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When I Hear the Term "Citizen Journalist," I Reach For My Pistol!

Jon Talton - April 8th, 2008 - (Newspapers & the Net Forum)

When I hear the term "citizen journalist," I reach for my pistol, to mangle a famously mangled quote.

The notion that hundreds of part-time gadflies, blowhards, tub-thumpers, students and well-meaning good-government types can replace real journalism is silly. Much of the corporate media has embraced this fad for a simple reason: it costs less to have a housewife blog from the city council meeting for free. Whether she has the time, seasoning, and street smarts to uncover what's really going on and put it in context for readers is highly unlikely.

That the blogosphere has embraced it is also predictable: the "citizen journalist" seems like another well-deserved payback to that arrogant "mainstream media." The reality is that most of us bring little original reporting to our sites. Without real professional journalists doing their work, the blogosphere would have little to talk about. And the most successful blog news sites, such as [Josh Marshall's Talking Points Memo](#), use traditional journalistic techniques.

Having said all this, "citizen journalists," the Internet, email and other innovations of recent years bring value to the work of journalism, provided they are properly and prudently employed. That they are changing the work is unquestionable. Let me use a generally positive example: the Internet. The Web allows a reporter or columnist to do research in a few minutes that once might have taken hours or days. When I was starting out as a financial reporter, we paid a service to pull Securities and Exchange Commission reports in Washington, then FedEx them to us. Now they can be seen online instantly. I can read several newspapers a day online, and set up customized filters for the information I want.

Similarly, working journalists use email to do tasks that once took much more time and trouble. I can communicate instantly with a corporate PR department, or send a query to a source, or place a notice online for readers to contact me if I need "real life" examples for a story. Email allows readers to contact journalists as never before, whether to complement, give information or rant and rave. I've received more than one death threat through this wonderful new medium.

These innovations, naturally, can breed laziness and trouble. I've heard old-time homicide detectives say the same thing about DNA evidence – "the new guys don't know how to work without it." Young journalists risk knowing more how to handle video streaming than to conduct an effective interview with a critical and hostile source. Much information on the Web is erroneous. An over-reliance on e-mail can take away the human contact, where journalists can detect nuance and shading and that golden moment where the news really slips out. Companies and government have been effective in exploiting the Internet to disseminate their particular spin on stories; it's



tempting to use it and leave it at that. The same could be true for journalists accepting a particular story-line that develops on the Web. Thus the journalist must fall back on traditional techniques of checking sources, corroborating information, applying the skepticism, context and knowledge that takes years to learn, and "if your mother tells you she loves you, check it out."

As for "citizen journalists," they used to be called tipsters, and they can bring value. Devices such as a camera-equipped cell phones, text-messaging and computers on wi-fi allow everyday people to send in information, some of which might be newsworthy. But their use calls for vigilant editing – at a time when the old roles of newspaper editors have morphed into a maelstrom of attending meetings, slinging copy and gathering doo-dads for graphics. I wonder if the care and quality are still being applied many places. More importantly, "citizen journalists" generally can't and won't do the work that has been performed by paid professionals. Journalism has seen its share of the lazy and knavish. But in general, these professionals have for decades provided an invaluable, and irreplaceable, public service in a democracy.

Not everybody can report intelligently or intelligibly on the workings of business, even though corporations and the capital markets have more power over the lives of average Americans than at any time in history. Not everybody can bring the news from foreign capitals, war zones, genocides and emerging powers, even though in the era of globalization these events will have profound consequences for Americans. Not everyone can spend the months it takes to dig out malfeasance in institutions such as government, health care and business that costs tax dollars, retirement nest eggs and even lives. Done well, this journalism explains the world, uncovers injustice and is essential for a self-governing people. Corporate newspapers have been cutting back these critical functions for years. They won't be replaced by "citizen journalists." This is the work of real journalists who have spent years honing a complicated craft, who have been increasingly thrown out of work.

The major corporate newspaper owners have long been the prisoners of a group think that has devalued these journalistic skills, somehow telling themselves that technology would save them, or technology was the danger, or both. "Get a great story and put it in the paper (or online)" remains the reality. The trouble the newspaper industry faces is largely the failure of a business plan involving monopolies, exorbitant advertising rates, an unwillingness to invest in research and development, and, finally, a jettisoning of journalism to chase assorted fads.

The results have been predictably dismal.

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22 Responses to "When I Hear the Term "Citizen Journalist," I Reach For My Pistol!"

1. *max* Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 2:17 am

Hi,

Check out this case study: <http://www.zetaprints.com/blogpaper/blogpapers/87>

Techcrunch, ReadWriteWeb and other top blogs said it's a great concept. Reading this post I suspect you'll have a totally different opinion.

2. *Jack Thompson* Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 7:53 am

I generally agree with you—the majority of blogging, by the numbers, is dreadful in style, writing, research, etc. But most of this material is also harmless, in my opinion. More

importantly, there is plenty of good blogging to go around—including this forum and your post as prime examples—and this arena, at its best, can act as a useful watchdog on long-established media giants. Slate, for example, just today, has a wonderful story on two dubious/bordering on bogus articles in the NY Times, on "Death by Blogging" and "Obamas's Talk Fuels Easter Sermons." The research and journalistic standards of the Times writers are highly questionable, as the Slate writer (Timothy Noah) details, providing a nice check on the quality of our "newspaper of record."

Perhaps a better question is, is Slate a blog? (And what is a blog? Any online site without a print counterpart? Any unpaid writer with a website? It's hard to nail down a definition.)

A good post nonetheless.

3. *Spencer* Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 7:55 am

Jon, I definitely agree that "citizen journalism" cannot, and will never replace its traditional counterpart. Traditional journalism involves ethics, both taught and learned, research, analysis, and objectivity. Citizen journalism is highly biased, typically opinionated, one-sided, and prone to participation in groupthink.

However, newspapers cannot ignore this trend, as much as real journalists detest the idea. People want to be heard. Blogs give people today easy access to a distributed communication channel that can potentially reach millions of people over time. No matter how worthless or unsubstantiated their "reporting" (it's a stretch to call it that in most cases) can be, those who are writers place value on their own work. And if they have a strong following, that value only increases, even if they have no official journalistic credentials.

If newspapers want to succeed in the future, I personally feel they need to embrace citizen journalism. They need to show that the everyday persons' opinions are valued in mainstream media, then augment those opinions and discussions with "true journalism."

4. *tbeshear* Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 9:45 am

To my mind, publications like Slate and Salon are just online magazines. They contain blogs, but most of the pieces are news and feature articles that are just like what one would find in a dead-trees magazine or perhaps on a newspaper's op-ed page.

5. *Tom Grubisich* Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 9:53 am

Despite the provocative headline on your post, most of what you say about citizen journalism is true, at least arguably. I think citizen journalism can prove most valuable on the community level, where news — at least the reliable variety — can't be bought by the pound. You single out, unflatteringly, the "housewife [who blogs] from the city council meeting for free." But that housewife may be a highly qualified professional who is on maternity leave. Her donated citizen journalism may hold considerable potential. She might need some tips on how to practice journalism, and that's why every site that uses citizen journalism needs to be backed up by editorial expertise. Gordon Joseloff set up an admirable model with his Westport (CN) Today. So has Mike Orren with his Pegasus News in Dallas/Fort Worth. Journalists and citizens — including, I hope, many "housewives" — can and should collaborate to do what often is done at all because there aren't enough hired reporters to go around.

6. *Katie* Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 9:57 am

Interesting points, but you lost me with "housewife." I get what you are saying, but if we had legions of stay-at-home-moms or retired grandmas covering town halls and village halls I suspect you'd get some damn fine journalism. Problem is, I suspect too many of today's news executives would organize them first into focus groups and then dispatch them to get community news-you-can-use a la "tell us what's up with your Brownie troop."
Gag.

7. **Gregory McNamee** Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 10:02 am

Jon Talton provides an interesting view of the "citizen journalist" problem, though I wish he hadn't used his initial line that carries echoes of the Third Reich ("Wenn ich Kultur höre ... entsichere ich meinen Browning"), where citizen journalism properly applied would have been welcome.

That problem overall is a subset of the Wikipedia complex, the devaluing of expertise and professionalism in the face of the strange, particularly American beliefs that anyone's opinion is as good as anyone else's (it is not) and that you are who you say you are ("Jethro D. BoDean, brain surgeon").

Real journalists are guided by professional standards and traditional saws, some of my favorites being "The only way to look at a politician is down" and, a variation on Talton, "If your mother says she loves you, get it from two independent sources."

But there is a more valuable and necessary source of training that real journalists share, namely that gnarled, world-weary editor who, having seen it all before, no matter what *it* is, takes pity, does not fire the newcomer on sight, and painstakingly teaches the young writer how to extract information out of a slippery interviewee, work a source, craft a lede. The run-of-the-mill blogger, who has not worked in a newsroom and takes his or her notions of what the news business is supposed to be from film and TV, will not have had this education, this training, this trial by fire and combat—all of which yield expertise, practiced frequently enough.

Citizen watchdogs and whistleblowers are essential to the news enterprise. Tipsters are, too. Commentators are not, unless they have true expertise, since there is plenty of unabsorbed and generally useless commentary afloat on the wind already. The wind, however, is blowing in favor of the amateur, for publishers, it seems, are increasingly of the view that anyone's opinion is as good as anyone else's when it comes to books, food, movies, travel, art—and politics, world events, finance, and every other imaginable topic, to just the dismal results that Jon Talton reports.

For all its gaffes, such as the recent death-by-blogging piece and the old Jayson Blair affair, the *New York Times*—along with the *Washington Post*, *St. Petersburg Times*, and a few other papers—remains reliable because committed to the notion of expertise, its editors to the idea that experience matters. The local newspaper that arrives on my doorstep, and that I read only for the obituaries, is another matter. How we get its management back on track in the face of those dismal results is a challenge.

8. **mikey** Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 10:06 am

Citizen journalists? hah. When the "real serious journalists" in traditional media are not reporting the serious issues - like Obama's bowling scores, and whether Britney is wearing underwear this week, they are busy homogenizing perspective and overlooking those pesky facts that don't fit into their pre-conceived point of view.

At least with citizen journalists there is more diversity of content and a good amount of wheat to pick from the chaff, and important, relevant - even kontroversul - issues get some discourse that the RSJ don't have the space, time or curiosity to even mention.

9. **lance** Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 10:07 am

Point 1: We have had gadflies, blowhards and tub-thumpers in print for years. In the days when publishers bought ink by the barrel, they had no real competition. Now you can ride electrons for free, publishers are priced out of the market by a flood of views. Some of it is interesting, but most is not. But, hell, I'm not paying for it and the market will work it out. So for print, it's goodbye editorials and columnists. There's been far too much pointless armchair journalism anyway.

Point 2: You fail to note that the MSM has already given up on covering the city council

meetings, and local politics, as being boring and routine. They have been replaced in print by pretty pussy cat stories. Tell me, when is the last time you read a print story about the local sewer authority's monthly meeting?. Ditto zoning board, or parks authority? I happen to disagree with this decision by print to abandon these meetings because a lot of what they do affect our lives and tax rates. Interested in slow-growth issues, then you are interested where sewer lines are going and encouraging new development. What's exciting about citizen journalism is that at least someone is telling us what these local authorities are doing. Point 3: Will someone please tell editors that a newspaper filled filled with pretty pussy cat features won't entice many people to pick up tomorrow's edition. Newspaper execs seem to have forgotten the first part of their name _ news _ and concentrated too much on the economics of paper. I can buy reams of paper without news at Staples.

10. *Matthew Battles* Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 11:20 am

The idea that "citizen journalism" threatens the end of serious newsgathering really is a bugbear. The outpouring of opinion and information on the web, delivered in the form of blogs, comment, wikipedia entries, or social networking sites, has enriched the public sphere enormously. Is there more heat than light out there? No doubt there is. We all—journalists and consumers of news alike—have to become more intelligent finders and users of information, rather than relying on the unquestionable legitimacy of whatever's in the bundle dropped on the stoop each morning.

When the executive director of the nonprofit auditing website GiveWell was discovered early this year posting to online forums under aliases to boost his company's profile, the story wasn't broken by reporters at the Times or the Wall Street Journal (both of which newspapers recently had run laudatory articles about the company and its e.d., Holden Karnofsky); It was users of the popular discussion board MetaFilter, many of them tech-industry professionals, who identified suspicious patterns of online communications that eluded mainstream reporters. Expertise in trolling online forums and streaming video, far from representing surrender to trendiness, is fast becoming part of the toolkit of certain kinds of serious newsgathering.

Newspapers were born in the seventeenth century in a spirit of do-it-yourself partisanship, and the best citizen journalism revives that spirit. There's a great deal more to the diverse happenings lumped together under the term "citizen journalism" than the belittling image of the housewife at the city council meeting represents. At its best, these new sources of reporting deliver a much-needed dose of advocacy and zeal to a profession that has committed itself to ideals of balance and objectivity—ideals that frankly stand in need of questioning. Citizen journalists are activists in countries where freedom of information is curtailed; they're insiders in business and government; they're advocates of points of view given short shrift when the commercial media use notions like balance and objectivity to hide a softening commitment to journalism in the public interest. (I don't have the data, but I imagine that many of them are also housewives and grandmothers.) As Jon Talton points out, whistleblowers and anonymous sources have long been important to serious journalism; it's worth celebrating the fact that the new media give such people new and powerful ways of getting themselves heard.

11. *Seth Finkelstein* Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 11:37 am

Y'know, there really should be a FAQ on this stuff.

1) Journalism isn't the same as punditry. This is about journalism. Writing that, hey, everyone can given an opinion, rant, rant, rant - isn't relevant

Sigh ... no point ...

12. *Bob McHenry* Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 11:45 am

I used to show touring groups of Britannica salespeople our library copies of such books as

"The Myth of the Britannica" and "The Lies and Fallacies of the Encyclopedia [sic] Britannica." I'd hold them aloft and wait for the quick intake of collective breath that I knew would come. Then I'd say "No, no, this is the good news."

Puzzlement on faces.

"It's the good news because nobody would bother to write such a book about any other encyclopedia."

So it is that when a New York Times reporter is caught falsifying his sources, or a Washington Post writer makes up a story out of whole cloth, that itself is news, and we all hear about it and cluck our tongues and file it away for future debates over the state of journalism.

When did you last read an expose of a "citizen journalist"? When do you expect to? You haven't and you won't because, apart from a few self-interested promoters, we all recognize amateurism for what it is and invoke the necessary number of grains of salt. An uninformed or politically motivated "citizen journalist" is dog-bites-man.

13. *Stu Adnderson* Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 11:53 am

Guess what? It's too late to worry about the distinction between "citizen journalists" and "official journalists." The money-boys (and slow-moving editors) have already killed almost all the geese that used to lay the golden eggs. Most newspapers and magazines have adopted Detroit's mantra: "Hey, our product isn't selling. So let's make it crappier. Maybe we'll sell more." And we cannot even blame China for the death of this industry. Why? Because USA journalism is committing suicide.

14. *Bob McHenry* Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 12:22 pm

James Lileks provides us with a fortuitous example of a professional journalist functioning in a private capacity today at <http://www.lileks.com/bleats/index.html>

and along the way offering a pretty strong critique of a couple of SoCal newspapers.

15. *Geoff Dougherty* Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 1:07 pm

Talton's line of argument, which pops up every couple of weeks when some crusty old-time journalist mounts his high horse to defend the industry, is a misleading waste of time.

Jon conflates citizen journalism and blogging, and compares the worst of those two genres to the best of traditional journalism.

Yes, there are dozens of blowhards who write utterly worthless blogs. Comparing them to yesterday's Pulitzer winners is silly.

For every tub-thumping gadfly, I'll surely find you a lazy, mendacious reporter writing for a metro daily. The damage he does to society far outweighs that of some housewife with a blog.

A more apt question would be: When citizen journalism is done right, does it make a useful contribution to society?

At my site, chitowndailynews.org, we work with dozens of volunteer journalists who cover news and events in their neighborhoods. They receive free training, and their work is edited to the same standards that are in effect at major dailies.

Most of the stories they write are about events and issues that have gone uncovered in other media, so they're providing valuable information to Chicago residents that isn't available anywhere else.

I'd argue that they're doing something worthwhile, regardless of what you call it.

16. *Bob McHenry Says:*

April 8th, 2008 at 3:18 pm

It must be in the air or in the water: Terry Teachout on the decline of cultural coverage in newspapers:

http://www.artsjournal.com/aboutlastnight/2008/04/tt_after_the_fact.html

17. *Bob McHenry Says:*

April 8th, 2008 at 3:29 pm

And now Megan McArdle:

http://meganmcardle.theatlantic.com/archives/2008/04/reading_is_fundamental.php

18. *Blair Boland Says:*

April 8th, 2008 at 7:47 pm

You can certainly "mangle" something - or someone - with a pistol alright, that point at least is true enough. No doubt there are jealous journalists that want to protect their turf up to and including that extreme expedient. But it won't do any good. It's a war they'll ultimately lose, peacefully or not. The rise of so-called citizen journalism, face it, is the upshot of profound dissatisfaction with the aptly described corporate media - emphasis on the corporate. Whether or not these "citizen journalists" can "discover what is really going on and put it in CONTEXT for readers" is another matter. But that is indeed the overarching purpose of the "corporate media". To manufacture and edit - by omission and commission - the "news" to suit corporate interests and sell it (in both senses) to the public as the universal norm. Those corporate interests have attempted to co-opt and suppress any type of concerted opposition before but are presented with a little more formidable task in the up-until-now more open frontier of cyberspace. The blogosphere will never run out of topics of discussion without "real professional journalists" because everyday people have everyday concerns that seldom get much notice in the corporate media with their single-minded devotion to the class interests of the rich and powerful. These are the concerns that form a different world view seldom condescended to by "real professional journalists" bent on pleasing editors and publishers concerned chiefly with not offending powerful vested interests. The results have been predictably dismal.

19. *Jay Rosen Says:*

April 8th, 2008 at 10:19 pm

"The notion that hundreds of part-time gadflies, blowhards, tub-thumpers, students and well-meaning good-government types can replace real journalism is silly."

Jon: whose notion is this? Seriously, I don't know anyone who believes it. You apparently don't either, since there are no names, quotes, links. The only people who ever talk about "replace" are legacy media types like yourself, who all say what you said: bah, humbug. An idea that lives only when it is in the process of being refuted is a silly idea. In fact the replacement thesis is a conversation professional journalists are determined to have with themselves. The question is why they continue to do this, year after year.

About "...the most successful blog news sites, such as Josh Marshall's Talking Points Memo, use traditional journalistic techniques." No one who knew how Talking Points Memo actually worked would put it that way. It's true that Marshall is in many ways a traditional journalist with traditional values; he employs reporters often operate in the traditional way— making phone calls, digging into documents.

At the same time the TPM operation is also a new kind of news organization that relies heavily on a flood of information coming in from its highly knowledgeable readers.

Today, for example, at Talking Points Memo there appears this item, signed by Marshall and directed at users of the site. "I'd like to ask your assistance. The word has clearly gone out to every Republican elected official and campaign committee to hit back against anybody pushing John McCain's 100 years in Iraq claims. So if you've seen press releases or statements from politicians or explanations of what he meant or whatever, send me the links. And let me know in the subject line what you're writing in about."

Marshall is indicating that the 100 years claim is going to become a top issue for TPM over the next few days. This means he intends to track it in the aggregated reports of others, opine on it regularly, employ reporters to dig into McCain's thinking on occupation, use video to document what McCain has said, and ask readers to help in casting a wider net.

Now it's possible to say, "There have always been tipsters. People have always sent stuff to reporters. For the love of god, this is nothing new!" But that's a true statement masking a false claim. Marshall and his crew do not operate like reporters have always operated and TPM Media does not function like a traditional news organization functions.

TPM's homegrown mix combines political argument, dogged investigative work, news aggregation, a filtered community forum, some media criticism, and user-assisted reporting. And of course he abandons any pretense of political neutrality.

Stop waving your pistol around, Jon. It might go off.

20. **Seth Finkelstein** Says:

April 8th, 2008 at 11:42 pm

I'd like to point people to Jay Rosen's exchange with Nick Carr at:

"The Great Unread"

[http://www.rough.type.com/archives/2006/08/the_great_unrea.php]

And my own go-around at:

"The People Formerly Known As The Audience" ... are STILL the audience

[<http://sethf.com/infothought/blog/archives/001035.html>]

Jay Rosen is now doing something I call "The Game Of A-lister Wins". The outcome of this game is simple: The A-lister wins, because, drumroll ... they're the A-lister and you're not. But the mechanism of the win does illuminate a deep issue.

The basic problem is that if an A-lister is caught saying something wrong or stupid, they get to redefine it so that they didn't say it. Because, again, they're the A-lister and you're not. If you claim they did say it, they always have the option of writing a personal attack on you to their audience, which may be two or three orders of magnitude more than your own.

The only people who can stand up to this *effectively* are pundits of similar status.

Before Jay accuses me of deliberate unfalsifiability: I'll acknowledge the philosophical problem, but will he acknowledge the practical issue?

Again, there's something very profound here about the future of journalism.

21. **Jennifer** Says:

April 9th, 2008 at 12:04 am

Ahem.

As a housewife, a mom of three little girls, a college graduate (with a degree in journalism, no doubt), a former newspaper reporter/editor/designer and a former state legislative aide WITH, I might add, my own blog, I have only this point to make:

You get what you pay for.

Journalism — and by that term, I mean the hardnosed, fearless, dogged reporting done by professionals who know what to look for and how to find it, like those from the Columbus (Ga.) Ledger and Sunday Ledger-Enquirer who won the 1955 Pulitzer Prize in Public Service — is like any other profession: Quality requires investment. I left my job at my local daily when my third baby girl was born, mostly because I would actually lose money putting my kids in day care to be there. Do you know that drivers for my local pizza delivery company make more per hour than I did as a trained and experienced professional working in my field?

That is no joke, folks.

I agree with those who say that so-called "citizen journalists" are no substitute for the real thing. But the fifth generation newspaper person in me says, "How can more information be a bad thing?" I am frustrated with our industry and the backward thinking that now governs it. Fortune 500 companies don't get great junior VPs for \$50,000; such a proposition is laughable. So why is it that tested reporters who have spent a lifetime honing their craft struggle to ever reach that mark?

It isn't about the numbers, whether \$40,000 or \$50,000 or more (but in most cases, much less). It's about understanding that quality requires investment, and then determining to make that investment to improve the product, which will then become indispensable to readers, which will then bolster ad revenue, which will then drive profits.

Only in our business would stockholders expect to do so much more — and do it so much better — with so much less. Until they experience a paradigm shift, newspapers will continue to suffer death by a thousand cuts.

We must ask ourselves: What is the First Amendment worth? What is government oversight and accountability worth? What is a free press worth to this country — and to our world? Because without knowledgeable, experienced, trained professionals to give them hands and feet and, yes, words, they are just — and only — the loftiest of ideals.

(P.S. By the way, I sometimes cover City Council.)

22. *Stravingus Says:*

April 9th, 2008 at 3:15 am

Could "All The President's Men" have happened through a blog? Two professional journalists paved the way for a major change in the form of a presidential resignation.

If several citizen journalists tell the same story, doesn't that count as a form of fact-checking? Even if the grammar sucks and words are misspelled, the story still gets told.

Can we round up all of the citizen journalists and professional journalists and repeat the wonderful service that Woodward & Bernstein did for the USA in 1974?

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