

## **PEJ Report On Citizen Journalism Sites**

Thirty years ago, freedom of the press belonged to those who owned the presses. A recent study suggests that online citizen journalism belongs to the citizens who build the Web sites.

The content analysis of 64 citizen journalism sites (25 news sites and 39 blog sites) in 15 metropolitan areas found that the majority of these sites did not allow uploading of material by visitors. However, the sites varied extensively in type and degree of citizen participation and interactivity.

The results should not come as a surprise because a 2006 survey on the nature of online citizen media conducted by the Knight Citizen News Network (KCNN) ([http://www.kcnn.org/research/citizen\\_media\\_report/](http://www.kcnn.org/research/citizen_media_report/)) found little standardization among these sites. This lack of standardization continues today.

The degree of diversity in the structure, nature and level of citizen participation at online citizen journalism sites raises issues and questions about what it actually means to be a “citizen journalism” site. Perhaps the most heralded criteria defining citizen journalism, at least among its proponents, are the creation of the site by non-professional journalists, interactivity with visitors, and the creation of content by citizens other than those who run the site. All of the sites examined meet the first criterion, but interactivity and citizen participation were more limited than called for by proponents of citizen journalism.

While level of and extent of interaction varied, all of the sites allowed visitors to post comments about site material, though it seemed not always an easy matter to contact the site administrators. Even though 96% of the news sites allowed email messages to be sent to the site administrators, only 75% of the blogs allowed email messages, and the vast majority of the sites did not provide a telephone number or address for the administrators (see Table 1). Only 5% of the blog sites and 20% of the news sites provided polls or surveys soliciting visitor views and only 8% of blogs and 20% of news sites offered reader forums.

While 40% of the news sites offered visitors the opportunity to upload text stories, a mere 20% allowed visitors to upload photographs (see Table 1). In addition, 28% allowed the uploading of community events, 20% provided templates for letters-to-the-editor, 16% provided for uploading of audio files and 12% allowed uploading of video. Blog sites were even less likely to allow visitor uploads, with 8% allowing uploads of community events; 10% allowing uploads of stories; 8% allowing uploads of letters to the editor; 5% allowing uploads of photos and 5% allowing uploads of video; and none allowing uploads of audio.

### **The Study**

This study is Phase I of a project financed by the Pew and Knight foundation to content analyze citizen journalism sites. Phase II will involve analysis of sites in 51 metropolitan areas. For this analysis, the sites in the study were grouped into news sites, which included both citizen-run sites and commercial sites not associated with traditional media outlets, and citizen blog sites, which included sites run by bloggers and sites run by blog aggregators. Even though the sample was randomly selected, the limited number of sites suggests caution should be used in generalizing the results of Phase I to all media markets and Web sites. (For more detail, see the method section.)

### **Citizen Participation on Citizen Online Journalism Sites**

Much of the variation among the sites can be explained by the various approaches the site administrators take toward their gatekeeper role. Gatekeepers control the flow of information, allowing some through, keeping some from passing along and changing some of the passing information. Gatekeepers at online news and blog sites tend to fall along a continuum from absolute gatekeepers, who allow only staff members to create content, to the non-gatekeeper, who lets anyone publish whatever material they want on the Web site. A persistent criticism of traditional news media is that they tend to involve very strong gatekeepers and allow non-staffers to publish only the occasional letter to the editor. Indeed, one idealized element of citizen journalism is the idea of allowing individuals to publish whatever they want. The strong gatekeeper approach among traditional media has also been identified as a justification for the development of blogs, primarily because with blogs a traditional news organization-type gatekeeper would no longer control the stream of information and opinions. Blogging allows citizens to open up the marketplace of ideas and contribute their opinions and ideas.

Other than allowing visitor comments about posted material, however, the majority of people running the sites analyzed here tended to be strong gatekeepers. They will use material from citizen journalists, but they tend to act more like traditional news media editors in wanting to discuss and edit material before it is accepted (<http://www.cowtownchronicles.com/>). However, moderate to weak gatekeepers, who allow citizens to upload content but examine the content for inappropriate language or expressions, also could be found among these sites (<http://www.pegasusnews.com/>). Just as there were no absolute gatekeepers (who allow no citizen-generated content), none of these sites involved absolute non-gatekeepers who allow uploading of all material without any editing or oversight at all. This probably reflects concerns about content violating standards of good taste and even the law (or example, see the rules at Peoria Pundit, <http://peoriapundit.com/blogpeoria/the-rules>).

Content analysis cannot answer the question of why blog sites were more restrictive, but this strong gatekeeper tendency among blog sites may result from technological limitations. Blog sites associated with national networks, such as blogspot, were more likely to not allow uploading of material. Forty percent of the blog sites and 16% of the news sites were associated with national networks (see Table 1). The blog templates provided by some national networks may not be technologically sophisticated enough to allow visitors to upload materials. However, this was not always the case. For some sites, connection with national or international networks was related to extensive

citizen participation, such as at the Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center (<http://www.ucimc.org/>).

## **Support**

As the 2006 KNN report also indicated, most of the news sites (72%) in this study sold advertising. In many cases, the sites included statements that the advertising was primarily aimed at supporting the site rather than making a profit. Because individuals are the primary producers of blogs, only 43% of the blog sites sold advertising. It was difficult to code the number of paid ads on some sites because some ad images may represent unpaid trade out with other technology companies. For example, some sites had what appeared to be ads for the company that designed the site. It was impossible to determine if these were courtesy ads or paid ads. To improve coder reliability, the number of ads was coded using the categories seen in Table 2.

Even using these categories, the difference between blog and news sites was obvious. The majority of blog sites (58%) had no ads at all, but the majority of news sites (64%) had three or more ads on the home page, compared to only 30% of the blog sites. Data from Table 1 show that 44% of the news sites had classified ads, mostly free, and only 3% of the blog sites carried classified ads.

Four other types of support were recorded as present or not. The most prevalent form of support for news sites, other than ads, was volunteers (see Table 1). Sixty percent of the sites asked individuals to volunteer their time in a number of ways. Only 10% of the blog sites invited volunteers. Solicitation for other forms of support was rarer. Sixteen percent of news sites asked for individuals to donate money, compared to 10% of blog sites, and only 8% of news sites and 3% of blog sites mentioned forms of organizational support (foundations, commercial media, governments). A final form of support was selling of products, such as T-shirts and mugs, but only 8% of blog sites and none of the news sites sold products.

Of course, sites could seek multiple forms of support, but few did. Table 3 shows none of the sites mentioned all four types of support, and only 16% of the news sites and 5% of the blog sites mentioned two or three types of support.

## **The Role of News Sites**

The group of citizen news sites studied here encompassed a variety of roles. Some covered an entire city, whether large or small, but 52% of the 25 news sites identified themselves as neighborhood sites, compared to only four of the 39 blog sites. These neighborhood sites covered geographic subdivisions of larger cities defined by political or historical districts (see the Carver and Jackson Ward News in Richmond, VA, <http://cjwn.net/news/>). Of the 15 metro areas, Richmond had developed the most extensive set of neighborhood sites, with 12 of the 18 neighborhood news sites in the entire study.

These neighborhood sites are important because they cover relatively small areas, offering what has been termed hyperlocal content. Most traditional news media do not cover news at this level because of the staffing expense. Interestingly, the neighborhood

sites were less likely to allow citizens to upload material directly to the sites than were the other citizen journalism sites. For example, only one of 18 neighborhood sites allowed uploading of stories compared to 13 of 46 (28%) of the non-neighborhood sites. This may reflect the newness of many of the neighborhood sites. About a dozen of them were not in the original sample generated during the summer of 2007. Citizen access might increase as these sites become more established.

### **Richmond, Virginia, Citizen Journalism Sites.**

Richmond, Virginia, was the most developed community of citizen journalism sites in the sample. Richmond has 16 citizen journalism sites, 10 of which were citizen neighborhood news sites, two were neighborhood blog sites, two were blog sites that addressed the Richmond area, one was a news aggregator for Richmond, and one was a blog aggregation site. Of particular interest are the neighborhood sites that have very similar “About Us” statements and that link to each other. According to a statement on the Greater Fulton News (<http://greaterfultonnews.org/about-this-site/>), the neighborhood sites can be traced to John Murden, who set up the Church Hill People’s News (<http://chpn.net/news/>) in August 2004. The Greater Fulton News, which was established with a grant from the New Voice Program at the J-Lab (<http://www.j-lab.org/>) with help from Richmond news media, wrote:

“The programming and format of this site is based on work by John Murden, who started Richmond’s first community news blog, Church Hill People’s News, and who has helped launch other community news blogs in the Richmond area.”

Most of the citizen news sites started during 2007. On the basis of statements on the sites or the earliest postings in the archives, two sites started in March 2007, one in May 2007, one in June, four in August and one site in October 2007. In addition to the individual sites, RVANews (<http://rvanews.com/>) serves as a news aggregator by providing links to specific stories on the neighborhood sites and publishing some original material. RVABlogs (<http://rvablogs.com/>) serves as a blog aggregator for more than 200 blogs.

Although all of the neighborhood sites ask for volunteers, for news tips and for work from area residents, most indicate that the contributors should contact the site administrators with their story ideas. Most of the news sites offer free classifieds, community calendars, business directory and crime maps about the neighborhood. Taken as a group, these news sites provide a network that provides an extraordinary volume of hyperlocal news from a medium-sized city.

### **Dallas Commercial Citizen Journalism Sites**

Citizen journalists are not the only ones providing hyperlocal news and blogs online. As newspaper circulation has declined, some newspapers aim to attract readers through Web sites with news and information about smaller geographic areas within the larger metropolitan areas. A good example of these efforts can be found in the Dallas area

where the *Dallas Morning News* (DMN) has engaged in two efforts to serve smaller geographic areas.

In what appears to be the digital equivalent of zoned newspaper editions, DMN covers 44 suburban cities or neighborhoods within Dallas with Web pages connected with the Dallasnews.com (<http://www.dallasnews.com>) site. These sites contain news and information that includes staff written news, community church and schools briefs, records of real estate sales, police blotters and a feature called Good Kid that involves a young person answering a series of questions about herself or himself. The sites also feature forums and chatrooms.

The second DMN effort to produce hyperlocal news is called Neighborsgo.com ([http://www.neighborsgo.com/index.php?page\\_id=1000](http://www.neighborsgo.com/index.php?page_id=1000)). These sites are similar in that they target smaller geographic areas within the greater Dallas area, but some of the areas are much smaller. Neighborsgo.com has 63 separate sites, including 15 within the city of Dallas. These sites are a cooperative effort between DMN and WFAA-TV, both of which are owned by Belo Corporation.

The major difference between the Neighborsgo sites and the Dallasnews.com sites is that the former allows for much more citizen participation in content creation. Prominently located on the Neighborsgo sites are links that allow registered visitors to upload stories, photographs, video and blog entries. Members also can create a forum group or add to the community calendar. These sites also sell classified advertising.

The Neighborsgo sites appear to be relatively new, but the sites do not discuss their history. The basic Web site, the Dallasnews.com site, states that the site is receiving 1.3 million page views on weekdays. The ability of citizens to upload content on these sites far exceeds that ability to do so on most of the citizen news sites.

### **Links from Citizen Journalism Sites and Articles**

A great advantage of Web sites over newspapers is the ability of hyperlinks in articles to take visitors to other sites for context and background. Similarly, links from a Web site represent the self-identified community of the people who create and maintain the site. This study evaluated both types.

**Site Links.** The sites varied greatly in the number of links. Table 4 breaks down the external links for news sites and blogs. Although the percentage of blog and news sites without any links was about equal (18% and 20%), blog sites tended to have more external links than did the news sites. Sixty-eight percent of the news sites had between one and 30 external links, while 44% of the blog sites fell into this grouping. At the high end, 38% of blog sites had 31 or more external links, compared to only 12% of the news sites. One blog site had more than 300 links.

Just as important as the number of external links is the nature of the sites at the other end of the links (see Table 5). Not surprisingly, the blogs were more likely to link to other

blogs. Sixty percent of the blog sites linked to at least one citizen blog site and another 27% linked to commercial blog sites. More citizen news sites (56%) linked to citizen blog sites than to any other types of site. The second most linked-to type of sites were other citizen news sites, with 48% of the news sites connecting to other news sites. Only 28% of the blog sites connected with citizen news sites. Interestingly, blogs sites were more likely to link to traditional news sites (40%) than were news sites (24%).

The site link analysis suggests that bloggers and the people running citizen news sites exist in separate but overlapping interest communities. The two overlap, but the citizen reporters are more likely to send people to blogs than are bloggers to send people to citizen news sites.

**Story links.** Table 6 shows the links from within stories on the various types of Web sites. In addition to the citizen blog and news sites, the table also has links from the two *Dallas Morning News* (DMN) sites that serve smaller geographic areas. In all four types of sites, the stories include more links to material on the site than to material external to the site. The DMN zoned sites, which contain staff-written stories, had zero external links, compared to an average of 2.10 external links from citizen blog site postings, 1.86 from citizen news site stories and .58 from the Neighborsgo sites. This is consistent with the existing wisdom that commercial news sites do not want to send visitors to other sites. However, it indicates that these sites are not using the vast amounts of context-providing information that is available on the Internet.

The breakdown for types of external links shows a wide variety of links that vary with the type of site. Excluding the other sites links, citizen news sites were most likely to link with non-local news media sites (average links per story = .26), local blog aggregates (average = .23), local businesses, local non-profit organizations and local citizen blogs (average = .16 for all). Finally, the news sites averaged .14 links per story to local newspapers. Interestingly, the citizen news sites' stories did not link to other citizen news sites. [home page links to other citizen sites & stories but not inside content] Content analysis cannot answer why, but it may represent the tendency of neighborhood sites to link to entire stories on other citizen news sites rather than put such links within stories.

Excluding other sites links, blog site stories averaged the most links to non-profit organizations, both local (average external links = .53) and non-local (average = .37). The only other type of link that exceeded .20 links per story was reference Web sites. Blog stories were less likely to link to news media of various types than news sites. This seemed to be a basic difference between blog and news site stories. Both types tended to link to local sites, but the types of local sites that dominated the links differed greatly.

### **Technological Distribution**

As digital technology continues to evolve, it raises the possibility of distributing news stories, blogs and material in ways other than the Internet. The technology also allows for distribution in a variety of ways using the Internet. Table 1 shows whether citizen blogs and news sites were using these technologies. RSS feed were so common that only

10% (4) of the blog sites and 4% (1) of the news sites did not have RSS feeds. However, the use of other distribution systems was rare. Blog sites were more likely than news sites to have Podcast capability (8% to 4%) and to allow visitors to email individual stories to other people (13% to 8%). Content was distributed through cell phones by one blog site and one news site. Even though blogs tended to use newer distribution systems more than news sites, the difference was minor. A number of factors could affect the technological conditions, but the most likely are funding and technology proficiency.

### **The Future of Online Citizen Journalism Sites**

Although this study had a limited sample, it does offer some suggestions for the future of online citizen journalism. These include:

- Online news sites administrators need to think about the nature of their gatekeeping role. Do they want to imitate traditional media and play a strong gatekeeper role or do they want to allow more freedom in uploading content. If they are concerned about the nature of content, the sites could follow the *Dallas Morning News* dual site approach. One site could serve the role of news site, and a related site could provide for more citizen uploads.
- The people who create and maintain online citizen news and blog sites within a city or metro area should form cooperative or at least create a loosely formed group to support each other. This would be similar to the network of sites in Richmond, Virginia.
- Citizen journalism sites should consider expanding their efforts to generate support. In addition to volunteers, sites could ask for donations and seek out grant support.
- Additional help can be found from universities and colleges. The best news site among small markets was in Urbana-Champaign, which is home to the University of Illinois, and Ann Arbor had more sites than one would expect based on its size.
- Increased support could be used to enhance the technological capabilities of the site. This would allow for the uploading and storage of video and multimedia content.
- Sites should examine evolving systems of distribution, particularly through cell phones.
- Consideration should be given to the current and future use of links on home pages and within stories. Within-story links for context appear to be under-used.
- Citizen journalism sites could become more active as locations for forums and chatrooms.
- Blogs could experiment with more interactive elements on their sites.
- Blogs should provide as much information about their sites as news site do.

### **Method**

This report describes a portion of the work on Phase I of a project funded by the Pew and Knight foundations in order to examine the nature of online citizen journalism. The primary goal of Phase I was to explore online citizen journalism activities in order to generate a reliable and valid content analysis protocol for use in a larger Phase II study. The Phase I process involved three sampling steps: the selection of 15 metropolitan media markets for study; identification of online citizen journalism sites in those markets; and development of a three-stage content analysis protocol suitable for studying three different aspects of online citizen journalism. The first protocol stage addressed procedures for coding the sampled sites for a variety of presentation, linkage, financial support, and citizen participation or involvement characteristics. The second stage addressed procedures for coding links within stories on sampled sites in terms of where they send visitors. The third stage addressed procedures for coding the actual content of postings and stories on the sites.

This report is primarily a description of the first two stages of Phase I, because development of site and story link protocol stages required considerably more time than anticipated before suitable protocol reliability could be established.

The following section will address the three sampling steps and the reliability of the protocol.

### **Market Sample**

The 15 markets used in this study were randomly collected from three sizes (large, medium and small) of the 277 Census-defined Metropolitan Statistical Areas. No markets smaller than 50,000 households were selected, and the three largest metropolitan areas (New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles) were excluded because of the complexity of those media markets and because of the high concentration of blog sites in each. Here are the delineations of the three sizes of markets.

Large metro areas – 507,000 to 2.2 million households – 37 Census-identified areas – 5 selected for the sample

Medium metro areas – 100,000 to 506,000 households – 129 Census-identified areas – 5 selected for sample

Small metro area – 50,000 to 99,000 households – 111 Census-identified areas – 5 selected for sample

To qualify for inclusion, each market had to have at least one site meeting the definition of “citizen journalism” (see below). One would assume intuitively that the larger metro areas are more likely to have citizen journalism Web sites, simply because those areas are home to more potential creators and more users of these sites. A correlation did exist between market size and number of citizen journalism sites, but it was far from perfect.

For example, Richmond, VA, which was a medium market, had more such sites than did Dallas, which was a large market.

However, to make sure that the primary Phase I goal (to generate a reliable and valid content analysis protocol for use in a larger Phase II study) was met through exploration of content from a range of markets, all three sizes of markets were used for sampling. The five markets in each size category were selected from a randomly selected sample of 30 sites in each category. That is, because random selection could yield metro areas lacking citizen journalism sites, an initial list of metro areas was randomly generated and ordered from 1 to 30 for each of the large, medium and small metro areas categories. Starting at 1, each metro area on each list was examined for citizen journalism sites. If one or more was found, that metro area was included in the sample. This process continued until five markets were selected for each market size.

### **Finding Citizen Journalism Web Sites in Each Market**

The determination of whether a market had one or more citizen journalism sites and the identification of a list of sites in each market involved using three sources that have lists of citizen journalism sites. These were Placeblogger (<http://www.placeblogger.com/>), Knight Citizen News Network (<http://www.kcnn.org/>), and Cyperjournalism.net (<http://www.cyberjournalist.net>).

The definition used to determine site inclusion or exclusion is described below.

### **Citizen Journalism**

Several elements make up the operational definition of citizen journalism sites:

1. Local service or region definition: the site must identify some specific geographic area it serves. Such information may be found on a home page banner, in a mission statement, or in a FAQ section, or through some other means of self-identification on the site.
2. Citizen Participation: The site must indicate that a significant portion of content is provided by volunteers or community members, not professional journalists. Such information may also be found on site locations that provide details about the geographic area served.
3. Journalism content: At least some of the news and opinion provided must focus on the local geographic area rather than broader national or world areas.
4. Origination: At least some of the material on the site must be originally produced for the site by citizens who participate. The site may also qualify for inclusion if citizens are aggregating material found in other places that is of relevance and importance to the audience the site serves.

The goal was for the initial list of sites for each market to be as inclusive as possible, but some sites were later eliminated as content was examined in more detail. For example, many of the blogs turned out to be about hobbies, personal experiences or other topics that did not qualify as journalism and were dropped. Because sites that were primarily news were scarcer than blogs, as the study proceeded any news sites that were identified were included. For example, multiple news sites in Richmond, VA, were added as the study progressed because they did not exist when the study started. Blogs that were not initially identified were not added in order to keep Phase I manageable. Here is the final list of markets and the number of citizen journalism sites.

	Blogs	News	Total
<b>Large markets</b>			
Dallas-Fort Worth, TX	2	3	5
St. Louis, MO	6	2	8
Cleveland	5	1	6
Miami, FL	4	2	6
Portland, OR	3	2	5
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	20	10	30
<b>Medium markets</b>			
Tulsa, OK	4	0	4
Asheville, NC	1	0	1
Peoria, IL	1	1	2
Richmond, VA	7	10	17
Ann Arbor, MI	3	2	5
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	16	13	29
<b>Small markets</b>			
Dover, DE	1	0	1
Champaign-Urbana, IL	0	1	1
Charlottesville, VA	2	0	2
Fargo, ND	0	1	1
Bellingham, WA	1	0	1
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	4	2	6

### Reliability

The reliability of the site and story link categories or variables was established using simple percentage of agreement. The total number of agreements between or among coders was divided by the total number of category decisions. Because this study was preliminary to a larger follow-up study, a simple agreement level of 75% was considered acceptable.

Two coders coded all of the sites using 41 variables. Agreement for all of the variables reached 78% or higher. Four equaled 78%, eight were between 80% and 85%, nine were between 85% and 89%, and 20 were greater than 90%. Three other coders coded 236

citizen journalism stories for 28 types of links, after achieving an overall reliability of 94%

### **Authors**

Stephen Lacy, Professor, Department of Communication and School of Journalism, Michigan State University

Daniel Riffe, Professor, E. W. Scripps School of Journalism, Ohio University

Esther Thorson, Professor and Acting Dean, School of Journalism, University of Missouri

Margaret Duffy, Associate Professor and Acting Associate Dean for Graduate Studies, School of Journalism, University of Missouri

### *Research Associate*

Frederick Fico, Professor, School of Journalism, Michigan State University

### *Research Assistants*

Miron Varouhakis, Ph.D. student, Media and Information Studies Program, Michigan State University

Stephen Siff, Ph.D. student, ABD, E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, Ohio University

Jennette Lovejoy, Ph.D. student, E. W. Scripps School of Journalism, Ohio University

Andrew Heger, master's student, E. W. Scripps School of Journalism, Ohio University