



A proposal for a real revolution in 'user-generated content' and news

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Making 'UGC' work for 'users'

The 7 July 2005 bombings in London helped the mainstream media understand how millions of mobile phone cameras could dramatically expand the coverage of an event. It was a pivotal moment in journalism. But apart from breaking news, most news organisations have failed to use community contributions to broaden and deepen their coverage or to expand their narrow, traditional news agenda.

Few people apart from professional journalists actually want to be journalists, which is one of the greatest problems underlying news organisations' enthusiasm for 'citizen journalism'. News organisations cannot and should not expect crowdsourcing to replace the work of paid journalists. One of the greatest risks to news organisations is that, in developing channels for user-generated content, they alienate their audiences by leaving them with a feeling of being exploited, that they are doing for free what others are paid for. As blogger and freelance editor Tish Grier recently wrote of CBS and Fox UGC initiatives:

"Okay, so we know *what* CBS and Fox are looking for, and *where* you can send in your stuff, but, more importantly *why* do they want it and **will you get anything other than a pat on the ass for giving it to them?**

"To a greater or lesser degree, these networks are looking to rip-off citizen content--and not paying for it as well as keeping the rights, makes sure that you the citizen stays an amateur."

A few of the more enlightened news groups understand that UGC can broaden and deepen their coverage and renew their relationship with their audiences. But as media groups' revenues decline and budgets are cut, most UGC strategies have been little more than outsourced newsgathering with little consideration for how to increase the utility of the content for both contributors and consumers.

News organisations, or indeed anyone looking to take advantage of user-generated content, must look for ways to build sites and services that actually benefits those users. In a talk at the BBC, Tim O'Reilly said Web 2.0 sites that have succeeded are designed in such a way that the value of the site increases the greater the level of participation. How can news organisations design websites and web services that encourage participation through increased value to their users? The future for news organizations lies in both tapping expertise and enhancing their content with community contributions.

History of success

Before I go any further, I'm going to shift terminology. I don't like the term user-generated content: it's corporate speak and it creates a wall between contributors and the organizations that are using their content. Some people are beginning to use the term community-created content, which has a better ring to it.

I also want to challenge the idea that this trend is new. It may be new to most news organizations, but it's been happening for years elsewhere online. In 1998, Legacy.com in the United States changed the face of obituaries. Instead of a single static tribute online for a deceased friend or relative, people could contribute their own personal memories. The service weathered the dot.com crash and has thrived, with more than 350 newspapers in the United States now offering the service. It's not breaking news, and most journalists do think of breaking news when they think of community-created content. But it's a valuable service.

Across the United States, small newspapers have been showing success with hyper-local strategies. The Lawrence Journal World in Lawrence, Kansas, has long been a hotbed for innovation, launching its own 'converged' newsroom in

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2001, long before most newspapers were even thinking about multimedia. The newspaper website has a wide range of community projects including a section called “Game”, which combines contributions from the staff with contributions from parents and coaches of youth sports teams in the area. As the New York Times said in a 2005 article:

“Every Little League player in this town of about 85,000 people can be a star. Regardless of how he or she hits or fields, each tyke and teenager is eligible for a personalized electronic trading card - replete with a picture, biography, statistics and an audio clip of the player philosophizing about the game - that can be posted on the Web site of the local newspaper, The Lawrence Journal-World.”

Like other innovative local news websites in the US, including BlufftonToday.com and MyMissourian.com, Lawrence community contributions are then printed in a weekly freesheet.

What can you do for your users?

Recently, media blogger Mark Glaser echoed President Kennedy’s inaugural address when he challenged news organisations to “Ask not what the community can do for you; ask what you can do for the community.”

“Simply asking for people to submit stories, submit photos or submit videos won’t work without providing them with some motivation, with some support from the community,” he said.

Most journalists labour under the misconception that everyone else wants to be a journalist, too, which is why they find the idea of “citizen journalism” so threatening. But most people have their own jobs and aren’t interested in changing careers and becoming journalists. They do, however, want to know what is going on in their community – news about schools, events and activities. They want to know if there are crimes in their neighbourhood to keep their families safe. They will share information they have with others in their community.

Mr Glaser wrote about hyper-local community news projects in 2004, and in his piece for the Online Journalism Review, he interviewed Mary Fulton of the Northwest Voice. She said:

"We are the traditional journalism model turned upside down. Instead of being the gatekeeper, telling people that what’s important to them ‘isn’t news,’ we’re just opening up the gates and letting people come on in. We are a better community newspaper for having thousands of readers who serve as the eyes and ears for the Voice, rather than having everything filtered through the views of a small group of reporters and editors."

News organisations large and small often get caught up in very narrow definitions of what is ‘news’, avoiding anything that doesn’t fit into the traditional news agenda. News organisations often cannot provide all of the coverage their communities would like because of a lack of resources. Journalists themselves rely on a traditional linear story model regardless if the medium is text, audio or video. However, there are many kinds of information that don’t fit into the traditional definition of news or the linear story structure.

Successful community-created news sites collate and publish information that’s important to their community, such as lists of the lowest petrol prices or, in the case of Bakersfield California, a community created map of potholes that included photos taken by the public. It is important information for the community, and the value to the contributors increases the greater the number of contributions. Would this be journalism as most professional journalists define it? No, but gradually that is changing.

The Gannett news group recently redefined its mission stating that they wanted their newsrooms to become “information centres” which use a mix professional and amateur sources to best serve their communities.

Adrian Holovaty, now with the Washington Post, has championed the programmer-as-journalist model. His seminal work, the mashup at ChicagoCrime.org, took crime data and used Google Maps to show citizens of Chicago where crime was occurring. It was a simple but powerful idea. His database-driven work at the Washington Post is proving an effective model of presenting complex information in novel ways, such as campaign contributions to presidential candidate John McCain.

The solutions are not always purely technical. Sometimes a subtle shift of approach can show the utility of older tools. Using relatively primitive forums, but with active engagement by their editorial staff, a Gannett newspaper in Fort Meyers Florida worked with its readers to investigate complaints against a local water company. "Rather than start a long investigation and come out months later in the paper with our findings we asked our readers to help us find out why the cost was so exorbitant," Kate Marymont, the News-Press’ editor in chief, told Wired magazine. The crowdsourced project by the newspaper has led to a US Department of Justice investigation into possible fraud.

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Some sites, such as BlufftonToday.com and its sister sites, have used Drupal to power community created calendars. And a freesheet is printed from the contributions of both professional journalists and members of the Bluffton community. Morris Communications, who own BlufftonToday.com, not only sells newspapers, but also the software they have created, such as photo-submission software Spotted which works with Drupal and other content management systems.

Work smarter, not harder

Many of these community sites are very simple, utilising existing third party blog or forum software, but much more is possible using technology that is available or just over the horizon.

Many media outlets now rely on blanket, unfocused pleas to the public for pictures, video and comments. It's a brute force approach, and media organisations are already straining under the weight of moderating or evaluating the submissions. This is difficult enough with text comments, but becomes even more difficult with photographic, audio and video material.

There are smarter ways. People could geotag and send their images either manually or, better yet, via applications such as Zonetag or Shozu. They could also include basic information either explaining or questioning what they are witnessing, such as: "Why have the police shut Holborn Underground Station?"

This would help staff focus their efforts.

They could use geotags and keywords to pre-sort the photographs, allowing them to see whether a photograph corresponded to a current story or related to something new. Given enough metadata, it would be possible for an application to group photographs together, and sort them by location, time, or other criteria. Not only would this save valuable time and resources, it would also allow journalists to spot 'interestingness', as it's termed in Flickr.

After initial verification, staff could send questions to members of the community who had opted in and who had included location and contact information at registration. Community members could be encouraged to develop profiles that help journalists identify whether they might have expertise on a given story.

The BBC's registration process encourages people to register by allowing those who register to take part in reactively moderated debates. During that process, they are encouraged to leave contact information. It is one of the reasons that the BBC has been so effective in using community contributions to enhance their coverage.

National Public Radio in the United States has already developed an expertise-based network called Public Insight Journalism. They have greatly expanded the network of sources that their journalists can call on by finding new sources in their audience.

Journalists also need to expand their methods of communication and newsgathering beyond the phone to include SMS, IM, e-mail and Skype. Again, as with mobile phone services, members of the community could receive special, targeted news alerts beyond typical breaking news flashes. And these news flashes should not be simple broadcast messages. There should also be a return channel via which members of the community can contribute any information they have.

But the mobile phone service could also take advantage of emerging location-based services. Dodgeball is a mobile service in the US that alerts you when your friends are near via your mobile phone. What happens if users could not only contribute information with location information but also be alerted to news near them? They could be made aware of traffic information, road closures or other events that they might need to route around. They could share the best routes to avoid traffic tie-ups and be alerted if they are close to the event. Instead of bombarding mobile users with information that may be of little relevance, alert them to information that they can act on.

Challenges

The biggest challenge for newspaper organisations comes from their lack of expertise in software development. Only a handful of news organisations have active software development groups. Ironically, one of the most well known software development groups came out of the Lawrence Journal-World in Lawrence Kansas. Adrian Holovaty, Simon Willison, Jacob Kaplan-Moss and Wilson Miner developed the Django framework for Python so that they could deliver highly interactive sites on tight news-driven deadlines. They were able to develop websites in hours, not days – a feat

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unheard of in media. As they say in the documentation, they were perfectionists with deadlines, which describes a fair number of journalists.

The news organisations that succeed, not only in developing user-generated content services that actually benefit users but also in this increasingly challenging business environment, are the ones that re-examine their development processes, resist the urge to always build bespoke systems when many open-source options exist and use rapid development web frameworks such as Django and Ruby on Rails. We need more programmers with journalistic sensibilities and a journalist's sense for deadlines, and we also need news organisations that realise that they are software companies now.