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The 11 Layers of Citizen Journalism
A resource guide to help you figure out how to put this industry trend to work for you and your newsroom.

By Steve Outing (more by author)



"<u>Citizen journalism</u>." It's one of the hottest buzzwords in the news business these days. Many news executives are probably thinking about implementing some sort of citizen-journalism initiative; a small but growing number have already done so.

But there's plenty of confusion about

citizen journalism. What exactly is it? Is this something that's going to be essential to the future prosperity of news companies?

In my conversations and communications with editors, I sense plenty of confusion about the concept. There's enthusiasm about experimenting in some quarters -- about harnessing the power of an audience permitted for the first time to truly participate in the news media. But mostly I hear concern and healthy skepticism.

This article is designed to help publishers and editors understand citizen journalism and how it might be incorporated into their Web sites and legacy media. We'll look at how news organizations can employ the citizen-journalism concept, and we'll approach it by looking at the different levels or layers available. Citizen journalism isn't one

simple concept that can be applied universally by all news organizations. It's much more complex, with many potential variations.

So let's explore the possibilities, from dipping a toe into the waters of participatory journalism to embracing citizen reporting with your organization's full involvement. We'll start out slow and build toward the most radical visions of what's possible.

1. The first step: Opening up to public comment

For some publishers skittish about allowing anyone to publish under their brand name, enabling readers to attach comments to articles on the Web represents a start. At its simplest level, user comments offer the opportunity for readers to react to, criticize, praise or add to what's published by professional journalists. If you look at news Web sites that allow user comments (and at this writing, it's still a small minority of all news sites), you'll see a mix of user reactions within article comments. But almost universally, you'll see occasional reader comments that add to what's published. Readers routinely use such comments to bring up some point that was missed by the writer, or add new information that the reporter didn't know about. Such readers can make the original story better.

Which content should be open to reader comments? Blogs traditionally have included reader comments (though even some of the most popular independent blogs eschew them; e.g., Instapundit), so that's a no-brainer. Some sites -- including Poynter Online, where you're reading this -- support user comments on all articles. Do that and you're on your way toward the citizen-journalism experience.

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Comments (132) | Tra

But why not go further; think outside the box a bit? Consider allowing reader comments on things like calendar listings, obituaries, letters to the editor, even

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- * Taking Tsunami Coverage Into Their Own Hands.
- * New Desk in the Newsroom: The Citizen Editor's (E&P).

Resources:

- * We Media report (The Media Center @ API).
- * Wikipedia entry on citizen journalism.

classified ads. Let's think about this: Why does a letter to the editor from a member of the public have to stop with that letter? Why not allow it to spark an online conversation? Comments on a calendar listing might attract citizen reviews from people who've seen a speaker or performer before (an interesting and useful public service). Obituary comments will draw remembrances from people who knew the deceased.

Even allowing comments on classified ads -- especially if they are in categories where sellers don't pay for the ad -- can be a fascinating exercise and a potentially good public service.

A few words of caution: Some news Web sites have had trouble with readers posting objectionable content in comment areas. This can be at least partially avoided by requiring users to register with the site and submit their names and e-mail addresses before being allowed to post comments, and by establishing a system that makes it easy for site users to report objectionable comments.

I don't want to paint this as easy. As media Web sites that allow comments have learned, you do need to watch what people post. The key may be to realize that opening up to reader comments requires vigilance, even if the number of problems you are likely to encounter may be slim.

Still, many publishers seemingly remain reluctant to take this first step into citizen journalism. Even <u>The Northwest Voice</u>, a stand-alone citizen-journalism Web site and newspaper owned by <u>The Bakersfield Californian</u>, which I'll mention in the layers below, doesn't allow reader comments. Two-way conversation is an imperative characteristic of most citizen journalism, yet it appears to remain threatening to many people in the journalism and publishing professions.

Examples:

- InsideVC.com (Ventura County Star, Calif.).
- Poynter Online (The Poynter Institute's Web site).
- ZDNet.com.

2. Second step: The citizen add-on reporter

A small step up the ladder is to recruit citizen add-on contributions for stories written by professional journalists. I mean more than just adding a "User Comments" link. I mean that with selected stories, solicit information and experiences from members of the public, and add them to the main story to enhance it.

Here's an example: A series of car break-ins is occurring at trailhead parking lots in your area. A reporter writes a short article about the problem, identifying some of the locations of the vandalism. As a sidebar to the conventionally written story, trail users are invited to post their experiences of having their cars broken into, including submitting photos.

This approach turns a standard 10-inch minor article into an ongoing story, with victims or witnesses to the crimes contributing information and news over a longer time period. (Until the culprit is caught and the story fades.) The information from the public serves as a warning to other trail users about which parking lots have had break-in problems. The public-submitted information could even be crafted by the news staff into an online map of crime reports, featuring victims' self-reports and photos.

(This is another one of those areas that requires vigilance. Imagine, for example, if someone posted a note with a photo of someone apparently breaking into a car,

and the suspect was identifiable. If that person was an innocent car owner who locked his keys in the car ... well, you can imagine the libel threat.)

Many (but certainly not all) stories can benefit from this treatment. A story, say, about bicyclists being harassed by motorists is the ideal type of story to solicit reports from the public.

Such an approach to citizen contributions isn't something you'll want to do on every news story, but, when appropriate, it's a great way to offer the community better and deeper coverage than is possible with a lone professional reporter. So look for stories that can benefit from the citizen add-on approach.

Examples: If you know of any news sites employing this approach, please <u>e-mail</u> me.

3. Now we're getting serious: Open-source reporting

If you're willing to take yet another step up the ladder of citizen journalism, consider what's sometimes referred to as "open-source" or "participatory" journalism or reporting. This is another one of those techniques that you'll use once in a while, when appropriate to a particular story or project.

The term generally is understood to mean a collaboration between a professional journalist and his/her readers on a story, where readers who are knowledgeable on the topic are asked to contribute their expertise, ask questions to provide guidance to the reporter, or even do actual reporting which will be included in the final journalistic product.

There are various approaches that a reporter can take under the umbrella of this general model. One would be to announce up front that you are working on a particular story, and ask readers to guide you. An example would be if you have an interview scheduled with a famous politician or celebrity. Announce that you want to go into the interview armed with questions submitted by your readers. Pick out the best ones, add your own, then do the interview.

Take it a step further: Distribute a draft of your article before "official" publication to the readers who've helped you out, getting feedback to "perfect" the article before it gets wide readership. Reporters who publish on Web sites or on blogs can do this by publishing a draft online, getting public feedback, then later publishing the polished version on the Web as well as then publishing in a print edition.

An alternative to simply taking readers' advice and incorporating it into the article invisibly is to build specific suggestions into the story and give the readers credit. One technique involves adding pop-up notes on a story that highlight reader ideas; these can appear when a Web site reader mouses over a "hot" word or phrase.

More advanced forms of open-source reporting involve a collaboration between writer and readers. This could take the form of requesting that readers with knowledge or involvement in a topic do actual reporting, which is then incorporated into the final published story. Payment for readers' work might be as simple as credit in the finished article, or event actual cash payment. Obviously, it will behoove the reporter to double-check reader reporting so as not to get duped.

Also (perhaps) fitting in this category of citizen journalism is the reader panel. Some newspapers have developed databases of volunteer readers willing to be interviewed by reporters. When a writer needs to find a group of sources to be

interviewed for a story project, he/she can search the database for certain characteristics and contact them. Or reader-panel members can be used in some of the ways described in the paragraphs above.

Examples:

- The Spokesman-Review/APME reader panel.
- If you know of any other news sites deploying this approach, please e-mail me.

4. The citizen bloghouse

Blogging started out as an "everyman" phenomenon (and now, it seems, almost everyone has a blog), but then professional journalists took up the form, too. But the real promise of blogs remains with the non-journalists, for whom blogging has given a powerful and inexpensive publishing tool to reach out to the world with their stories and thoughts.

A great way to get citizens involved in a news Web site is to simply invite them to blog for it. A number of news sites do this now, and some citizen blogs are consistently interesting reads.

A couple different approaches work for citizen blogs on news Web sites. The first is simply to invite anyone who's interested to start a blog, by offering a blog hosting service. (Try using a service like Blogdigger Local to find local bloggers to invite.) What can turn into a long list of citizen blogs are listed by category on a blog table of contents page. And a main citizen-blogs page can highlight new posts to the various blogs as they are published. Or site editors can watch the citizen blog postings and select the best to be highlighted on the

>> COMMUNITY BLOGS . . . (more)

P David's blog: Deep Throat 'outs' self

KELLYPMOMOF3's blog: Come on Bluffton!

ARhoneBush's blog: Teacher of the Year

FORUM Topic: Teen Curfew?

Web Video from local events



main blog page. Yet another interesting approach is an aggregator application which creates a sort of Über-blog featuring the newest entries from a variety of citizen blogs, continuously updated.

Your community might already have a Web site that's aggregating local blogs (like <u>Greensboro101.com</u> or Rex Sorgatz's <u>MNSpeak.com Aggregator</u>) -- in which case, perhaps there are partnership opportunities to be explored.

The other model is to be selective, inviting people who you think would be good additions to the Web site to start blogging under your news site's brand name. This might mean seeking out local people who already have independent blogs and encouraging them to move over to the news Web site -- perhaps with enticements such as free hosting, promises of promotion to increase their blog audience and visibility, or even money. Or accept "applications" from bloggers, saying you'll choose the best to be published on your site (and perhaps paying them a modest fee).

If your site takes the selective approach, it's worth thinking about what topics the blogs might cover. The best strategy may be to have citizen blogs that complement what the news staff produces. A great promise of citizen blogs is that they can cover topics and areas uncovered by or too narrow to warrant the interest of the news staff. If your newspaper, say, has a small sports staff, citizen bloggers who are passionate about minor sports can fill in the gaps,

ensuring that sports like trail running and girls' softball get at least some coverage. If your news organization doesn't provide much coverage of pets, consider finding a local veterinarian or animal trainer who might like to start a blog.

One word of caution, however: Citizen bloggers, because they're usually volunteers, can't be counted on to keep a blog filled with content consistently or for very long. Most news Web sites that have used citizen bloggers report that the blogs tend to be short-lived; starting out strong is common, followed by less-frequent posting, then complete inactivity. Paying citizen bloggers -- even if it's a token amount, or in the form of prizes or "goodies" -- might help to alleviate this problem.

Examples:

- Bluffton (S.C.) Today Community Blogs.
- Lawrence.com Blogs (The Lawrence Journal-World, Kansas).
- The Denver Post Bloghouse.
- NJ.com Weblogs.

5. Newsroom citizen 'transparency' blogs

A specific type of citizen blog deserves its own category here. It plays on the notion of news organization "transparency," or sharing the inner workings of the newsroom with readers or viewers. This involves inviting a reader or readers to blog with public complaints, criticism, or praise for the news organization's ongoing work. A reader panel can be empowered via a publicly accessible blog to serve as citizen ombudsmen, of a sort, offering public commentary on how the news organization is performing.

A milder form of this is the <u>editor's blog</u> -- typically written by a paper's top editor and explaining the inner workings of the newsroom and discussing how specific editorial decisions are made -- along with reader comments, so that the editor has a public dialog with his/her blog readers.

Example:

SpokesmanReview.com's "News Is a Conversation" blog.

6. The stand-alone citizen-journalism site: Edited version

OK, now we're swimming in the deep end. This next step involves establishing a stand-alone citizen-journalism Web site that is separate from the core news brand. It means establishing a news-oriented Web site that is comprised entirely or nearly entirely of contributions from the community.

Most such sites focus on local news -- very local news. Citizen contributors can submit whatever they want, from an account of a kids' soccer game, to observations from an audience member at last night's city council meeting, to an opinion piece by a state legislator, to a high-school student telling of her prom-night experience. The site's editors monitor and perform a modest degree of editing to submissions, in order to maintain some degree of "editorial integrity" of content placed under the publisher's brand name.

Photos are also a big appeal of such sites. You'll find citizen-submitted shots of pets, cars, vacations, kids graduating...



If that sounds like a big mish-mash of not-that-interesting content, you're right. But that doesn't mean this is a bad idea. Rather, it means that editors of such local citizen-journalism sites need to guide community members into making quality submissions -- to educate them about what's worth sharing with their fellow citizens. That can mean recruiting community leaders, event organizers, and just plain interesting people to contribute to the site. It can mean guiding submissions by, for example, promoting an upcoming event and urging that participants take photographs and submit them, and write up their experiences.

And in this model, the site's editors also perform a line-editing role, ensuring that content is up to at least a minimal level of quality. (Correct spelling, proper grammar, attention paid to potential libel issues.)

The other imperative with such sites is to create a homepage and section pages that highlight the best of citizen coverage. Since much of user-submitted content can be deadly dull to most of the audience, a page that simply lists everything people submitted by date -- no matter how bad -- can be about as exciting as reading a press-release wire. But if site editors are doing their job well in terms of recruiting and educating citizen journalists, there should be enough compelling content within the submissions pool to populate a homepage that will engage site visitors.

An advantage of sites like this is that citizens can cover issues and events that local mainstream media ignore. If you as a community member think that your fellow citizens should know about a stop sign that was knocked down and the county government won't fix, then this is an outlet to publicize news that's not big enough to get on the radar screen of the local newspaper or TV news outlets. Citizens likewise have a way to publicize big stories that local media outlets are avoiding. Got a complaint about the local press? Go around them.

Examples:

- MyMissourian (Columbia, Mo., student-run site).
- WestportNow (Westport, Conn., independent site).
- iBrattleboro.com (Brattleboro, Vt., independent site).
- Greensboro (N.C.) News & Record YourNews (sub-site of main news Web site).

7. The stand-alone citizen-journalism site: Unedited version

This model is identical to No. 6 above, except that citizen submissions are not edited. What people write goes on the site: blemishes, misspellings and all.

With this model of stand-alone citizen-journalism site, it is important to have safeguards against inappropriate content being posted. Having a site editor review all submissions as soon as possible after they've been automatically published is ideal -- but impractical, of course, since editors do have to sleep and posting by the public is possible 24 hours a day.

A more practical model is to include "Report Misconduct" buttons on every citizen-submitted story and photograph. Users click these when they spot something inappropriate, and a message is sent to site editors so someone can take a look, and take action if necessary. Also worth considering is having a script written that automatically takes down an item when,



say, at least three people click the misconduct button -- a safeguard that will come in handy in the middle of the night.

Why would site editors want to keep their hands off and not even fix obvious errors? Well, for one thing, this approach is more in the spirit of citizen journalism -- let them be what they are (amateur writers, community members), rather than try to turn every contributor into a mini-journalist. Make the site more about community and less about "journalism."

Then there's the legal angle. I'm not a lawyer and I'd urge you to consult one for specific advice, but a citizen-journalism Web site publisher may be on safer legal ground by not being in a position of editing every submission. Should an editor spot a user-submitted article that's potentially libelous (and thus violates the site's terms of service), then of course remove it. But by screening every submission for potential libel before publication, the site will have greater liability should something get through that results in a lawsuit.

Examples:

- <u>Backfence.com</u> (U.S. nationwide, with current beta sites in Reston and McLean, Va.).
- GoSkokie (Skokie, Ill., student-run site).
- <u>GetLocalNews.com</u> (large network of community citizen-journalism Web sites around the U.S.).
- <u>NewWest</u> (news site covering the Rocky Mountain region; mostly by professional journalists but with a stand-alone "Citizen Journalism" area).
- <u>DailyHeights.com</u> (neighborhood citizen-journalism site for the Prospect Heights neighborhood in Brooklyn, N.Y.).

8. Add a print edition

For this model, take either No. 6 or No. 7 above (stand-alone citizen-journalism Web site, either with edited submissions or a hands-off editing approach) and add a print edition. A number of newspapers have tried this, using a print edition distributed freely once a week as an insert into a traditional daily or weekly paper, or as a stand-alone print product delivered to people's doorsteps and/or delivered to local retailers and placed in news boxes for consumers to pick up.

Content for these print special editions is typically comprised primarily of the best content submitted to the citizen-journalism Web site. This can be categorized in a similar way as the traditional newspaper: weddings, deaths, business, sports, opinion, people, features, food, etc. Photo features -- especially the best photos from all the people who attended a local event, for example -- can be particularly compelling content for such print editions.

Most stand-alone citizen-journalism sites, even those that choose not to edit



submissions before they go live online, do exercise at least some editing prior to print publication. The print edition will look more credible if misspellings are avoided and proper grammar is used. But even print editors should avoid editing out the flavor of the citizen submissions; keep editing to the bare minimum.

A print component can help entice "trusted" contributors to sign up for voluntary writing duty: youth and community group leaders, religious leaders, coaches, politicians, etc. Especially in a citizen-journalism initiative's early days, the prospect of a volunteer's writing turning up in a newspaper can be more appealing than writing for a still-obscure Web site.

For now, at least, such print editions often are seen as the primary revenue source for newspapers venturing into citizen journalism. Typically, advertising rates are significantly lower than in the newspaper itself or on its Web site, so the combined print-online combo citizen-journalism site can be appealing to small businesses that otherwise couldn't afford to advertise with the newspaper.

However, there is a school of thought that having a print edition as part of a citizen-journalism venture is sort of "retrograde." It adds significant costs that shouldn't be underestimated, and, the argument goes, print can't begin to capture what's most interesting about the citizen-journalism concept because it isn't an interactive, two-way medium like online.

Examples:

- MyTown (The Daily Camera, Boulder, Colo.).
- Neighbors (The Dallas Morning News, Texas).
- Northwest Voice (The Bakersfield Californian).
- YourHub (Rocky Mountain News, Denver, Colo.).
- <u>Bluffton Today</u> (South Carolina; daily print edition, so it fits in this category, but also in No. 9 below).

9. The hybrid: Pro + citizen journalism

The next step up the ladder creates a news organization that combines citizen journalism with the work of professionals. South Korean site OhmyNews is the best example of this approach. It has recruited, to date, some 38,000 "citizen reporters," who contribute articles for review by OhmyNews' editorial staff. A small team of professional reporters also create content for the site. Citizen reports account for about 70 percent of the site's content, and pro reporters create the rest, so the emphasis clearly is on the citizen.

Not everything submitted by the citizen reporters is accepted for publication on OhmyNews. And some of the contributors who submit quality content are paid modest fees for their writing and/or photography. This is a different approach than is taken by most U.S. citizen-journalism sites, which rarely pay for submissions. OhmyNews treats its citizen reporters as though they are journalists (albeit low-paid ones).



This approach appears to be potentially profitable. OhmyNews, which is five years old, says that it made about US\$400,000 in 2004, two-thirds of which from advertising. While it started out as a Korean media venture, the company has created an international edition and recruits citizen journalists from around the

world to participate. It's possible that OhmyNews represents a new kind of media organization that will rival traditional "pro-only" news outlets.

BlufftonToday.com, a South Carolina news Web site that's part of the Morris Communications news empire, also represents a melding of professional journalism and citizen participation. The Web site is dominated by citizen submissions -- mostly in the forms of blogs and photo albums -- and community members talking to each other, along with some staff-produced content. Accompanying the Web site is the daily *Bluffton Today* print edition (which is why I also listed it in layer No. 8 above), the main newspaper for the small town of Bluffton, population 1,600. The 32-page edition is delivered free to the town's homes. The print edition is comprised of the work of staff journalists, but also includes citizen submissions -- and the intent is to grow citizen content in print over time.

This site is interesting because the site's creators decided to "turn the traditional community newspaper model on its head," where the citizen-driven Web site drives content to the print edition. It is an example of a small town that has a principal news organization offering up a mix of professional and citizen news coverage. Could this be the future of small-town news?

Examples:

- <u>Bluffton Today</u> (South Carolina; it also fits in layer No. 8 above, since it has a print edition).
- OhmyNews.com.
- <u>Greensboro (N.C.) News & Record YourNews</u> (this forward-thinking newspaper initiative seems to be heading in the direction of this degree of pro-journalist and community-member integration).

10. Integrating citizen and pro journalism under one roof

Now we enter the world of theory, because I've yet to find anyone taking this bold step yet. Imagine, then, a news Web site comprised of reports by professional journalists directly alongside submissions from everyday citizens. This is slightly different than No. 9, above, because on any one page there will be a mix of professionally written (paid) and citizen-submitted (free) content -- labeled appropriately so that the reader knows what he/she is getting -- rather than the more typical walling-off of citizen content as a way of differentiating it from the work of professionals.

(OhmyNews and Bluffton Today come close to this, and Greensboro's *News & Record* perhaps is heading in this direction.)

Here are some examples of how this might look:

- A "lifestyles" section might have a traditional feature article, while nearby is a report on a society event written by an attendee.
- A food section might include links to not only a restaurant review by a
 professional staff critic, but also customer reviews of that and other local
 eateries. A staff food editor's column might be placed on the same page as
 recipes submitted by readers.
- A report by a city hall correspondent might be accompanied by opinion pieces by citizens commenting on the outcome of an issue decided by the city council.

The key to making this work is the labeling of the respective content. "By Joe Jones, *Chronicle* staff reporter" and "By Sam Smith, Citizen contributor" makes the difference between the two authors obvious. The former should offer some

level of trust that what appears under Jones' byline is professionally reported and credible. Smith's content indeed may by just as good and credible, but the reader must understand that the news organization does not accredit his content in the same way -- and should take care in trusting what's been written.

It's this vision of citizen journalism complementing and adding to professional journalism that is so compelling -- at least in theory. Few news organizations have the staff manpower to cover everything that their readers are interested in, but by tapping the volunteer (or cheap) resources of the citizenry, a news organization can potentially provide coverage down to the Little League team and church-group level, as well as offer better and more diverse coverage of larger issues by bringing in more voices and perspectives.

This is the model that perhaps gets closest to what citizens'-media pioneers like <u>Jeff Jarvis</u> and <u>Dan Gillmor</u> espouse: When news becomes a conversation, and not just a lecture. It's professional journalist and community member sharing the online media publishing space, to the benefit of the audience.

In these early days of citizen journalism -- especially in the U.S. -- publishers seem skittish about this combining of pro and amateur/citizen content. They're more likely to wall off citizen submissions, as though they shouldn't "contaminate" the work of the professionals. I suspect that that attitude will wear off in time, and that this complementary approach will bring professional and citizen closer together -- to the ultimate benefit of the audience.

Examples: If you know of any news sites employing this approach, please <u>e-mail</u> <u>me</u>.

11. Wiki journalism: Where the readers are editors

Finally, in the "way out there" category, comes wiki news. The most well known example is the <u>WikiNews</u> site, a spinoff of the famed <u>Wikipedia</u> public encyclopedia, which allows anyone to write and post a news story, and anyone to edit any story that's been posted. It's an experimental concept operating on the theory that the knowledge and intelligence of the group can produce credible, well-balanced news accounts.

The jury is still out on whether or not WikiNews will work, but the wiki model does seem to succeed with Wikipedia. The online encyclopedia is now one of the top information sources on the Web, and its entries are, for the most part, accurate and useful. WikiNews, at this writing, is a less compelling service.



Traditional news organizations are unlikely to copy WikiNews, but the wiki concept might be useful to them in certain situations. For example, an obituary

might work as a wiki. A family member might write the initial article, then friends and family add remembrances, photos, etc. The big worry that editors have about wikis is that people will use it inappropriately, and while that's certainly possible, the experience at Wikipedia would seem to indicate that that's unlikely. In the case of an obituary, a family member likely would monitor what people add, removing anything inappropriate.

News Web sites might better experiment with information rather than news. A city guide that's part of a news Web site, for instance, could benefit from the public being allowed to build on it and improve it over time. Backfence.com, a

network of micro-local news citizen-journalism Web sites, utilizes the wiki concept in its Community Guides sections.

Going this far with citizen journalism will take some guts -- and a change in thinking. It means moving far down the continuum of journalist-reader interaction, allowing an unprecedented loss of control of the editorial product.

Examples:

- WikiNews.
- <u>Backfence.com Community Guide</u> (small component of Web site).

(Notes: I've excluded Pegasus News from the list of examples in this article. This company has announced plans to debut a Web site in Dallas, Texas, that will "reinvent the model of local market content and advertising," but there's no product yet. ... Ditto for Bayosphere, a Bay Area (California) citizen journalism site being developed by Dan Gillmor, author of The Book on citizen journalism, "We the Media" (2004, O'Reilly). ... If you have a citizen-journalism site that fits in one of these categories, but is not listed in this article, please let me know so I can add it.)

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