help you get the answers?’”

### *You will help your community maintain its sense of community*

There is something about local news and especially local newspapers that touches the hearts of friends, neighbors, business and political leaders, civic clubs, sports teams, schools and churches. Hometown news is reassuring; it brings people together, is a source of pride and helps people make sense of things. Things like birth announcements, obituaries, sports scores, school events, business openings and closings, politi-

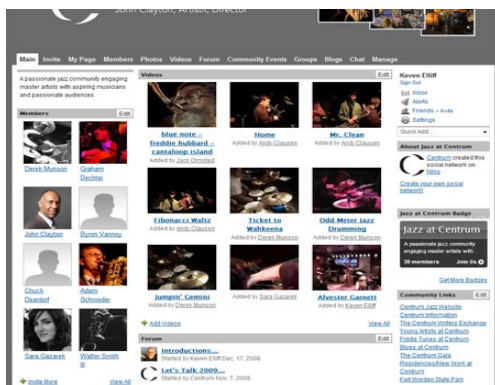
# Handbook for Citizen Journalists

cal maneuverings and all of life's disappointments and accomplishments are chronicled by local news people and news products.

As a citizen journalist, you will play a vital role in building a sense of kinship and understanding in your area. Your stories about interesting people, worthy ideas and important events will help create a community where people know and respect each other.

*You will be a part of an every-increasing worldwide community of like-minded citizens*

In preparing for the writing of this book, we attempted to get a handle on the worldwide impact of citizen journalism. It was one of the most frustrating activities we have every attempted. No one person can know the broad impact that citizen journalists are having around the world. There are too many websites, too many blogs, too many Twitter and Facebook accounts, too many people on LinkedIn who claim to be citizen journalists. And more are coming online every hour.



We believe there are millions of citizen journalists around the world and in every nation. The National Association of Citizen Journalists is connecting those citizen journalists with each other through our citizen journalist social networking system.

When you become a NACJ member, you will meet other citizen journalists from around the world. It is one of the most eclectic, stimulating and personally transforming networks you will ever join. Some you will get to meet face-to-face. Most you'll just meet online and exchange ideas, expertise, experiences and your common enthusiasm for your chosen avocation.

## Chapter 9 - Will YOU Answer the Call?

### *You will live with passion and purpose*

When you say yes, you will ignite a passion within that will bring out the best in you. You will no longer just grumble about what is going on around you, you will do something about it.

In his book, “The Call,” author Os Guinness says: “Somehow we human beings are never happier than when we are expressing the deepest gifts that are truly us.” He furthers the theme later in his book:

“There are many things we do, not for profit, but for the sheer love of doing them. Whether we are doing it for our own sake or the sake of others, we are happy to be doing it, even if nobody is watching us and nobody pays us. We do it gratis pro deo (free as for God), as earlier generations put it.”

### *Everyone gives their life for something*

Ultimately everyone gives their life for something. Most people exchange their time and talents for money. They find a job or a profession that brings them a modicum of pleasure but ultimately what they are after is a paycheck, a few nice benefits and someday a retirement.

Some give their lives for a cause, for something that has lasting significance. A few wander aimlessly accomplishing nothing much more than taking up space on an already crowded planet. But not you.

### *What are you giving your life for?*

The gifts, skills, relationships and knowledge you have - combined with the opportunities and needs that you see before you - create a moment of decision and action for you. You are the only person on Earth – the only



# *Handbook for Citizen Journalists*

person in the past, present or future who can use your unique combination of gifts and talents. You are unique in time and space - only you can be you.

How are you using your unique combinations of gifts and talents?

## *Is this an unreasonable call?*

Yes it is. It is not reasonable to ask someone to give of them self without any promise of fame, fortune or effect. It's contrary to the common theme of our times – look out for number one, get your piece of the pie.

But we're calling you to look out for someone else, to give a little of your pie to someone else, to give a little extra. We're asking you to serve others while most of the world wants someone to serve them. While most of the world shuns confrontation, we're asking you to question boldly. While most of the world is concerned about being politically correct, we're asking you to be correct about what's happening politically.

Here's the bottom line: anyone can do what is reasonable, but only a few are ever called to do what is unreasonable, demanding and maybe even dangerous.

Your destination may be unclear and your success not guaranteed, but if you respond to this call, you will have a voice that will be heard, driven by a vision of a better informed, better led democracy.

T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) wrote in his introduction to *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*,

“All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dreams with open eyes, to make it possible. This I did.”



## *Chapter 9 - Will YOU Answer the Call?*



Join the “dreamers of the day” and act your “dreams with open eyes.”  
*Say yes to the call of citizen journalism.*

# Part 2

## Skills You Need to be a Successful Citizen Journalist



**By Susan Carson Cormier**

# Skills You Need to be a Successful Citizen Journalist

Chapter  
**10**

## **JOURNALISM 101**

### *Defining the News and How to Write It*



Journalism is reporting, writing, editing and disseminating the news in an unbiased manner to inform the public. It's that simple. While the general public has relied on trained, professional journalists for most of their news, citizen journalists are arriving on the scene to fill a void now being left by mainstream media.

With just a little bit of training and practice, citizen journalists can be as reliable and responsible in their reporting as the paid professionals.

Let's start your training by defining news. Generally speaking, news is the report of a development that changes or alters an existing situation or status quo.

News can be an account of an event, such as a city council meeting, a governor's speech, a business gathering or a junior high school baseball game. It also can be facts about a situation, such as the number of women seeking refuge at a shelter or a local teen becoming an Eagle Scout.

Sometimes news can change as you are gathering your information for your report. For example, a congressman may announce he is running for re-election but then suffers a heart attack and dies. What once was the main point of the story – the announcement of the re-election campaign – now becomes a secondary element to an article about a congressman's death.

# **JOURNALISM 101**

## ***Defining the News and How to Write It***

### ***Gathering Your Information***

Reporting the news isn't rocket science, but knowledge of a few key steps will make your job as an information gatherer much easier. While these steps are expanded upon in more detail in National Association of Citizen Journalists' training webinars, we'll cover them briefly here. The key reporting steps include:

1. Whenever possible, do research prior to conducting interviews or covering a news event. Find out the background of the people involved, find out the history of the particular topic. The Internet has made this aspect of reporting the news easier. An overwhelming amount of information is available, however, you will want to double-check the information in your pursuit of an accurate and complete story. Just because the information was on the Internet, doesn't make it absolutely true.

Of course, with breaking news, this step won't be possible. You will be covering the news as it happens. If you need more information, your research will have to wait until after the breaking news has occurred. In the case of a deadly car accident at a major intersection, you might want to follow-up with police and find out how many people have died in car accidents at that location in the last year or two.

2. Acknowledge your biases pertaining to the topic at hand. Everyone has biases. But when you are reporting and disseminating the news, it is imperative that you acknowledge your bias and set it aside so that you can present an accurate and fair report. If you are unable to do that, you should give the story to someone else to cover.

3. Be thorough in your reporting. Good reporting is essential to writing a complete news article.

Be sure to get the answers to the 5 Ws and how?

Who? Who did what to whom? Who is involved?

What? What did they do?



# **JOURNALISM 101**

## ***Defining the News and How to Write It***

Why? Why did they do it? This question can often save an interview that might be going nowhere.

Where? Where did they do it?

When? When did it happen?

How? How did it happen?

Remember, each answer has the potential to inspire additional questions. Don't be afraid to ask them. In fact, ask more questions than you think you will ever be able to write about. It is better to have more material than you will ever use than not enough.

Listen to the answers. Don't assume the answer will be what you think it should be. Also, if it is a quick yes or no answer, make sure you follow it up with another question, such as 'why?'



4. Get all sides of the story. Don't just interview one person and let it go at that. There may be one or several other people who have a different feeling from the event that you are covering.

Don't assume that there are only two sides to the story. There could be more. So get all sides.

Of course, there are times when a story only has one side. If someone says the sky is blue, you don't have to go find someone to disagree. Weather forecasts, lottery winners and some press announcements are examples of types of stories that could have only one side.

5. Understand the issue you are writing about. If you don't understand something, ask for another explanation. Don't stop asking for an explanation until you fully understand what you will be writing about. If you don't understand the topic, there is no way you can write an article in a way that others can understand.

6. Strive for accuracy. This includes checking facts that are checkable.

# **JOURNALISM 101**

## ***Defining the News and How to Write It***

Go to the police department or appropriate source and verify claims that have been made. Verify the spelling of everyone's names and their titles. If there is information that can't be checked, make sure you use attribution. Knowing who said what helps to put the information into context. Also, witnesses to an auto accident – or any other unexpected event – often see different things so identify and quote who saw what.

### ***Writing the News Story***

Whether you are writing your news story for a print or online news outlet, or for radio or TV, you need to have a straightforward first paragraph that will grab the attention of readers or listeners.

The first paragraph – called the lead in journalism lingo – needs to be short, provocative, clear and simple. A hard news lead should summarize briefly what happened and when it happened. As a general rule, it should be one sentence. In fact, the shorter, the better. Try to keep your leads below 35 words.

There are many different types of leads that can be written. For example, some leads ask questions, some offer direct quotes, some are anecdotal.

Many newspapers these days use more anecdotal leads than they had in the past, but that type of lead requires people to take time to dig for the news – time they often don't have.

People want the news to hit them head-on, so don't put the lead in the fifth or sixth paragraph. Many readers or listeners won't stay with the story long enough to find out what it is about.

Leads are often considered the hardest part of the article to write because they need to be short and highlight what the rest of the story is about.

# **JOURNALISM 101**

## ***Defining the News and How to Write It***

Here are two fictional examples:

Faced with increasing expenses, the Water and Sanitation District voted unanimously on Monday to raise Parker's residential water rates by 10 per cent in 2010.

This 24-word lead answered the five Ws and how.

Who: Water and Sanitation District  
What: Raised residential water rates  
When: Monday  
Where: Parker  
Why: Increasing expenses  
How: By a unanimous vote

The second example:

Winds reportedly whipping at up to 120 miles per hour damaged four homes in the Elizabeth area Saturday afternoon, but police said no injuries were reported.

This 26-word lead answered three of the five Ws and how.

What: Four homes were damaged  
How: Winds whipping at up to 120 mph  
When: Saturday afternoon  
Where: Elizabeth area

Again, additional examples are given in the training webinars offered by the National Association of Citizen Journalists.

To summarize, the lead is the showcase of any news story. It must be clear, concise and understandable to everyone. It should tell the readers quickly if

they want to read the rest of the story.

### ***Writing the Rest of the Story***

News articles should be written in third person and in an inverted pyramid format, starting with the lead that summarizes the key items of a news event.

The second and sometimes the third paragraph should back up the lead and provide additional answers, such as the how and why, and maybe even a quote. Each succeeding paragraph should contain information that is secondary and that can be listed in order of decreasing importance. All of your paragraphs should contain information that is worth noting, but each paragraph is less important than the one before it.

The reason articles are written in this style is because it allows readers to understand the news quickly. It hits them head-on, making it more convenient for readers to quickly understand what happened and decide if they want to continue reading the article.

### ***Fourteen Keys to Writing Good Articles***

1. You are writing for people who may not have been at an event, but they want to know what happened. You are their eyes and ears. Use strong verbs to provide a good description for your readers.

2. Write your articles in third person. "I" should only be used within a quote or in an opinion piece. Use both first and last names the first time you identify a source or person being quoted. After that, use the last name only. There is one exception. If you are quoting a couple with the same last name. In that case, you need to use first and last names in future references.

3. Be objective. Report only what you see or what you are told. Do not



# **JOURNALISM 101**

## ***Defining the News and How to Write It***

interpret or put your opinion into the article. All people have biases. Your job, as a citizen journalist, is to identify your biases and set them aside so that you can report as objectively as possible. Readers should be allowed to make up their own minds and develop their own opinions.

4. **Timeliness.** You need to submit or post an article in a timely fashion. If it is something that happened three months ago, people won't be as interested as if it happened yesterday.

5. **Proximity.** The closeness to the situation or event also is a key component, especially for community journalists. Denver readers aren't as interested in a junior high school game in Colorado Springs as they are about a game in their own town.

6. **Use correct grammar.** Nothing turns a reader off faster than incorrect grammar. This also means to be consistent with the tense you use. With hard news, that normally means past tense. You know someone said something. You do not know whether he or she says it still.



7. **Be accurate.** Make sure words are spelled correctly. Double-check names, addresses and dates.

8. **Be specific.** Specify the date rather than saying "recently." If someone has been in business or held office for a long time, give the number of years.

9. **Be brief, tight, concise.** Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. Be clear. Use simple language. A good guideline is: One sentence, one idea. To a degree, write the way you talk.

This also means you should avoid excess words. The sentence, "In order for John to graduate from high school," could be written as, "For John to graduate from high school." The words "in order" don't add anything to the meaning of the story. After you have written your article, go through it and

# **JOURNALISM 101**

## ***Defining the News and How to Write It***

see if you can take out excess words.

10. Be smooth. Stories must have a flow. They are not a series of paragraphs. They are complete entities. Work to make the paragraphs flow into each other.

11. Use quotes and plenty of attribution. Choose quotes that add color and visuals to your article. Attribute anything that can't be verified.

12. Be fair and present all sides of the story. Make sure all sides are covered. If there are three people at a debate, write about what each of the three said. Don't leave out one person because you don't agree with what he or she is saying.

13. Be thorough. Leave no reasonable question unanswered. Also, don't forget to include background information. Don't assume that your readers know what has happened in the past.

14. Be careful with word use. Here are some examples:

— Words like “feel,” “think” and “believe” are states of mind and should be avoided unless used in a quote. You know someone said it. You do not know if she/he admitted, endorsed or cited it.

— Several, many and various are interpreted differently by different people.

— There is not the same as their. Site is not the same as sight or cite.

Try to avoid:

— Long or bureaucratic words. Utilize is a great example. The word is use. “Ize” words, such as finalize, departmentalize, should be avoided.

— Words that you have to look up in the dictionary. The rule of thumb is that if the writer doesn't know the meaning of the word, the reader won't either.

# Skills You Need to be a Successful Citizen Journalist

Chapter  
**11**

## HOW TO WRITE FEATURE ARTICLES



A feature is a soft news story that can be delivered in a number of ways. It can come in the form of a personality profile, a human interest story or it can be a more in-depth look at an issue. Many people really enjoy writing in this format because it is more free flowing and less restrictive than a straight news article.

Features aren't meant to deliver the news, but they contain elements of news. Their main purpose is to add the human element to the news, to add color and feeling. They often recap major news that already has been reported.

For example, a feature could be a personality profile of the principal at a brand new high school. The hard news story would be the opening of the new school. The soft news is the profile, which brings readers more information about the person who is running the school. These types of stories are designed to give your readers more insight into people in the news.

***Feature stories are different than hard news articles because:***

- \* They don't necessarily have to be written under the same deadline pressure because they are not breaking news. The writer can take more time to work with the words and the information.

- \* People who read feature stories usually have more time to read and peruse articles. This allows the writer to take more time to tell the story. The

# HOW TO WRITE FEATURE ARTICLES

basics of the story don't have to be summarized in the lead, like in a straight news article.

## *Types of Feature Stories*

Three approaches to features stories are a personality profile, a human interest story and an in-depth look into an issue.

A personality profile personalizes a person who may or may not have been in the news, such as the high school principal mentioned before. It could be an interview with a person who volunteers at a food bank or an animal shelter or someone who just turned 100.

These stories are designed to make the individual more human. They let the reader know what the subject had to go through to get where he or she is today, or what led them to be interested in being a volunteer.

Personality profiles can head in a variety of directions.

For some, it all starts with the interview. For example, the 100-year-old might want to talk about the key to longevity or life experiences that occurred more than 50 years ago.

For other profiles, it is good to do a little research beforehand, if possible. For example, get the resume of the new high school principal so you know in advance where he or she has been. This allows you to develop some good questions in advance of the interview.

And there are times when the person you are interviewing just won't make a good profile. If your interviewee won't open up or talk about the subject at hand, you can either drop the story entirely or try interviewing the person's colleagues and associates. They might be able to provide some fun and insightful anecdotes that you can use to write your piece.

# HOW TO WRITE FEATURE ARTICLES

Next are human interest stories. These are similar to personality profiles, however, they do not always have a strong news peg. These are stories that are reported because they are unusual or have emotional or entertainment value.

Here are some examples:

— Three good friends get together to celebrate one of their birthdays. The birthday girl usually celebrates her birthday by doing something unusual, like sky diving or scuba diving. On this birthday, her friends want her to overcome her fear of horses, so they get together and spend the day horseback riding. There's no particular news angle here, but it is a fun story about three friends and the celebration of a birthday.

— A group of guys in their 60s meet weekly for a basketball game. Interviews with these guys can add some insight into why they come out and play every week. Do they want to stay in shape, get out of the house or beat up on some buddies? Who knows what they might say.



Again, there's not a lot of news value in either of these stories, but they offer an interesting twist on everyday life.

Human interest stories also can include a news angle. For example, you could write a feature about a woman who clips coupons and saves hundreds of dollars on her food bills. She may have started doing this because of hard economic times, so that could be the news peg. Volunteer firefighters could be interviewed during wild fire season to explain why they do what they do, the risks and rewards.

It can be easy to come up with ideas for human interest stories. Just open

# HOW TO WRITE FEATURE ARTICLES

your mind and your eyes. Stories are all around you.

Finally, the third type of feature is an in-depth look at a news topic where you can take a little extra time. You can conduct research and additional interviews to go way beyond the basic news story. For example:

— You could spend time with a family who has a disabled or severely ill child to see how they cope with caring for the child and how it impacts other children in the family and the parents' employment.

— You could interview a variety of people who were forced to switch careers because of tough economic times and changes in the workplace. What did they have to go through to find new careers, did they have to be re-educated, etc.?

These types of pieces take more time in the interview and research areas, as well as cooperation from those featured. It is best to do most of your research prior to the interviews, so that you are fully informed and prepared to ask questions. Keep in mind, however, that some additional information may come up during your interviews that may require additional research. You will have time to do that if necessary. In the meantime, don't be afraid to ask the source to explain or elaborate.

Try not to predetermine where these stories are going. While you may have an idea what direction your story may take before you start, it could switch directions midway through. Bottom line: Keep an open mind.

## ***Writing the Feature Story***

Features are usually not written in the traditional inverted pyramid form with a hard news lead. As mentioned previously, people usually have a little more time on their hands when they read feature stories. That gives the writer the opportunity to bring the readers into the story, to get them involved.



# HOW TO WRITE FEATURE ARTICLES

To create a mood for your readers, you can use several different types of intros. Here are a few:

Anecdotal - or narrative - intros. This type of intro draws the reader into the story by setting the scene for them. It can take several paragraphs to set the scene before getting to the real reason for the story. When taking this approach, you need to get your readers attached to a person or situation so they will continue reading.

As a rule of thumb, the reason for the story is usually in the third or fourth paragraph. In journalism lingo, this is referred to as the nut graph.

The Associated Press provided us with a great example about a Sri Lanka survivor of the tsunami that hit south Asia on Dec. 26, 2004. The tsunami killed 230,000 people, including 16 close relatives of this survivor. Here's the intro:

“PETTIYADICHCHENI, Sri Lanka - Every morning and evening, Velmurugu Kangasuriyam gathers his 2-year-old daughter and his wife and confronts the wreckage of his former life.

“His wife, Thaya, lights an oil lamp on the mantle of a dark, bare concrete room. Kangasuriyam presses his hands together and closes his eyes. Little Theresa follows in imitation. For a long minute, his new family stands in silent prayer.

“Thaya places orange flowers in front of pictures of Hindu gods. She lays several more before a picture of Kangasuriyam's parents.

“The last flowers sit in front of a photo of a woman in a red bridal sari: Devi, who was Kangasuriyam's wife for just 10 months before she died with his parents, three of his sisters and a brother four years ago Friday.”

This writing draws you into the scene. You can pretty much picture the day in Sri Lanka.

# **HOW TO WRITE FEATURE ARTICLES**

Another type of intro could be a contrast lead. This makes comparisons such as old and new, or short and tall. These types of intros are great for historical-type pieces. Here's an example:

In 1912, Elbert's first and only mail carrier delivered the mail to your home, as well as groceries or whatever else you needed in town. In 2009, the U.S. Postal Service is having a hard time finding carriers who will deliver mail to the 8,000 people living in the town's 80 square miles.

Another intro could be a quote. To be effective, the quote should be the most powerful one in the story or set the tone for what is to follow. Some editors do not like quote leads, but good quotes can carry the day.

A great example of a quote lead came after US Airways Flight 1549 landed in the Hudson River on Jan. 15, 2009. Keep in mind this was not the hard-news story reporting the crash. This was continuing coverage in the days that followed.

The intro read: "This is a story of heroes," said New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg Friday of the incredible Hudson River landing Thursday of US Airways Flight 1549, in which all 155 people aboard survived.

Another quote that could have been as effectively used in a follow-up article was: "We have had a Miracle on 34th Street. I believe now we have had a miracle on the Hudson," said New York Gov. David Paterson as he described the rescue and survival of all 155 people aboard the US Airways plane that landed on the Hudson River on Thursday.

And finally, there is the question lead, in which a question is asked in the first paragraph and the answer is found in the second or later paragraph. These types of leads are easy to write. But most newspaper editors don't particularly like them because readers want answers - not questions - in that first paragraph.



# HOW TO WRITE FEATURE ARTICLES

Here's one example:

Are you ready for some baseball?  
Approximately 200 youngsters are anxiously awaiting the first pitch Saturday as they open the Little League season in Pima County.

## *Writing the Rest of the Story*

After the intro in the feature story, you will want to include information as to why you are writing the story – or more importantly, why your readers should spend their precious time reading the article. Again, this typically should be in the third or fourth paragraph, the nut graph.



Provide plenty of background information. Remember, you are expanding on a news angle. Don't forget to include the news. This would most likely be information from a previously written hard news story. In the school principal story, it would be the information about when the person was named principal, a little bit of information about the school, when it opened, etc.

Sprinkle your story with quotes, especially early in the article, to establish a good reader/source relationship. Quotes are always a great addition to a feature story. They also are a wonderful way to end an article, particularly if you have a quote that summarizes your source's thoughts.

# NOTES



# Skills You Need to be a Successful Citizen Journalist

Chapter  
**12**



## **HOW TO WRITE ABOUT SPORTS**

The sporting world offers citizen journalists almost limitless possibilities as the number of sports and fans continue to grow.

All sorts of different levels and rules exist in sports - from pee wee football

to high school, college and pros.

There also are all different types of sports. Football, baseball, basketball and hockey are the obvious ones. But let's not forget about those that your neighbors and kids participate in – swimming, tennis, golf and bowling. And don't forget those often neglected equestrian competitions, track and field events, as well as lacrosse, racquetball and volleyball, not to mention the National Senior Games.

Since the mainstream media doesn't have the resources to cover all of these events, regular fans and family members of the competitors can provide the coverage sought by others following the sporting events.

Of course, citizen journalists covering the games of their family members should strive to be as objective as possible. So if you are a parent covering your son's athletic competitions, identify your bias and set it aside so you can provide fair reporting and writing.

For sports writing and reporting, you use basically the same skills and techniques as you would a news report or feature article. These skills – which should become habits - include doing your research ahead of time

# Chapter 12

# HOW TO WRITE ABOUT SPORTS

and checking your facts to make sure they are correct.

Learn who the key players are and who the coach will go to at crunch time.

This information can be uncovered in a variety of places. You can access information online, in newspaper morgues, in public libraries or by talking to coaches, players, students or spectators.

## Preparation for Game Day

To do an adequate job, citizen journalists must know the sport they are writing about. They need to know the rules and what statistics are important for basic coverage of a contest. This could require some additional preparation for those who are just learning a sport or are not entirely familiar with all of the rules.

Citizen journalists also would benefit from doing advance work.

With college and professional sports, a sports information officer is often available to give out information to reporters covering a game or event. This can include statistics, quotes from players and the coach's plan of attack for the game. In fact, so much information can be handed out that very little effort is needed as far as reporting and covering a game – at least for the basic game story.

You won't find that same type of information flow at your weekend Pee Wee football game or even your child's high school baseball game. That's why doing the leg work in advance will make the game day coverage easier for you.

The image shows a page from 'Le Journal de Montréal' titled 'L'affrontement' and 'Vos STATS'. It features several tables of sports statistics. The top section is 'Baseball majeur' with a 'Classement' table for the National League (NL) and American League (AL). Below that are 'Les meneurs' (Leaders) for National and American leagues, listing top performers in various categories like batting average, home runs, and RBIs. The bottom section contains 'Classement' tables for the National and American leagues, showing team records, wins, losses, and other statistics.

# HOW TO WRITE ABOUT SPORTS

For example, you should get the rosters of each team's players for an upcoming competition. You should learn about the teams' records and general histories and if there are any rivalries or if there is any other type of emotion that might present itself during the event. You should learn who the key players are and who the coach will go to at crunch time. This information can be uncovered in a variety of places.

## *Reporting on the Competition*

As citizen journalists, you will probably need to keep your own statistics. The bottom line is your story might contain more color and flavor of the game, race or match than actual statistics. Once the event is over, try and get a quote from a coach, a player or even a parent of a key player.

Use your feel of the game, limited statistics, the score and selected quotes to put your article together. Put the score and winner in the first or second paragraph. Your readers don't want to read to the 10th or 11th paragraph to find that information.

Also, please respect the wishes of some coaches and parents who may not want their player or child interviewed. These are not professionals who have been trained in how to talk to the media. You are dealing with kids who are out there for the fun of the game – not to make a multi-million-dollar living.



And please pay special attention to the spelling of names. If a player's name is included in your coverage, get it right or face the wrath of an upset parent. It's easy. Just ask them to spell their name for you.



# HOW TO WRITE ABOUT SPORTS

Whether you are covering a Little League baseball game or the World Series, being properly prepared and being able to capture the feel of the game or event are crucial.

If you have significant background facts, knowledge of players and coaches, and a feel for the game-day setting, you can weave this information into your story without too much trouble.

Your observations and knowledge will give readers a much more insightful report than the basic – The East High Bulldogs beat Central High’s Hawks 6-5 in 10 innings at County Stadium on Saturday.

It would be more fun to read: The underdog East High Bulldogs refused to let opponents’ chants and Saturday’s chilly temperatures at County Stadium stop them in their 10th inning 6-5 victory over the Central High Hawks.

Of course, you have to be careful that your insight doesn’t lead to cheer-leading or over embellishing about one of the teams in your article. As mentioned previously, if you are a parent or family member of a player, you have to acknowledge that fact and then try to keep your enthusiasm reigned in to produce as unbiased of a report as possible.

Regardless of the sport, your stories should include some of the same basic information. Use a straightforward summary lead that includes who, what, when, where, why and how.

Let’s use the Bulldogs/Hawks game as an example:

Who: East High Bulldogs

What: 6-5 10th inning victors

When: Saturday

Where: County Stadium

Why and how: Refused to let opponents’ chants and chilly temperatures stop them.

# HOW TO WRITE ABOUT SPORTS



In the second paragraph, you can include information that explains why the Bulldogs were the underdog.

Subsequent paragraphs may discuss the game-day setting – such as the specific temperatures – and what led the opponents to chant against the Bulldogs. Give examples of what was said.

This would be followed by information about how the Bulldogs got the victory and highlights from the game, including home runs, strike outs, walks, RBIs or runs batted in.

Here are some additional examples of what type of information you should include for other sports:

A citizen journalist's article about a basketball game should include high scorers of the game and any remarkable facts such as players fouling out, getting injured or shooting unusually good or bad.

Highlights for a football article could include interceptions, completed passes, touchdowns, field goals and yards run by key players.

For swimming or track and field events, you should identify the type of race, such as the men's 100 butterfly or 100-yard dash. Include the scores in minutes, seconds and even hundredths if possible.

All of these stories should have the score and winner in the first or second paragraph. They also could include a post-competition quote or two, as well as information on the next scheduled match, game or race. Records in the division and overall season could also be included to round out the story.

# NOTES





# Skills You Need to be a Successful Citizen Journalist

Chapter  
**13**

## ***HOW TO CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW***



One of the most effective ways for citizen journalists to gather information is through personal interviews with people who have the information they need.

If you're writing an article about a dangerous intersection in your community, you could talk to several different people. You could interview a traffic cop, the town traffic engineer, a city council member, a victim of an accident that happened at the intersection, the owner of a nearby business impacted by the traffic flow, a tow truck driver, neighborhood citizens and even traffic light manufacturers so you have an idea of what a new more modern traffic light costs.

Each of these perspectives will provide you with a different view of the problem and give you several angles for writing your story.

Conducting an interview isn't as simple as it might seem. In fact, it can be quite intimidating to someone who is new at it, or if the interviews are related to controversial issues.

Let's start with the basics.

Decide what type of article you will be writing, why the interview is needed and who needs to be interviewed. Is it a personality profile, is it a hard news story about a pressing issue, is it a puff piece about a 103-year-old's birthday?

# **HOW TO CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW**

The second thing you must do prior to setting up an interview is research.

Citizen journalists who take the time to do a little bit of research to learn the background of the source, as well as basic information about the subject at hand, are much more likely to have a successful interview than someone who goes in with no advance knowledge.

Sources are much more likely to open up and talk about the topic when they are being asked intelligent questions by someone who understands what they are talking about. You can really break the ice by going into an interview with knowledge.

Where do you do that research? Many resources exist: the Internet, libraries, a newspaper morgue, a public information officer, or governmental agencies and their staffs.

More detailed information about doing research is available in the university-level training provided by the National Association of Citizen Journalists.

After you have done your homework, you can set up the interview. This can be done in various ways. The best way is to call the source or the source's assistant and set up a time to either talk in person or over the phone. Make sure they know that you are working as a citizen journalist and plan to submit the story to whatever medium you use. Identifying yourself as a citizen journalist is much like a police officer reading accused criminals their Miranda rights. It is something that should be done before each and every interview.

When you are requesting the interview, be sure to let the source know what information you are seeking. Give them a brief synopsis of the story you are planning to write and how long you expect the interview to take. If they can't give you as much time as you have requested, take what you can

# HOW TO CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW

get and then spend some extra time preparing your questions so that you can retrieve the key information you need from that source in your allotted time frame. You can always go to other sources for additional information.

In today's hectic society, phone interviews are often the preferred method by both the citizen journalist and source. Some sources prefer to be sent questions via email and respond that way as well. That should be your last resort.

Email takes away the personal contact, which can often add dimension to your article. Don't agree to an email type of interview unless that is the only way to get the information you need.



While phone interviews are convenient, if you have time and if the source is willing, a face-to-face interview can be much more productive. Face-to-face interviews give you, the citizen journalist, the opportunity to observe your sources and to see them in their setting. For example, wouldn't it be much more fun and informational to interview a

junior high school football coach after a practice? You can arrive early and watch the coach in action with the kids, giving yourself insight that will add depth to the story you end up writing.

Sources should be given the opportunity to select the time and the place for this type of interview. They are taking time out of their day to provide you with information.

The situation, of course, is different when you are dealing with breaking news. If you are covering news as it is happening, you won't have time to do research or even prepare questions. You will simply have to think quickly and critically. Interview as many people as you can who are on the scene or at the event. If an answer doesn't make sense, question again what the person is telling you. For the most part, you will have to accept what infor-

# HOW TO CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW

mation you can get on the scene and prepare your story from that. In some cases, you can follow up later with fire or police officials to get additional information.

Let's move on to questions.



If you are doing a phone interview, you can write down the questions on a sheet of paper that you can refer to during the interview. This will help you be organized and efficient in your questioning.

If the interview is in person, however, a list of questions can distract your source and might make him or her freeze up a little bit. In face-to-face interviews, try to memorize the topics you want to discuss and take the interview from there.

In either type of interview, additional questions may come up because of the source's responses. Make sure you ask those questions.

There are two basic types of questions that can be asked – open-ended and closed-ended. You probably will use both types to get complete information.

Open-ended questions can provide you with a lot more information than you could have imagined. They are a good way to break the ice between you and your source, and allow your source to relax and elaborate on a topic. For example, an open-ended question could be: Did you ever dream of becoming a professional race car driver when you were 5 years old? This will allow your interviewees to be as detailed as they want in explaining their career choice.

Other times, you will need a specific “yes” or “no” answer. In these cases,

# HOW TO CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW

you should ask closed-ended questions to get a yes or no response rather than a reply that doesn't answer your question. For example: Is it true that your parents discouraged you from becoming a race car driver?

When do you use which type of question? If the interview is time limited, you might need to ask a few closed-ended questions to get your answers in a short amount of time. These also can be effective if your source isn't used to being interviewed. You can get some basic information while they are getting used to answering your questions. Open-ended questions are most effective after the source has relaxed a little bit and is willing to open up to you.

Six keys to good interviews:

1. Do your research. Be able to talk as intelligently as possible about the subject at hand, so that you can ask informed questions.
2. Listen to the answers. Don't assume that you know what the answer will be. Listen.
3. Make it a conversation, so that the person feels more comfortable. If it is a conversation, the interviewees will get a sense that you actually care about what they are saying.
4. Be open to asking questions you had not planned. Your interviewee may provide you with information that leads to additional questions you had not planned on asking. Make sure you ask those new questions.
5. Observe. This is best in a face-to-face interview. Your observations about sources in their office or with their children will help you paint a picture for your readers. These observations are fantastic in feature stories, but they also are effective in news stories. For example, you can paint the picture of fire victims standing barefoot outside their home in the middle of the night in just their bathrobes.
6. When you think you've have completed the interview, ask your sources



# HOW TO CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW

if they have anything else to say or to add. They are the experts and know if important information hasn't been discussed.

## *Challenging or Hostile Interviews*

Not all interviews are easy to conduct. Some can be quite intimidating. Imagine getting a comment from a high school basketball coach just after he lost the state championship or from a county commissioner who just voted against something 250 people in the audience wanted him to vote for.

Three tips for gaining courage in this type of situation include:

1. Realize that we are all people who put our trousers on the same way each day – one leg at a time. That puts us at a low common denominator.
2. Know that we all have a job to do - the coach, the county commissioner, the professional or citizen journalist. As citizen journalists, you are just doing your job – to inform the public about what is happening in your communities. To do that, you need to get as much information as possible. You can tell the commissioner that his or her constituents will want an explanation of the vote. You



will be saving the commissioner time in phone calls, etc., by including that side of the story in your article. Same for the coach or school principal.

Also, recognize that the coach or commissioner might be a bit sensitive, so consider that factor as you ask for a comment. Be careful in the wording of your question. Don't

antagonize the person you want to interview.

3. Identify yourself and say that you're working as a citizen journalist for whatever publication or outlet you are writing your story. That

# **HOW TO CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW**

information gives you some credibility and authenticity, and a reason for asking your questions. If you complete the Beat Reporter training offered by the National Association of Citizen Journalists, you also will have NACJ certification and a press badge to give you added credibility.

There will be occasions when people are reluctant or refuse to be interviewed. That is their prerogative. No one is required to give you an interview.

But there are methods you can use to try and get them to talk to you. Here are six tips you could use:

1. Do your best to understand the source's position. Perhaps there is an unknown reason the person has for acting a certain way.
2. Ask questions that show you are knowledgeable about the subject matter. Sources tend to open up or talk more if they know they are talking with someone who has done the advance research and has some knowledge about the topic at hand.
3. If you are following up on accusations that have been made, repeat those allegations so the source can respond to specifics.
4. Refrain from asking questions in a hostile manner. Try to phrase the question so that you don't come across as an accuser.
5. Don't stop asking questions until you feel the interview is complete or until the source has left the room or hung up the phone.
6. Don't be afraid to give your sources some information in return for their time and their information. Some sources will trade what they know for some information you can give them.

# NOTES





# Skills You Need to be a Successful Citizen Journalist

Chapter  
**14**

## **HOW TO GENERATE STORY IDEAS**



Citizen journalists do not have to rely on public announcements or press releases to generate news or feature stories. They are free to think outside the box and come up with stories that are not the run-of-the-mill pieces often produced by the professional media.

Citizen journalists will see stories everywhere if they keep their eyes and ears open as they move about their communities. All they have to do is be observant and watch what is going on and listen to what people are talking about.

Is dirt being hauled to a vacant lot? Are roads being closed for construction? Find out why and what is being done or going on. Are people talking about rumors that a big box store is coming to your area? Find out if those rumors are true.

### ***Ten Ways to Generate Story Ideas***

1. Spin off or focus on just one part of a larger story. For example, many cities and towns hold festivals each summer. While the bigger story would be about the festival in general, smaller stories could be told that go into more specifics. For example, local artisans and/or performers who will be appearing at the event could be featured and made the focus of a story. If it has been an unusually dry year weather-wise, firefighters could talk about fire prevention and landscapers could educate others about xeriscape landscaping.

# HOW TO GENERATE STORY IDEAS

2. Look for signs or activities that might be worthy of a story. Children riding horses routinely at a stable might actually be receiving horseback riding therapy. A dance studio announces it won a regional contest. It may have an up-and-coming star. Neighbors put up signs in their yards about a ballot initiative. What's the story?



3. Ask questions. When you are at an event, ask the person next to you what's going on or if there's anything happening in his or her life. A simple question can lead to a great story. You never know what information a person may have until you ask.

4. Look at governmental agendas. Legislatures, school districts, city and county governments all have committees, boards, commissions and councils that meet regularly to make decisions regarding the community's future. Check out their agendas and see if there is anything that catches your eye that would be of interest to your neighbors. If you see something interesting, start asking questions. It may or may not be worthy of an article, but you never know until you make your inquiries.

Most cities and towns have agendas on their websites. For some smaller cities and towns that don't have a website, all you have to do is ask a city manager or administrator or clerk for agendas of upcoming meetings.

Government websites contain much more than agendas, so see what else you can find that might be a great story. The city of Aurora, Colo., has an award-winning website that provides citizens with a mountain of information about city government, events, departments, law enforcement, permits, elections, and on and on. It even has a link to help you find your lost pet. Check out the events that are coming up, the permits that have been pulled or even the lost dog of the week.

Again, if you don't find what you need on your city's website or if your

# HOW TO GENERATE STORY IDEAS

city or town doesn't have a website, you can always walk into town hall and ask questions. The people in the offices are there to help and, in most cases, will be ready, willing and able to get you the information you need.

5. Check out the websites established by local organizations, agencies or Internet entrepreneurs. You'll find that many local groups list a variety of items on their websites.

The City of Grants Pass, Ore., has an extensive community calendar that lists upcoming events in the area, some of which might be worth a separate feature article. One month's calendar listed local theater productions and art shows, as well as an All You Can Eat Pancake Breakfast & Chili Cook Off, an Artisan & Crafters Market, a Boatnik Festival and a concert by the Rogue Valley Women's Barbershop Chorus. Any of these listings could generate a great story. Wouldn't it be fun to interview the women who are members of the barbershop chorus? Or you could investigate how a pancake breakfast and chili cook off came about. Pancakes and chili don't really go together, so there might be a fascinating story there.



Cities like Bangor, Maine, have a number of community websites that provide a variety of information. Here are just a few for Bangor:

[www.bangormaine.gov/](http://www.bangormaine.gov/) Bangor city website

[www.bangorcvb.org/](http://www.bangorcvb.org/) - Greater Bangor Convention and Visitors Bureau

[www.flybangor.com/](http://www.flybangor.com/) - Bangor International Airport

[www.downtownbangor.com/](http://www.downtownbangor.com/) - Downtown Bangor Association

[www.bangordailynews.com/](http://www.bangordailynews.com/) - Bangor Daily News

[www.bangorregion.com/](http://www.bangorregion.com/) - Bangor Region Chamber of Commerce

[www.bpl.lib.me.us/](http://www.bpl.lib.me.us/) - Bangor Public Library

[www.bangorstatefair.com/](http://www.bangorstatefair.com/) - Bangor State Fair

# HOW TO GENERATE STORY IDEAS

6. Look for trends. Trends could involve a rash of burglaries in a specific area, several new restaurants opening, increased vacancies in strip malls or even an unusually large number of babies being born during a certain week or month.

7. Volunteer opportunities. Volunteers who work behind the scenes in many communities can offer compelling stories. Whether it's someone who volunteers at the local food bank, pet shelter or hospital, there's sure to be a story that could be told.

Some volunteers may not want to be featured because they like to stay behind the scenes. That's their prerogative. You can't force someone to do an interview. Instead, take a different angle to the story. Write about the program the volunteer is a part of instead of the specific volunteer. For



example, you could feature a tutoring program at a local school or special goodies given to the area's food bank recipients during the holidays.

Businesses also do volunteer work or charitable deeds. No doubt they would love any publicity for donating proceeds from a day's sales to the Boys Scouts of America or for donating hair styling services to women at a women's shelter.

8. Sporting events. In addition to covering the actual competition, these activities can offer all sorts of ideas if you keep your eyes open and watch people interact with each other. Perhaps a coach has a special bond with one of the players. Maybe a competitor has a large family that shows up for every game. You can also ask fellow attendees if they know of anything new going on in the sport or the community. You might be surprised by what they might know that isn't public knowledge but is of interest to your neighbors and friends.



# HOW TO GENERATE STORY IDEAS

9. Achievements of children and neighborhood youth. Schools, scouts and athletics offer all sorts of stories that could be written. Whether your child has become an Eagle Scout, volunteers time at the local pet shelter or is an accomplished pianist, there are just about no limits here. If you don't have kids but want to report about what some outstanding students are doing, just check with the schools in your area.

10. Look for the unusual, out-of-the-ordinary. It could be a mountain lion spotted in a neighborhood, an unusual number or students absent from a school on a specific day, a homeless family finding a way to finally afford a home, or thunder during a winter snowstorm. If it is unusual, there's a good possibility that others would want to know about it.

Other ideas include featuring professions, such as firefighters or road workers or even snow plow drivers. You also could look at various other topics, like business developments, technology, weather, the outdoors. Or you could take an issue, such as rebuilding hope in a depressed part of town, and write a series of articles about it. You could feature different and interesting angles that could be explored.



In addition to those top 10 ideas, a multitude of other resources exist for coming up with information and story ideas about your community. Here are a few more:

### *Public libraries*

You will be amazed at the amount of community information that is available just on the bulletin board of your local library. In addition, most libraries have comprehensive websites that are great resources for research.

The Los Angeles Public Library has a wonderful website feature called

# HOW TO GENERATE STORY IDEAS

“Ask a librarian.” It’s a tab that gives you six ways to get information, including instant messaging and email.

## *School district websites*

Information about what is happening in your area schools is readily available on your local school district’s website. Want to know what’s happening in Tempe, Ariz., schools? Just visit [www.tempeschools.org](http://www.tempeschools.org), and you’ll find more information than you can use, along with contact information for getting interviews, specifics, etc.

## *Local newspapers and their websites*

Your local newspaper is always a good source for what’s happening around your town. Many now provide comprehensive news coverage on a website. One very interesting and informative newspaper website can be found in Norfolk, Neb., at [www.norfolkdailynews.com](http://www.norfolkdailynews.com).

## *Public access channels*

Another resource for news and information is the public access channel provided by most cable service providers. Such channels may feature a bulletin board that runs continuously with community information or they may have a full-fledged television production studio available for citizen journalists’ use, such as found in Monroe, Mich. [www.monroe.lib.mi.us/community\\_info\\_organizations\\_mpact.htm](http://www.monroe.lib.mi.us/community_info_organizations_mpact.htm)

## *Chambers of commerce*

Your local chamber of commerce has its finger on the pulse of your community. A visit to your local chamber website will update you on events and interesting and influential people. A good example of a chamber of commerce website is [www.sarasotachamber.com](http://www.sarasotachamber.com). Once again, if you can’t find what you need on the website, call or walk into the office and start asking questions.



# **HOW TO GENERATE STORY IDEAS**

## *Social networking websites*

A good way to keep track of activities in your area is to have many “friends” on Facebook, MySpace or similar social networking websites. Their postings can tip you off to interesting people and important events.

With all these resources, it is easy to come up with story ideas. Just open your eyes, keep an open mind, cruise the Internet, talk to people and ask questions.

# NOTES





# Skills You Need to be a Successful Citizen Journalist

Chapter  
**15**



## ***HOW TO EDIT YOURSELF***

In almost all cases, citizen journalists are editing themselves before they submit an article or story. This is the most difficult editing that exists. You know

what you want the article to say, so typos and incorrect grammar often go unnoticed. Catching your own errors is very difficult.

If you have friends who are willing to look over your work before you submit it, then by all means ask them to review your articles for possible errors.

### ***Seven Suggestions for Doing Your own Editing***

#### ***1. Read your story at least three times.***

The first edit should focus on whether the story makes sense. During the second reading, pay special attention to style and spelling. On the third time through, you might want to see if there are any unanswered questions or negative words that could get you into trouble.

If time allows, give some distance between your readings, like an hour or two. That gives you a chance to walk away, think about something else and then come back more refreshed to look at your writing and catch possible errors.

#### ***2. Check and double-check anything that can be checked or verified.***

If someone says there have been five accidents at a specific intersection in the last week, go to the police department and verify that claim. Also, be sure to check any unfamiliar names and locations. Check and double-check

# HOW TO EDIT YOURSELF

phone numbers, and website addresses and links.

### 3. **Check your attribution.**

Remember that the only information that can be unattributed is that which can be proven, such as a two-car collision, broken arm, a gray horse, and that which can be documented, such as a city budget or date of birth.

### 4. **Double-check your grammar and make sure it is correct throughout the story.**

Avoid sentences that say: “The volunteer donated hours of their time each week.” It should read: “The volunteer donated hours of her time each week.” This, of course, assumes the volunteer is a female.

In the long run, it is best to avoid he/she issues whenever possible. The above sentence could read: “The volunteer donated hours of time each week.”



### 5. **Go through and look for excess words that can be deleted.**

Short and concise is best. Extra words can bog down sentences and stories. For example, “In order for Laura to meet her goal...” should be “For Laura to meet ... ” The words “in order” are not necessary and don’t add anything.

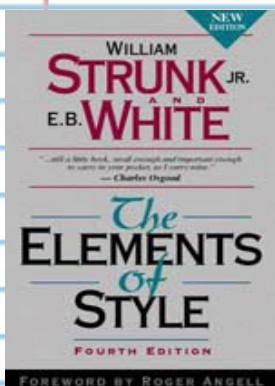
### 6. **Check your word use and spelling.**

Don’t count on a computer spell-checker to find your errors. It can’t always pick up a “there” that should be a “their.” And it probably won’t notice the difference between “site,” “sight” or “cite.”

### 7. **Make sure you use the same tense throughout the story.**

If your attribution is “he said,” keep it that way. Don’t let a “he says” slip in.

## HOW TO EDIT YOURSELF



Many great resources exist to help with your writing and reporting efforts, including telephone books, dictionaries, “The World Almanac,” Strunk and White’s “The Elements of Style” and “The Associated Press Stylebook.” Use these resources in your editing process.

It is easy to make errors or assumptions. Even those with years of training and experience slip up from time to time. In a January 2009 column in *The New York Times*, the paper’s public editor, Clark Hoyt, explained how three errors occurred in December 2008 because reporters and editors failed to go far enough in checking and verifying information.

As Hoyt put it: “Each failure had its own unique causes but all show how in a business that relies heavily on trust, it is imperative to stay vigilant and skeptical.”



The errors? The newspaper:

— Reported on a political phone call that never actually occurred.

— Published a fake letter to the editor that was NOT written by the mayor of Paris, France, as was claimed.

— Published sensationalized information about a recruitment fight between two universities that *The Times* did not verify as true.

Again, the bottom line is to check and double-check the accuracy of the information you are presenting.

# NOTES



# Skills You Need to be a Successful Citizen Journalist

Chapter  
**16**



## ***THE IMPORTANCE OF SOURCING***

Attribution is crucial in reporting and writing the news. It puts the content of what was said into context.

Think about it this way: Would a political activist give you the same information as an unbiased observer? Probably not. The activist would probably give a biased quote to sway you his or her way, while the observer might give you independent insight.

Would a salesman and a consumer give you the same quote on a product? Again, probably not. The salesman might include some propaganda as he or she tries to sell you the product. The consumer would give you his or her actual experience with the product.

On a recent television show, viewers were told that Moorestown, N.J., was the #1 community to live in that state. This information was provided by a real estate agent, but it wasn't attributed to anyone. Without giving credit to the claim, it was impossible to know how to interpret it. If it is the Realtor saying it is the #1 community, that is one thing. The real estate agent is not real believable because he is trying to sell homes in Moorestown. That same information would carry a lot more clout if it was attributed to a national organization that annually looks for the top communities across the country, relying on such information as jobs, schools, cost of living, etc.

Consider the source when you are gathering information. Does the source have a reason to slant the information he or she is giving you? Perhaps the source is trying to hide some information. Do you need to get an opinion from someone with a different point of view?

# THE IMPORTANCE OF SOURCING

Check facts that are checkable. Facts that can be verified don't need attribution. However, statements that can't be verified must have attribution. Otherwise, they are meaningless.



If the source doesn't want to be identified, find someone else who is willing to be quoted by name. If you are interviewing witnesses at an accident scene and there are numerous witnesses who can tell you what they saw, stick to those who will allow their names to be used.

Government and company officials sometimes ask to be treated anonymously. This is largely because they haven't been given the authority to speak and they believe their bosses or the agency or company for which they work want to receive the credit.

You see many newspapers work around this issue by referring to these folks as high-ranking officials or using the name of the agency or the company. For example, the Secretary of State's office said today . . . .

Newspapers often use phrases like: "according to a source who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he had not been given the authority to speak on the matter."

These crutches are being overused today. In many cases, an official can be found who is authorized to speak on the record.

As citizen journalists, you probably will not find yourself in a situation where someone asks to be an anonymous source. However, you should know how to handle the situation in the off chance that it comes up during an interview.



## **THE IMPORTANCE OF SOURCING**

When you interview someone, explain that you are a citizen journalist writing an article for whatever medium you use. That way, the source knows you are serious and professional in your way of conducting business. You should also let the source know that you will be quoting him or her as part of that story. At this point, it is up to your interviewees to be careful about what they say.

Hopefully, you won't be faced with a source who goes on and on in an interview and then asks that he or she not be quoted on some of the information. If this happens to you, and it may, you will have to decide if you want to use the person's name or respect the source's wishes that his or her name not be used. You will have to consider the importance of the information versus the importance of your source in making this decision.

### ***Hostile or Reluctant Sources***

What do you do if you have a hostile source or someone who doesn't want to be interviewed? First of all, if someone doesn't want to be interviewed – whether it is a politician or a neighbor – that is his or her right. Anybody can refuse to comment or answer questions. In most cases, you should include that fact in your story by saying so-and-so declined to comment or refused to comment.

Keep in mind the difference in the meaning of the words declined and refused. Individuals are refusing to comment if they angrily say something like, "No, I won't dignify that question with an answer." They are declining to comment when they say something like, "I really don't want to talk about that right now."

Always give individuals the option of commenting, but if they don't want to or refuse to, let your readers know that and then look for another source who can provide you with the information you are seeking. Of course, that second source might not always be out there. Sometimes only one source has

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF SOURCING**



the specific information you are seeking.

If you come across someone who doesn't want to talk to you, you can try to ease the situation and open the person up by taking your time with them, being nice and sympathetic. Put yourself in their shoes and try to understand where they are coming from. Let them know you want to tell their story.

As a citizen journalist interviewing average people who are not used to being in the news, you may need to take a little extra time and explain in detail what you are doing. You'll need to tell them that you are talking to them because they have a specific insight into what you are trying to report. Many people have a fear of the unknown. If they've never been interviewed before, you are giving them an unknown. Take the time to help them get over that fear. You might end up with an amazing interview.

In summary, your news reports will be more informative to your readers if they know who said what. The information is much more authoritative if the sources are identified, along with their title.

Use a source who agrees to be identified. If someone doesn't want to be quoted, there is almost always someone else who knows the information and will agree to be named. In fact, sometimes it's the source who won't agree to be identified who can tell you who to contact.



# Skills You Need to be a Successful Citizen Journalist

Chapter  
**17**



## ***HOW TO AVOID LIBEL***

Libel can be one of the scariest concerns to a citizen journalist. In this handbook, we will explain the basics of libel law so that you won't be afraid to write a story or fear being sued.

Libel is defamation or injury to someone's personal reputation and good name in print. The libel can come in the form of words, photographs, cartoons, photo captions or headlines. If the information holds a person up to public hatred, ridicule or scorn, it could be libel.

This also applies to broadcast news in most states - even though the defamation is spoken and would seem to fall under the definition of slander. If the defamatory comment is broadcast, it means it was recorded and spread to a larger audience than something said in a conversation of two or three people.

Oddly enough, a large percentage – more than 90 percent – of libel suits are the result of routine stories, such as those based on police reports, court actions or even public meetings. If an accusation is made against a council member, for example, it is best to look deeper into the allegation and get a comment from the accused. Also, it is good to remember that police interview witnesses and suspects in crimes. So if a person is interviewed by police, he or she may not be a suspect. Don't make assumptions that could get you into trouble.

Obviously, a good way to avoid libel is to be careful in your reporting and with the words you use in your article. Don't negatively label someone

## **HOW TO AVOID LIBEL**

in a way that their reputation could be damaged.

In very simple terms, you should be okay if there is no reckless disregard to the truth or actual malice.

To explain more, the following information has been condensed from the AP Stylebook's Briefing on Media Law. According to the AP, five requirements must be met for a libel action to be successful:

**1. *There must be proof that a defamatory statement was made.***

Plaintiffs are not always able to demonstrate that what was written about them conveys a defamatory meaning. For example, the AP's Briefing cited a New York court's finding that a statement identifying an attorney as a "flashy entertainment lawyer" was not defamatory. However, a statement that a lawyer was an "ambulance chaser" interested in only "slam dunk" cases would be considered defamatory. As explained by the AP Briefing, the first statement would not necessarily damage a lawyer's reputation, but the second statement would.

**2. *The defamatory statement was said as a matter of fact – not as an opinion.***

Opinions, satire, parody and hyperbole that cannot be proven true or false tend to be protected forms of expression. For example, a theater reviewer can give his or her opinion that an actress has no talent. Another way to look at it is that the actress, by performing in the theater, is presenting her talents to the public and opening herself up to commentary.

**3. *The defamatory statement is false.***

The plaintiff must prove that the statement is false. For a libel defendant, the best defense is to prove that the statement is true. If a definitive decision is unable to be made on whether the statement is true or false, the defendant wins. The plaintiff holds the burden of proof.

# HOW TO AVOID LIBEL

**4. The defamatory statement is about the plaintiff, whether it is an individual or a business entity.**

Only a person or business whose reputation has been tarnished is able to file a suit. This does not necessarily mean that the person or entity is identified by name. If individuals can identify the plaintiff by a description, then the person or entity is identifiable.

**5. The defamatory statement was published with reckless disregard for the truth or actual malice, which means intent to harm.**

In the 1967 *New York Times v. Sullivan* case, the Supreme Court recognized a constitutional requirement that a public official must demonstrate that an error was made, but also that there was a high degree of fault by the person who published the erroneous information. By fault, we mean reckless disregard to the truth or actual malice. This ruling helped to establish that when newspapers publish information about a public official and it is without malice, they should be spared a libel suit even if some of the information turns out to be wrong.

Three years later, the Sullivan ruling was expanded to also include libel claims made by public figures.

This leads us into public officials and figures vs. private individuals.

If the plaintiff is a public official or figure, he or she must prove the publication of the information was made with actual malice. That means the information was published with knowledge that a statement was false and/or in reckless disregard of the truth.

For private individuals, most states require the plaintiff to show that a reporter was negligent or less careful than what would be

expected of a reasonable journalist in similar circumstances. The question is whether the defendant, through common sense and accepted journalism



## **HOW TO AVOID LIBEL**

practices, could have found out that the statement was false.

Whether a person is a public figure has yet to be clearly determined by the Supreme Court, so the definition varies from state to state. Some folks are obviously public figures, such as the president of the United States or governor of a state. Actors and actresses are public figures. Not every government employee is considered a public official, although most elected officials are often deemed to be public officials. If individuals seek attention due to the nature of their work, such as an actor or politician, they are considered public figures.

Regardless of whether your story includes a public or private individual, you should always be careful with your word usage and check your facts.

***To best avoid a libel situation, here are five basic questions the AP's Briefing suggests you ask when you are writing a negative story:***

***1. Does your article include any statements that could be considered defamatory?***

Watch for words that may sound more negative than if a different word had been used. The AP cites words like "fraud," "crony," "linked," "suspicious" and "contaminated." These words may suggest or imply bad conduct. Careful word use and editing are key to making sure the facts get properly reported.

***2. Are the statements said as a matter of fact or are they protected as opinion or satire that no reasonable reader would believe to be true?***

***3. Is the person or entity identifiable by someone reading the story, whether or not the person or entity is actually named?*** Could readers possibly misidentify the person or entity? The AP warns against using descriptive phrases that could lead to mistaken identity.

## **HOW TO AVOID LIBEL**

4. *Can you prove the questionable or borderline defamatory statements are true?*
5. *If erroneous information ends up appearing in your story, did you act as any reasonable journalist would have in a similar situation to provide an accurate report?*



We highly recommend you purchase “The Associated Press Stylebook.” It is available at most bookstores or at [www.apbookstore.com](http://www.apbookstore.com).

# Part 3



**Values**

**Methods**



**Resources**



# ***Core Values of the National Association of Citizen Journalists***



By Ron Ross and Susan Carson Cormier

Great accomplishments are achieved by people whose lives are guided by great values. Think of the truly great leaders of all time, and one can list the virtues by which they lived their lives. Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther, Thomas Jefferson, Gandhi and many religious leaders in history were known and respected for their well-defined principles and values.



The work of citizen journalists may not reach the heights of social or spiritual impact as the great men and women of history, but make no mistake, it is extremely important to the preservation of democracy. The basic principles of journalism - objective reporting, detachment from personal bias, a commitment to the truth and more - are needed today more than ever in history. These principles applied by well-meaning, truth-seeking, public-serving citizen journalists across the nation and around the world will increase public knowledge, improve public trust and expand public discourse.

The National Association of Citizen Journalists' 15 core values will help citizen journalists define who they are and what they stand for as they gather information in their communities. Active citizen journalists should read them thoughtfully and apply them directly to their important work informing the public.

## **#1 Freedom of the Press**

The battle for a free press first began in the 1500s in England, but its importance has been reiterated and fought for by numerous individuals and organizations over the years.



Let's start in the United States in 1787 with Thomas Jefferson, who was quoted as saying: "The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter."

When the U.S. Constitution was signed on Sept. 17, 1787, it did not provide for a free press. That right was contained in the First Amendment, one of the first 10 amendments included in the Bill of Rights that went into effect on Dec. 15, 1791. It stated that:

"Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press."

Let's fast forward to 1948 and take a worldwide look at the issue.



On Dec. 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which included Article 19. It stated: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Upon its adoption, the Assembly asked its member countries to publicize the text of the Declaration and "to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories."

Even more recently, Reporters Without Borders, founded in France in 1985, draws its inspiration from Article 19 as it "fights against censorship and laws

that undermine press freedom.”

With the growing number of bloggers and citizen journalists spanning the globe, the struggle for press freedom and how far it will extend will continue for years into the future.

A couple of websites provide valuable information that can help citizen journalists, including Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. Its website - [www.rcfp.org](http://www.rcfp.org) – offers several publications, including “The First Amendment Handbook” and “The Open Government Guide.” Resources also are available at another site – [www.splc.org](http://www.splc.org) – which is run by the Student Press Law Center to “educate high school and college journalists about the rights and responsibilities embodied in the First Amendment.”

## **#2 Power of the Truth**

“Truth does not become more true by virtue of the fact that the entire world agrees with it, nor less so even if the whole world disagrees with it.” – Moses Maimonides (1135-1204)

Maimonides, the medieval Jewish philosopher who authored “Guide of the Perplexed,” said it all in his quote about the truth.

Just because someone believes something should be true, does not make it so. And determining whether something is true should be a fundamental goal of all journalists.

Citizen journalists who are working to inform their communities should focus on this concept, the concept of finding the truth – not reiterating something that is commonly believed by others.

They must question people on all sides of an issue. They must check and

double-check facts. They must provide attribution and information about the person who is being quoted, such as a job title or political party affiliation.

Those who are diligent in uncovering and reporting the truth will find that their reputations will grow rapidly. They will be viewed as citizen journalists who readers or listeners can trust.

They will be known as individuals who have integrity and can't be swayed by one side or another. They will be the leaders in accurately informing their communities about the news of the day.

### **#3 Vox Populi - Voice of the People**

Citizen journalists give added meaning to the term – vox populi - the voice of the people.

Many hyperlocal and niche stories go untold because professional journalists do not believe there is enough interest in the subject or because they are not on the scene of the event.

Citizen journalists can change that. They are the eyes and ears of their communities. They are on the scene when many professional journalists are stuck in the office. They are willing and able to tell those thousands of untold stories, even if there are only 10 people in their neighborhood who care about the topic.

In reporting these stories, citizen journalists should strive to listen to everyone. They shouldn't just rely on government officials, public information officers or company spokesmen. They should talk to those who are impacted by what is happening. They should think about the average Joe on the street. In doing so, citizen journalists will be providing an outlet for the impacted citizens to state their case.

Imagine how enlightened the public will become with all of this information gathering and reporting provided by citizen journalists.

#### **#4 Accountability to the Public**

Citizen journalists' highest obligation is to the public they serve. They are answerable for the truth, fairness and usefulness of whatever they write. The Hearst Newspapers' Statement of Professional Principles says it well: "We place our readers' interests above all others and dedicate ourselves to the principles of truthfulness, fairness and independence."

The meaning of this core value is simple: Serve the best interests of the reading or listening audience first. Citizen journalists will –

- Revere the public's right to know above any interest, whether personal or public. Citizen journalism is about creating an informed citizenry for the improvement and perpetuation of participatory democracy. A citizen journalist will provide the public with the information they need and have a right to know.
- Respect the dignity and intelligence of their audience. A citizen journalist will not insult or assail the audience.
- Respond to the concerns of their audience about the accuracy, fairness or efficacy of what they write or produce. When challenged on a fact or confronted with new information by readers or other sources, a citizen journalist will respond appropriately and deferentially.
- Reject associations and activities that compromise their independence. Business relationships, organizational involvements and political participation must take a back seat to independence and objectivity.
- Refuse anything that compromises journalistic integrity such as gifts, favors, fees, political associations, special treatment, free travel and

extra employment.

- Reveal conflicts of interest that are unavoidable. When conflicts of interest cannot be avoided, the solution is simple: Reveal them, and then proceed to report fairly and honestly. If it is impossible to report without bias, then the citizen journalist should give the story to someone who does not have a conflict of interest.
- Resist the influence of friends, advertisers, powerful people and special interests.

Sometimes it's difficult to set aside the pressures of personal or business relationships, especially in a community where everyone knows each other. But a citizen journalist is accountable to a higher authority than a local official, a dominant industry or a next-door neighbor. A citizen journalist is accountable to the public.

## **#5 Accuracy**

One of the first rules of journalism is to be accurate. Without accuracy, citizen journalists have no credibility, integrity or respect from their readers or sources.

When reporting and gathering information, journalists are trusting that what people tell them is true and factual. But how can they be sure? The best way is to get all sides of the story and double-check everything that can be checked, including the spelling of names and statements that are made as facts. If information can't be checked, attribution must be included so people know where the information came from and can put it into context.



Citizen journalists will excel if they provide news content that is accurate, in

context and free from bias. Word will spread that their accounts are accurate and include all sides of the story. Not only will readers and listeners rely on them, but sources will open their doors to citizen journalists who provide fair and accurate accounts.

## **#6 Whole Story**

The importance of getting the whole story can never be understated.

No story should be complete until it presents all sides in a fair and unbiased manner, and includes all pertinent facts.

Because there are multiple points of view in most stories, citizen journalists should be diligent in trying to include all sides relevant to the story. They shouldn't interview one person and let it go at that. There may be one or several other people who have a different opinion.

Citizen journalists should be especially diligent in reporting all sides when a person is presented in a negative light or accused of misconduct or wrongdoing. The accused must be given a chance to respond and present his or her side. If the person or the accused is unavailable or does not want to respond, that information must be included in the story.

Of course, there are times when a story only has one side. If someone says the sky is blue, it would be pretty hard to find someone to disagree. Weather forecasts, lottery winners and some press announcements are examples of types of stories that could have only one side.

## **#7 Presumption of Innocence**

A citizen journalist should not function as an arm of law enforcement or as an advocate for a defendant by speculating about the guilt or innocence



of someone referred to as a “prime suspect,” “person of interest” or defendant.

The main reason is that significant harm can come to innocent people when they are associated with or implicated in a crime they did not commit. A person interviewed by police is not automatically a suspect.

The individual could just be someone who has information the police need.

One of the most notable examples of what some call “trial by media” was Richard Jewell, who became famous because of his connection with the Centennial Olympic Park bombing at the 1966 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Ga. He was the one who discovered a pipe bomb, alerted police and helped to evacuate the area before it exploded, saving many people from injury or potential death. He was initially hailed by the media as a hero but later was considered a suspect. Eventually he was exonerated completely.

Journalists who speculate on the guilt or innocence of an uncharged suspect violate the legal principle of presumption of innocence and potentially pollute the jury pool. To avoid this, journalists use the word “alleged” when reporting about an alleged robber, alleged terrorist, alleged murderer, etc.

## **#8 Importance of Context**

The American Heritage® Dictionary defines context as:

1. The part of a text or statement that surrounds a particular word or passage and determines its meaning.
2. The circumstances in which an event occurs; a setting.

Because the same information might be interpreted differently, depending on the circumstances, journalists must be vigilant in their efforts to paint the full picture. They must tell their audiences who said what, and when, where, why and how they said it.

Attribution is crucial in putting the content of what was said into context. For example, a political activist would not give you the same quote as an unbiased observer, and a salesman would probably not say the same as a consumer of the salesman's product. The activist and the salesman would probably give a biased quote to sway you their way, while the observer and consumer might give you independent insight.

Caution also is advised when dealing with quotes and sound bites. Make sure the statements are put into the context of the discussion. They should not misrepresent the meaning of what was said.

## **#9 Respect of all People**

Citizen journalists must be sensitive, respectful and recognize individuals' rights to privacy.

Citizen journalists should be extra sensitive and use common standards of decency when dealing with children or people who are not used to being in the news or who are unexpectedly in the news.

When dealing with people who have just experienced great tragedy or grief, journalists must also use good taste. For example, they shouldn't compound the grief by taking and using a photo of a dead body.

Regardless of who they want to interview, citizen journalists must identify who they are and explain what they are doing. After giving that full disclosure, they may begin asking questions. But the person they are interviewing doesn't



have to respond or give answers. If the person refuses to be interviewed, that is his or her right – a right that must be respected by citizen and professional journalists alike.

## **#10 Limitation of Harm**

Many news stories are about people – human beings who deserve to be treated fairly and with respect. Citizen journalists pursuing important stories are not automatically given the right to take any photo, ask any question or quote any witness. Even the process of gathering information can cause distress and even permanent harm to innocent people. Here are some guidelines for dealing with people in vulnerable situations:

Extreme care should be taken when dealing with children. In most cases, juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes should not be identified.

People impacted by tragedy or grief should be handled with discretion. Citizen journalists should not be overly curious about the vulgar or lurid details. They should resist the lure to intrude into anyone's privacy unless there is a compelling public interest in the matter.

Private people are not the same as public officials. Private people have more privacy rights than public officials and those who are actively seeking positions of power, influence or attention.

Criminal suspects should not be named as such until formal charges are filed. The criminal suspect's right to a fair trial must be balanced with the public's right to be informed.

An ethical reporter will treat the people they deal with in the same way they would like to be treated, whether they are sources for stories or subjects of them.

## **#11 Avoidance of Conflicts of Interest**

Good reporters must develop sources for the news they cover. That means they have to develop relationships with people of position and power. Many of these important relationships are developed in informal settings – social gatherings, golf outings, etc. The danger is that personal relationships can easily result in a show of favoritism, unusual access or commiseration.

Romantic involvement or a direct business relationship between the subject of a news story and the reporter must be avoided. These types of relationships will not only give the appearance of partiality, they will likely be evidence of it.

Citizen journalists should not accept gifts of value from newsmakers or news sources. They should not accept free or reduced-rate travel and lodging, entertainment, or gifts of products or services. They should be wary of special favors and special treatment offered by the people they cover. In most cases, this special treatment is given with the intention to curry favor and cloud a reporter's judgment.

Good citizen journalists keep themselves free from obligations of any kind towards news sources and newsmakers. Even the appearance of conflict of interest is avoided. The rule is to maintain professional objectivity and preserve a clear difference between legitimate business relationships and personal friendships.

Citizen journalists might encounter times when a conflict of interest is unavoidable. A next-door neighbor and life-long friend might get elected to the town council or a child might be the power forward on the high school basketball team.

In these cases, citizen journalists have two choices: Provide full disclosure or recuse themselves. If they can maintain clear-minded objectivity as they write a story, all they need to do is declare a conflict of interest, set their bias aside and cover the story. If they are so involved, so close to the people or institutions they are covering that their judgment is clouded, they must recuse themselves and hand off the story to someone else.

## **#12 Immediate Correction of Mistakes**

In the haste of covering the news, legitimate mistakes do happen. When they do, journalists have the responsibility to admit their errors and correct them promptly and completely. It's that simple.

While prompt correction of errors has always been mandatory in newspapers and broadcasts, the Internet compounds its importance even more – if that is even possible. Unlike newspapers that may be thrown away the next day, the Internet allows stories to be available worldwide and for years into the future. It also allows others to share the information – accurate or not - with everyone they know.

It can't be said enough. If a mistake is made, admit it and correct it immediately.

## **#13 Courage**

Most citizen journalists work in safe and friendly environments where the people and institutions they cover are cooperative and happy to have someone writing news about them. However, even in friendly communities, it takes courage to walk up to the coach of a 9-year-old boys' soccer team and ask a serious question about the game his team just lost, or to ask the chief of police about the rising crime rate or to inquire of a powerful local industry about the pollution it is dumping into the river.

Effective citizen journalists just do it. They ask their questions with boldness and with respect. The more they ask, the braver and more courageous they become. With practice, their fears are overcome.

Citizen journalism is also being practiced in places where a substantial measure of extra courage is required just to snap a photo or upload a video. There are places around the world where the mainstream press is censored and those who attempt to spread the news are threatened. In many totalitarian countries, citizen journalists spend a lot of time trying to figure out how to stay out of jail, how to avoid beatings and how to keep from “disappearing.”

Chinese blogger Zhou Shuguang reports that China has 40,000 police that monitor the Internet full time. He says they have blocked more than 500,000 websites from the people. It’s called “The Great Firewall of China” and is designed to keep all nongovernment approved foreign sites from getting into the country.

Wael Abbas, an Egyptian blogger who was named Middle East person of the year in 2007 by CNN, told about the problems all journalists face in his country under the guise of security. Journalists there have no protection and must suffer constant censorship and intimidation by the government. He said that presses are shut down, papers confiscated, tapes and video files seized, and television stations raided.

According to Abbas, bloggers are not directly censored, but they are bullied, harassed and arrested. Abbas has had his Facebook, YouTube and Yahoo accounts shut down by the government, and the government has accused Abbas of being a criminal, homosexual and convert to Christianity. The result is a self-censorship by members of the press so they don’t have to fear interference or arrest by government officials.

But despotic power-mad people can be found everywhere. More than one parish in Louisiana or county in England or township in Malawi is operated by the heavy hand of a local bully who controls everything that happens and who also wants to censor everything that is reported about him or her.

It is true, however, that one citizen journalist with courage can put the fear of God into even the most powerful person. Why? Because even the most powerful person fears that the pen really is mightier than the sword.

So it can be argued that courage is the foundation of all other citizen journalist core values. For without the courage to ask questions, research relevant facts, seek verification and face bullies with audacity, few truly important stories will ever be told.

When faced with a threat, whether by an angry Little League coach in a quiet suburb or by an aggressive agent of a brutal government, citizen journalists will summon the courage they need the moment they grasp that what they are doing is more important than the fear they feel.

Three inspiring quotes on courage:

“Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change a world which yields most painfully to change.” – Robert F. Kennedy

“No arsenal...is so formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women.” Ronald Reagan

“One man scorned and covered with scars still strove with his last ounce of courage to reach the unreachable star. And the world will be better for this.”

## **#14 Shame of Plagiarism**

To plagiarize the work of another is considered one of the most serious breaches of journalist ethics. In most cases, professional journalists caught plagiarizing are fired or are severely disciplined. Citizen journalists may not lose their jobs or even suffer any repercussions for plagiarism. However, they should experience personal shame, for it is a reprehensible act.

Although plagiarism has gone on for centuries, the Internet has made it remarkably easy. Articles, photos, graphs and ideas that are published digitally are easy to find using search engines and simple to copy. Who doesn't know how to "select, copy and paste"?

Those three words - "select, copy, paste" - may be the simplest definition of plagiarism because to plagiarize, is to intentionally present someone else's words and/or ideas as your own. Plagiarists are thieves who are committing a serious act of fraud and are breaking the law. Here's why: Words and ideas are considered by U.S. copyright laws to be intellectual property and are protected in the same manner as original inventions are under U.S. patent laws.

But more than breaking the law, plagiarism is a breach of trust with the audience. Reputable journalists have reputations as honest reporters. Those who are discovered to be frauds find that no one will ever again believe anything they write or produce.

Here's the principle: Legitimate citizen journalists never plagiarize. And here are three guidelines citizen journalists can follow to avoid the shame that comes from plagiarism:

- Always write original text. Never copy and paste someone else's words into a story and present them as original.
- If quoting someone, quotation marks and appropriate credit must be given.
- Provide the correct information about the source of the quotation so readers or listeners have confidence in the research.

## #15 Integrity

One gets a sense of the importance of integrity to the journalism profession by this powerful sentence found in the Preamble of the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics: "Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility."

Unfortunately, journalism's cornerstone of integrity has been crumbling in the last few years. The profession has suffered because of widely-reported and well-documented examples of journalistic bias, fraud, plagiarism and fabrication. The cornerstone needs to be restored.



Citizen journalists must join the many serious professional journalists who still adhere to the ethics and standards that made journalism a valuable and honorable profession. It all begins with integrity.

Integrity is the virtue of basing all of an individual's words and deeds on an unswerving framework of personally-held, well-developed principles. This means one must know what is right and wrong, good and evil, helpful and hurtful, and then act accordingly, even at personal cost. Integrity could be called the virtue of all virtues.

Journalistic integrity suffers when reporters allow their bias to dictate which story to cover and what facts to reveal or hide. Journalistic integrity suffers when stories are made up and presented as real, when phony evidence is offered as authentic and when made-up quotes are repeated as real. The biggest challenge is that once integrity is lost, it is difficult to re-establish.

Integrity starts from within. Those who live and work with integrity will be empowered and respected by all. Those who act with integrity will bewilder those who are deceitful and enlighten those who are sincere; it's a wonderful thing.

Here's the bottom line: Citizen journalists need a good sense of who they are and what they stand for. That's why these core values are presented in this handbook. Conscientious citizen journalists should study them, own them and live by them. These values will give citizen journalists great power and extend their influence beyond their wildest dreams.

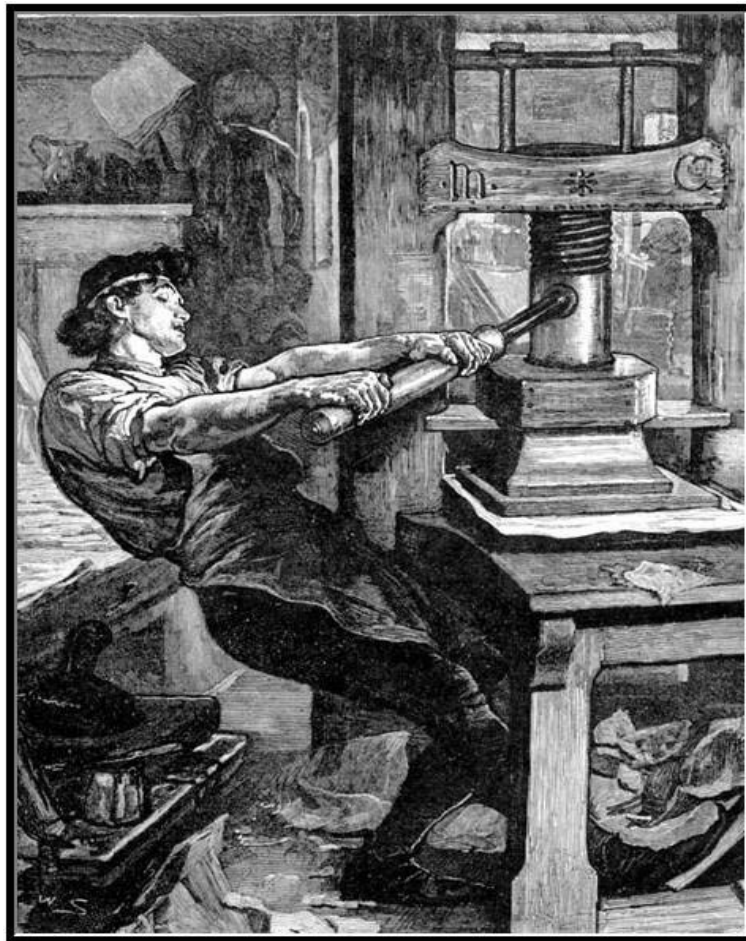
*Quote - End Quote*

“To be persuasive we must be believable;  
to be believable we must be credible; to  
be credible we must be truthful.”

- Edward R. Murrow (1908 1965); American journalist



# ***31 Ways You Can Write, Produce and Distribute News About Your Community***



By Ron Ross

The late journalist A.J. Liebling said, “Freedom of the press is limited to those who own one.” Not any longer. If you have a computer and an Internet connection, you can publish your observations and thoughts to the whole world with very little effort.

The number and variety of ways of getting news to people is increasing rapidly. Newspapers are ceasing to print and moving to the Internet, mobile phones can receive news alerts and even television broadcasts. Folks are texting and blogging and twittering and facebooking and v-blogging and youtubing and much, much more!

I’m not only watching the change – I’m participating in it. I’m old enough to remember when people connected either by going somewhere to meet (usually to each other’s house) or by making a phone call. Heck, I’m so old I can remember picking up the phone and waiting for the operator to say, “Number please!” (My childhood phone number in Julesburg, Colo., was 92-J) Now I get upset if my Internet connection takes more than two or three seconds to get me online.



This whole communications revolution means that you and I have an increasing number of ways to talk to each other. And these changes are having a profound impact on the gathering and dissemination of news. You no longer rely on the six-o’clock network news and Walter Cronkite to tell you “that’s the way it is” each evening. It means the local newspaper is no longer the arbiter of what’s important and what’s not in your town.

Most important, it means that we can have an impact on our communities by being a part of the new media. The National Association of Citizen Journalists is dedicated to “Ushering in the New Journalism” and so we present to you this list of 31 ways you can write, produce and distribute news about your community.

### **1. Blogging.**

Blogging is the quickest and easiest way to begin your impact as a citizen

journalist. You can start blogging within the next 10 minutes if you so desire. There is no need for any special blogging software and there are no subscription fees required to blog. It's free!

### ***What is a blog?***

A "blog" is an abbreviation of "weblog," a term used to describe websites that feature a constant flow of information provided by the "blogger," the owner/proprietor of the blog and readers who are allowed to post comments about what the blogger has written. Most blogs are updated frequently, creating a flowing commentary of information that often includes links to websites or articles related to the subject being discussed.

There are now millions of blogs on the Internet. Some have estimated that blogs are increasing at a rate of 40,000 blogs per day! They range from personal diaries to off-the-wall subjects such as UFOs, political discussions, narrowly-focused scientific subjects and an uncountable number of other items and issues. Most blogs focus on a particular subject that attracts readers interested in the same subject.

Blogs tend to have six things in common:

- A home-page content area where the blogger's articles are listed chronologically with the most recent on top.
- An archive area where older articles are stored.
- A way for readers to submit comments about the articles.
- A "blogroll," a list of links to sites that carry similar information provided by the blogger.
- One or more feeds like RSS, Atom or RDF files.
- Other features such as photos, ads, videos, etc.

Because your readers and subscribers can submit comments about what you write, you can create a conversation about the issues. In the final analysis, I believe that one of the biggest reasons to blog is to get people talking about important topics.

### ***How to start a blog***

If you want to start blogging, you can get going in less than 10 minutes. There are a variety of free blogging resources available to you on the Internet. Most of them are quite user-friendly and require only a brief learning curve. Here are a few free blogging resources. For more, Google: free blog hosting.

[www.wordpress.org](http://www.wordpress.org)  
[www.vox.com](http://www.vox.com)  
[www.typepad.com](http://www.typepad.com)  
[www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)  
[www.thoughts.com](http://www.thoughts.com)  
[www.blog.com](http://www.blog.com)  
[www.blogsarena.com](http://www.blogsarena.com)



Upgraded blogs with a variety of additional services, including branding, are available for fees.

### **2. Comment on blog sites.**

Besides creating your own blog, you can make appearances as someone who comments on blogs that attract your attention. Search for bloggers who are writing about the same subject you have chosen and write comments on their blog.

### **3. Personal website.**

You can start your own personal website where you are free to expand on any subject you so choose. It's possible that your name is available as a URL. For some time I owned ronaldross.com and put up information about our family. You might check to see if you can get your own name for a URL. If you can, I recommend you grab it even if you have no immediate use for it.

With your personal website, you can write about anything you so desire. One good use for a personal website is you can publish family history items

such as old photos, family trees, family links, etc.

To get a URL, visit [www.GoDaddy.com](http://www.GoDaddy.com) or other domain provider and follow the simple instructions. The cost is quite minimal and most domain providers also do website hosting and even provide high-quality website templates for non-technical users.

#### **4. Create your own personal [www.YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com) channel for FREE.**

Here's what you do: Develop and produce news videos using your digital video camera and movie-making software. Microsoft has relatively simple to learn software called Microsoft MovieMaker. Dozens of other movie-making software packages are also available with all kinds of features and at all kinds of prices.

Next, you create your own account on YouTube. Then, you create your own YouTube channel. Now you're ready to produce your own news videos, which you can upload to your very own personalized YouTube channel.

I have my own YouTube channel; it's not a news channel, but it houses all the inspirational and motivational videos I produce and post. You can look at it by going to [www.YouTube.com/ronalddross](http://www.YouTube.com/ronalddross).

You get people to watch your videos by sending them emails, connecting with them via social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, or you can develop your own email list and mail out notices of your new post-ings using [www.icontact.com](http://www.icontact.com), [www.constantcontact.com](http://www.constantcontact.com) or similar email agent.

#### **5. Create and distribute your own electronic newspaper.**

A college student who used to work for a weekly paper I owned has begun publishing his own weekly electronic newspaper. He writes about topics that interest him and has invited friends to submit columns and news items.

You can do this by simply using the email software you already use, then send your "paper" out to all the people on your email list.

You can get a little more creative with your layout and design if you use publishing software such as Microsoft Publisher, Adobe InDesign or other readily available software.

The final format of this type of electronic newspaper is usually a pdf document that is attached to an email blast.

## **6. Create and distribute your own hard-copy newspaper.**


This takes much more effort and some capital, but you can do it. My mother used to publish the *Horizon Homesteader* in Horizon City, Texas. When she owned it, she published monthly. She collected and wrote the news, sold ads, did the layout, collated the pages, stapled the pages together, addressed the paper for mailing and distributed many copies door-to-door.


After several years of publishing and making a significant impact on her growing community, she sold the paper. Today it is a weekly tabloid-size paper filled with news and ads.

To be successful, you'll need writing skills, layout and design skills, mailing lists or delivery routes, and the money to get your project going. Usually this kind of project requires a collaborative effort between several interested individuals.

## **7. Twitter.**

Twitter.com can be your entry-level news and views tool. According to the front page of Twitter, "Twitter is a service for friends, family and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing?"

But Twitter fans are using it for far more than answering that simple question. The fact is you can Twitter your way to fame if you work  at it.

In March of 2009, a 21-year-old University of North Texas  (Denton, TX) student, Wes Baugh, sparked a big debate about citizen journalism with a Twitter project. He created an account in Twitter (@DentonPolice) and then posted mug shots he got from the Denton Police Department's online jail log.

He now has nearly 2,000 followers. He also has attracted the attention of the Denton Police Department, mainly because he used a photo of the DPD's

shoulder patch.

The police department is not interested in stopping Baugh, but they have asked him to stop using their patch, and he has complied.

An article on the *Denton Star-Telegram* website said that Baugh's experiment "represents another skirmish in the brewing information wars, where Web-savvy citizens – who have no experience with the standards and practices of traditional news gatherers – are changing the rules of engagement."

They quoted the local police chief as saying, "I do think it's important to understand that once you post public information online, it can be used in ways the government hasn't conceived."

This story illustrates that as citizen journalists challenge the old media ways of covering news, they are on the cutting edge of journalistic evolution.

## **8. Create a news website for your community.**

That's what Michael Parks, the recently retired dean of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Journalism, is doing in the Los Angeles suburb of Alhambra, Calif. He refers to the community as "the town that news forgot." The *Los Angeles Times* used to cover the area, but it has cut its bureaus in most suburban areas and while there are a variety of ethnic newspapers, there is nothing that draws the community together.

He is working with the techies at USC to develop a website that will cover the community in a way that all ethnic groups (45 percent Chinese and other Asians, 35 percent Latino, 14 percent white and a tiny cadre of African-Americans), who would not normally talk to each other because of language barriers, can communicate.

This kind of a project is not easy to do, but you could begin the process by talking to people in your town who have the skills, finances and passion for such a project.

There is a substantial amount of grant money available for community news websites. You must search for it, qualify for it and write grant applications to receive it, but it's out there.

If you do this, you may not make friends in high places. The owners of www.

everythingconneautohio.com, a community website that was posting information about city officials and city fees, etc., experienced that dilemma.

City Council members did not like what was happening so they had the city attorney write a letter to the owners of the website and told them to “immediately cease and desist publishing any information concerning the City’s offices, employees, and/or departments without the express written consent and approval of the City of Conneaut.” They went on to demand “please remove any and all references to the City government and departments forthwith.”

The letter also advised the citizen journalists that they would not allow them any further use of the public access cable channel owned and operated by the City of Conneaut. (05.19.09)

## **9. Write and photograph news about your church and put it on the church website, church newsletter and Sunday bulletin.**

If your church has a communications department, I’ll bet they are searching for citizen journalists who know how to write news about the variety of events happening in the church.



They would love to have someone write a story about the mission trip to Mexico, the youth trip to Washington, D.C., or the men’s ski retreat in Utah. Volunteer your services to whoever handles your church website. I believe you’ll become a very busy and valuable writer.

## **10. Write and photograph news about your service club, book club, etc. and put the news on that particular website.**

The same ideas shared in the previous paragraph apply to this area. The clubs and organizations you are a part of would like to have a skilled writer keeping all of the members and prospective members apprised of what is going on in the organization.



**11. Write and photograph news about your school and put the news on the school website.**

If your school doesn't have a website that takes the kind of news and information you want to share, you can start one.

**12. Write and photograph news about your school, church, service club, book club, etc. and publish it in a format that can be printed inexpensively.**

If you don't like dealing with the technical issues of a website, you can create your own hard-copy newsletter, print it inexpensively and hand it out at the next meeting.

**13. Volunteer to photograph and write news for your local newspaper.**

Newspapers all across the country are suffering from diminished sales and staff cutbacks. You can help them fill their pages with news and information that they no longer have the staff to cover.

For instance, if you are interested in sports, you can volunteer to write sports stories for your local paper. Or if your interest is business, politics, education, parks and recreation, or police issues, etc., many papers will gladly use your services.

In some instances, you might even get paid for your work.

**14. Volunteer to report news for your local radio station.**

Like newspapers, local radio stations are experiencing a severe cutback in reporters, and you can help them fill the void. You can give live reports from the sports fields or cover local politics, etc.

Use your imagination, then call the station manager. Tell the manager you are a certified citizen journalist and you are ready to help inform people in your community. You may be surprised at how quickly you will be put to work.

**15. Develop a significant presence on Facebook.com or MySpace.com and send news and information about events that interest you.**

I'm on Facebook (RonRossDenver), and the kinds of items I write about are

usually related to current events. I have several “friends” who enjoy reading my comments, even though many times they don’t agree with my perspective.

**16. Write personality profiles on interesting people in your community and submit them to the local paper or area magazines for publication.**

Check around your town and pick up all the publications you can find. Contact the publishers to ask if you can contribute articles about interesting people or unusual news items. Many are looking for content, and you could be the writer that comes to their rescue.

**17. Submit news to local newspaper websites that request citizen journalist input.**

There are a growing number of newspapers that seek contributions from citizens. Check your local newspaper’s website to see if it offers such a service. If it does, start submitting news on your favorite topic.

Like many newspapers across the land, *The Baltimore Sun* has several pages where their writers submit copy and photos, and then make it possible for citizens to write their opinions or their view of the news item being discussed. [www.weblogs.baltimoresun.com](http://www.weblogs.baltimoresun.com).

Most newspaper websites oversee the comments, so well-written comments that follow AP style will always be welcome.

**18. Submit news to national/international websites that request citizen journalist input.**

One of the more controversial websites you can upload news to is [www.WikiLeaks.com](http://www.WikiLeaks.com) where citizens can upload news in a dozen or so languages and do so anonymously. It’s a whistle-blower website with an international footprint.

More than 2 million documents, including information about alleged human rights violations and politicians’ donor lists, can be found there. In March 2008, Wikileaks won a U.S. court victory that attracted amicus briefs from the Newspaper Association of America, the Associated Press, the American Society of

Newspaper Editors, Gannett and the Society of Professional Journalists, among others.

### **19. Submit news items to local broadcast websites that request citizen journalist input.**

There are a variety of public access cable television channels across the country where citizen journalists are invited to write, produce and broadcast news items.

In Amherst, Mass., you'll find ACTV (Amherst Community Television). Here's what its website ([www.actvamherst.com](http://www.actvamherst.com)) says: "Residents of Amherst, Pelham, Leverett and Shutesbury may exercise their right to free speech and expression on ACTV. These rights are protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

"ACTV welcomes all points of view including content that some may find controversial or offensive. The views and opinions of programs on ACTV do not necessarily represent those of ACTV staff, Board of Directors, or membership.

"ACTV encourages Amherst-based businesses, non-profits, residents and full-time students to become members of ACTV and express themselves through the medium of television."

Some of the public access cable channels are not-for-profit, others are for-profit entities, but either way you have an opportunity to broadcast your news items on their stations. You could even create your own weekly television show on the subject of your own choosing.

### **20. Submit news items to national broadcast websites that request citizen journalist input.**

A very clean and easy to navigate website exists in India where citizen journalism is catching on like wildfire. Check out <http://zc.cplash.com>. This is what its website says about its mission:

"We are privileged to live in a democratic society where the government is of the people, for the people and by the people. The Legislature, Executive, Judiciary and the Media are said to be the four pillars of democracy that

we all so dearly cherish. With voices being raised against the neutrality of the media, it's time that we the people take it in into our hands to strengthen the fourth pillar of democracy. With the advent and spread of the Internet more and more people are taking to blogging as a means to express their views and these bloggers are fast emerging as an alternate form of media as we know today.

“Cplash, a citizen journalism that aims to emerge as a platform where ‘we the people’ can express our views about events that touch our day to day life. Cplash with its name derived from citizen and splash, meaning front page news, shall feature stories that you - ‘the citizen’ shall highlight.

“Cplash has a simple aim: to present the voice of ‘we, the people’ to everyone. A platform where citizens can express, share and discuss their views and opinions about any issue that they feel about. Cplash will provide a platform where citizens can network and collaborate to come up with a better society.

“Let us decide our fate (literally) ourselves. Let us get ourselves heard and let us do it without chakka jams and bandhs.“

I do not know what chakka jams and bandhs are, but I salute the visionaries behind the website and wish them the best.

Most U.S. cable TV channels now offer some form of citizen journalist input, such as that made available at [www.FoxNews.com](http://www.FoxNews.com) and [www.CNN.com](http://www.CNN.com), and both have used footage and photos submitted by citizens.

The major broadcast television networks also have some form of citizen input, but their limited broadcast time does not afford them much opportunity for use other than by posting items on their website.

**21. Write business profiles and submit your articles to newspapers or broadcast media for publication.**

**22. Write sports stories about your favorite sports teams and submit your stories to their websites or create your own website for publication.**

**23. Attend your town council or other ruling body and write a “Fact Check” column after each session.**

Here’s a great idea for a citizen journalist who wants to make a difference. All you have to do is attend your town council meeting and take notes of statements made by council members and the variety of people who make presentations at a council meeting. Then when you get home go to work fact-checking the various statements. You’ll find many exaggerations, many misleading statements, many false statements, and of course, many true statements are made at nearly every meeting.

Then make your results known by submitting your information to your local newspaper or by creating your own form of publishing, whether by email blast, blog, website or flyer you hand out at the next council meeting.

**24. Attend political or cultural events (debates, rallies, concerts, school plays, parades, holiday programs, festivals, etc.) in your community and write about them.**

Some of the most controversial events in recent history are the increasing number of tea parties that began on April 15, 2009, as a grass-roots movement.

A CNN reporter covering one of the more than 2,000 tea parties seemed to lose her cool and engage in some nasty comments about those in attendance.

A citizen journalist by the name of Kathy Barkulis, with camera running, confronted the so-called professional journalist with great energy and yet more respect than the journalist showed the people she was interviewing.

Barkulis and her video appeared on cable TV’s morning show, “Fox & Friends,” where she was interviewed by Gretchen Carlson about her experience.

**25. Broadcast yourself using Internet radio, iPod/MP3 players or podcasting.**

A recent report showed that 42 million Americans listen to radio weekly on digital audio platforms. The March 2009 study by Arbitron and Edison Research showed continued growth in usage and ownership of various forms of digital

audio platforms, including online radio, iPod/MP3 players and podcasting.

You will have to build your audience, but it is out there to be had. The report showed that weekly online radio audiences increased significantly in the past year to 17 percent of the U.S. population age 12 and older - up from 13 percent in 2008. On a weekly basis, online radio reaches 20 percent of 25- to 54-year-olds - up from 15 percent in 2008.

Bill Rose, senior vice president of marketing for Arbitron Inc., says: "The sharp growth in weekly usage of online radio ... provides compelling evidence that radio's digital platforms may be reaching critical mass. We are ... seeing encoded streams of AM/FM broadcasts with significant audience in local markets."

There are a variety of ways for you to have your own Internet radio show. One of them is [www.shoutcast.com](http://www.shoutcast.com). Click on the "Be a DJ" link. It looks reasonably simple, though I have not done it. [DigitalBuzzradio.com](http://DigitalBuzzradio.com) is another site to check out.

Many communities already have Internet radio stations and are looking for people to host radio shows. In our area, we have [www.castlerockradio.com](http://www.castlerockradio.com) as our local radio station and my friend, Michael House, has hosted the morning show since the first day of broadcasting.

## **26. Become an expert on something and write about it.**

My theory is that if you read 10 good books on any one subject, you will be an expert on that subject. Once an expert, you can begin to write on the subject and someone might want to publish what you've written.

## **27. Volunteer to become the public information officer for your local library, police department or other government agency that does not have a PIO.**

Many governmental agencies are suffering from cutbacks and eliminating their PIOs. This opens up the possibility for a dedicated citizen journalist to step in and serve his/her community in a very meaningful way.

## **28. There are websites that will attempt to sell your work product (written, photo**

**and video) to mainstream media outlets.**

One such website is [www.demotix.com](http://www.demotix.com). I've registered on this website (it's free) and have uploaded some articles in hopes they may some day be published. So far no luck, but I'm way ahead of the person who hasn't uploaded anything.

**29. You can create and publish maps showing things like potholes, gang activity, local nightlife, church locations, private schools, dangerous intersections, etc.**

**30. You can write and produce “charticles” – articles that add clarifying charts, photos and graphics to your text.**

If you are good with graphics, you can develop a real niche for clarifying complex subjects with charts or graphs. Get your facts and figures together, create your chart or graphs, and I think you'll find someone interested in your work.

**31. Write an opinion piece and upload it to a local or regional website that accepts opinions from citizens.**

An example of an independent news website doing this can be seen at [www.newsreview.com/sacramento](http://www.newsreview.com/sacramento).

Check your local newspaper's website to see if it offers a forum for citizens to upload their opinions on local news items. Most newspapers are adding such capabilities in their attempt to stay connected with their shrinking readership. You can help them by submitting well-written news and opinion items along with good photos.

**This is not all!**

I am confident that this list is NOT exhaustive. No doubt by the time I hit “save” on this document, someone or two or 10 people will come up with other cooler, faster, more creative ways to communicate than those given above.

If you know of any other ways for citizen journalists to get their news to the people, please send them to me: [ronross@NACJ.us](mailto:ronross@NACJ.us). We want to know what's happening so we can share it with our members.

# Resources for Citizen Journalists





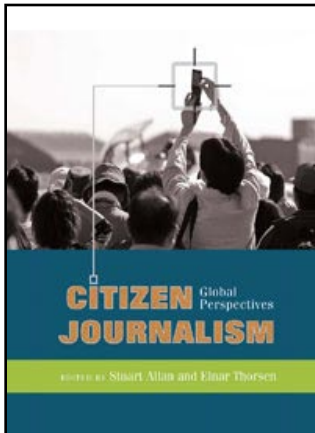
## Resources for Citizen Journalists

We hesitate to even begin this portion of the book for two reasons: the list of resources can be too exhaustive (and never complete) or it can be too brief and seem meaningless.

In your search for information on the Internet, there is nothing better than Google.com or Bing.com or dozens of similar search engines. In most cases, the information you want is at your fingertips. The challenge for the researcher is to separate the solid, useful information from the fraudulent and therefore worthless information.

Our suggestion is to search and verify any information before using it in a story or presenting it as fact.

### Books of Interest for Citizen Journalists



**“Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives”** by Stuart Alan and Einar Thorson

A series of chapters by various authors on the worldwide impact of citizen journalism.

**“Clear Blogging: How People Blogging Are Changing the World and How You Can Join Them”** by Bob Wash

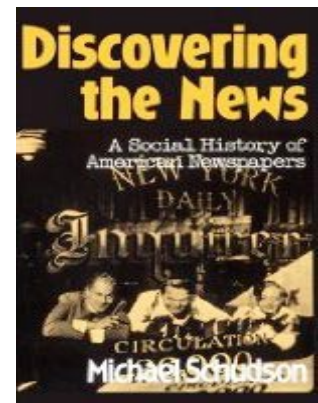
A good beginners book about blogging, written in 2007 but still relevant.

**“Community Journalism”** by Jock Lauterer

This book was written for the university classroom, but is a warm and friendly read about the importance of the newspaper in small towns.

**“Discovering the News”** by Michael Schudson

If you are interested in the history of American journalism, especially on the development of the professional journalistic code of “objectivity,” its strengths and weaknesses, you’ll want this book in your library.



**“Free Press, Free People”** by John Hohenberg

Hohenberg gives the reader a clear and easy-to-read account of the role of the press and its impact on society throughout history.

**“Just the Facts: How Objectivity Came to Define American Journalism”** by David T. Z. Mindich

The author takes a broad look at American journalism, its history and direction.

**“Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives”** by Todd Gitlin

A broad discussion of the variety of media impacting daily life written in 2001. Not specific toward citizen journalism.

**“News Reporting and Writing”** by Melvin Mencher

One of the most popular journalism textbooks on the market today.

**“Public Journalism 2.0: The Promise and Reality of a Citizen Engaged Press”** by Jack Rosenberry and Burton St. John, editors

A series of articles by various authors on the roots of civic journalism, its present status and a look at the future of the movement.

**“The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Journalism”** by Christopher K. Passante

A surprisingly useful book to anyone exploring journalism - written in 2007.

**“The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual”**

The AP Stylebook is considered the first and last word on newspaper writing. It is an essential reference for writers, editors and students. It clarifies the AP’s rules on grammar, spelling, punctuation and usage, with additional sections on libel, business and sports reporting.



**“The Associated Press Broadcast News Handbook”** by Brad Kalbfeld

Includes information on the skills needed to cover broadcast news, as well as style and libel information included in “The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual.”

**“The Elements of Style”** by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White

This may be the best guide to good writing ever written. Written by two masters of English prose, the book focuses on the few eternal guidelines – e.g., omit needless words, use the active voice – and models its own advice to value clarity above all else in writing and to keep things brief.

**“The Elements of Journalism”** by Bill Kovach & Tom Rosenstiel

The subtitle is: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect. An easy read on the relationship of journalism and democracy.

**“The Huffington Post Complete Guide to Blogging”**

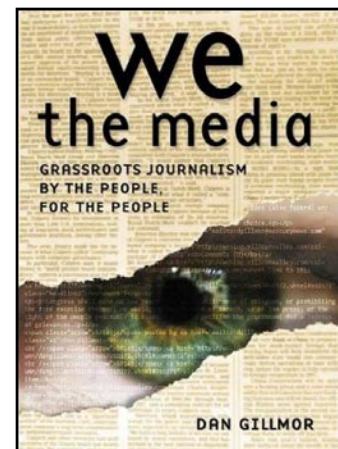
Written in 2008, it is a series of brief articles by a variety of authors on the subject of blogging, all related to *The Huffington Post*.

**“The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage”** by Allan M. Siegal and William G. Connolly

The official style guide used by the writers and editors of *The New York Times*.

**“We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People”** by Dan Gillmor

Gillmor describes and defines citizen journalism; widely acclaimed and debated.



**“We’re All Journalists Now: The Transformation of the Press and Reshaping of the Law in the Internet Age”** by Scott Gant

The author is a lawyer who specializes in constitutional law. He discusses whether bloggers and citizen journalists should receive the same protections under the laws as professional journalists.

**“Write to the Point and Feel Better About Your Writing”** by Bill Stott

A good book for beginning writers.

**“Writing Tools”** by Roy Peter Clark

This book was written specifically for journalists.

## Internet Resources

Notice: The Internet resources provided below are only a small portion of what is available. In most cases, the Web addresss can be loaded as they are presented below. In some cases it may be necessary to precede the URL with <http://www>.

### *Blogging Resources*

The following are only a few of the blogging resources available on the Internet.

**Vox.com**  
**LiveJournal.com**  
**Blogivists.com**  
**Blogger.com**  
**Tumblr.com**  
**Xanga.com**

For more, search “blogs,” “free blogging” or similar phrases. You’ll find thousands of resources, how-to guides and blogs on blogging.

### *Blog Listing Services*

**CyberJournalist.net**  
**BlogsByWomen.com**  
**BlogCatalog.com**  
**Technorati.com**

For more, search “blog listing services.”

### *Journalism Training*



**NACJ.us** is the website for the National Association of Citizen Journalists, where you will find inexpensive online training and credentialing for citizen journalists. Free news and information about the expanding world of citizen journalism is also available.

**Poynter.org** is the Web address for the Poynter Institute, a school for journalists, future journalists and teachers of journalism. Lots of good information is available free.

### ***Writing and Research Tools for Journalists***

**AcronymFinder.com** has thousands of definitions for acronyms, abbreviations and initials.

**Britannica.com** is one of several encyclopedia websites. Wikipedia.org is one of the most popular resources on the Internet but has from time to time been unreliable.

**Census.gov** is the official website for the U.S. Census Bureau, has online resources for every community in the U.S.

The Central Intelligence Agency's "World Factbook" has answers to many questions about international issues.

**<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>**

**Dictionary.com, Thesaurus.com** and **Reference.com** are three of the handiest websites available for writers today.

Fact checking websites are useful because you can find the real answers to urban legends, Internet rumors and email frauds. Here are three:

**Snopes.com**

**UrbanLegends.com**

**Purportal.com**

**Hoovers.com** allows you to do a search on corporate names. Unless the company is very small or very closely held, you'll likely get a summary of the company and its business model, the basic financials, and the names of a few top executives, even if you don't have a subscription.

**IRE.org** - Investigative Reporters and Editors has training, discussions and other general investigative reporting topics available.

**Nationmaster.com** is a massive central data source and a handy way to graphically compare nations. It is a vast compilation of data from such sources as the CIA's "World Factbook," United Nations and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

**NewsPlace.org** has links to news sources, reporting resources, journalism skills, breaking media-related news and more. <http://www3.niu.edu/newsplace/>

**Oyez.org** follows the activities of the U.S. Supreme Court.



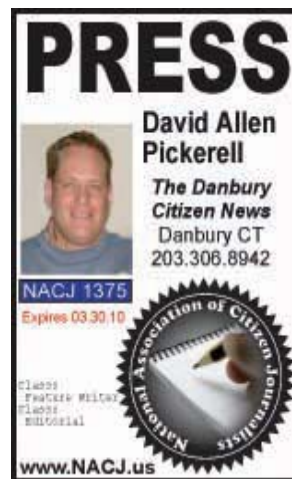
**ReligionSource.org** is a database of more than 1,000 categories including religion, politics, social issues, education, popular culture, ethics and more created by the American Academy of Religion.

**Sec.gov** is another source for corporate information. Click on "Search for Company Filings," then "Companies and Other Filings" for information on large corporations.

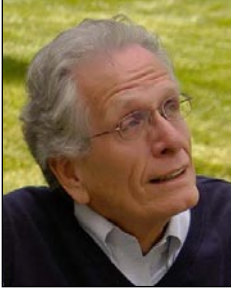
When you discover additional books, blogs or websites that are especially helpful for citizen journalists, please tell us about them by emailing us at [info@NACJ.us](mailto:info@NACJ.us).

Please visit [NACJ.us](http://NACJ.us) for additional resources for citizen journalists.

**Earn your citizen journalist credentials from the  
National Association of Citizen Journalists.  
For more information, please visit [www.NACJ.us](http://www.NACJ.us).**



## *About the Authors*



**Ronald D. Ross**, B.A., M.Div., D.Th., is a former pastor and missionary to Africa who has spent much of his life writing, teaching and working as the publisher of various publications, including an entertainment weekly in Douglas County, Colo.

Ross earned his first byline front-page story as a writer for his high school newspaper and served as a citizen journalist when he reported all of his high school's sports scores to a local radio station.

Now, as the co-founder and catalyst-in-chief of the National Association of Citizen Journalists, he focuses his attention on motivating and supporting citizen journalists in their quest to keep their communities informed.

This is Ross' second book. He also wrote, "Your Family Heritage, a Guide to Preserving Family History," a resource for oral history taking.

Ross' blog: [www.RonRossToday.com](http://www.RonRossToday.com)



**Susan Carson Cormier** has more than 28 years of experience in the media arts, including stints as a broadcast writer, reporter, assistant city editor, city editor, legislative bureau chief, public information officer and published citizen journalist.

Cormier's entry into the news business came naturally. Her father, Donald W. Carson, was a news reporter and editor before he became a journalism professor/department head at the University of Arizona. She became hooked on journalism after two pieces that she wrote as a college student – or as a citizen journalist - were published in local newspapers.

As the co-founder and head coach of the NACJ, she focuses her attention on teaching citizen journalists the basic skills that she learned at the UofA and during her decade in the newspaper business.

Cormier's blog: [www.SusanCormier.com](http://www.SusanCormier.com)

Both Ross and Cormier reside in the Denver, Colo., area.