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## Journalism's Aversion to an Evolving News Media

### Description

Jennifer Conner (Pacific University Class of 2010) won the Berglund Award for Excellence, awarded to a graduating senior, for her Senior Thesis. "The Real Political Elite: Journalism's Aversion to Evolving News Media". Here we present the thesis in an edited version.

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# Journalism's Aversion to an Evolving News Media

Posted on **October 7, 2010** by **Admin**

By **Jennifer Conner**



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Journalism's ability to inform and influence the public about everyday affairs rests in its credibility and reliability. In order to ensure both of those qualities, journalism created a foundation in schools and ethical codes to which journalists could adhere. But the emergence of new technologies has changed the environment of traditional newsgathering and reporting. With easy access to public officials and records online and permeating social media sites such as Twitter, citizen journalists and bloggers now find themselves at the forefront of the news.

This trend, the creation and running of online news websites by non-traditional media types, was my primary interest when I began my senior project at Pacific University. However, I quickly found another issue lurking beneath the surface. Citizen journalists and others who, relying on an internet platform to disperse their stories, faced rejection from the traditional media community who branded them as unreliable and damaging to the reputation of journalism.

Hence, I refocused my project to examine why this schism exists, as well as the legal, ethical and political problems it can create if left unresolved. Based on this research, I suggested a model of how the two spheres could interact and evolve together. Since I completed my thesis in May 2010, some news organizations, including the Associated Press, created or updated guidelines on social media for journalists during the summer. Such new developments undoubtedly affect my thesis, but they are not analyzed in the following discussion.

I concentrated my research on media most averse to evolving forms of journalism, which was the print media, notably newspapers. From here, I examined how newspapers and reporters treated new media and attempted (if at all) to integrate it into their operations. Major newspapers,

such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, prefer their employees to post only links, no commentary, to articles in order to maintain reliability, a key component of keeping readership and making a profit. Hence, newspapers might be using new media, but they certainly are not utilizing it. For instance, nearly all of *The New York Times*'s Twitter and Facebook posts are headlines with links to a story. But when those are posted, the information is not new; rather, it is the stories currently available in print editions or posted online content. There is nothing that encourages the reader to follow the link, although it is likely that the story or information is available elsewhere.

Next, I researched citizen journalists, as well as the related concept of community journalism (intimate local reporting by journalists living in the area), to understand the purpose and work of both ideas. Neither idea is particularly new, but applied in the context of emerging technology, "citizen journalists" (citizen implying no formal training) become neighborhood bloggers or active community members.

Finally, I explored how people use social media by looking at trends of what people search for and how it affects their news consumption. For instance, news, both national and local, topped the list for searches and there is a slight generational shift among those who find news online and those who read more traditional sources. Younger generations consume more news online, which should encourage news organizations to utilize technology to attract new readers. By analyzing the information from these three areas of my thesis, I formulated a model based on the characteristics of community journalism suggesting how traditional media should integrate citizen journalism. Community journalism lent itself to a natural foundation because it united the journalistic principles of traditional media with the localness of citizen journalists. There are five tenets generally associated with community journalism; they include being relentlessly local, small, second-read (not breaking news), accessible, and less concerned with deadlines [1].

1. Organizations should use a "hyperlocal" approach to promote information and stories important to the local vicinity. For instance, focusing citizen journalists' efforts on small, underrepresented towns or individuals.
2. Citizen journalism is secondary to traditional media; its part is to enhance, not make the story. An example might be a sidebar or accompanying story, unless the report stands on its own.
3. Too often, news organization focus on getting the information first, as that increases ratings and sells the news. Information on a story is easy to find via search engines; it is the local importance of the news that is often unreported. For instance, reporting the effect of a state law on a specific city or organization.
4. Accessibility, in this context, means both professional journalists and citizen journalists participate. This allows the newspaper's journalists to work their regular beats without an extra burden of more stories, especially in newsrooms with reduced staff.
5. Online components cannot be rushed by a deadline. This does not mean content updates are infrequent. However, a weekly paper operates differently than an everyday publication. Content can be added daily, as websites are easily updated quickly, adjusting to the pace

and demand of information.

This model is not without two significant questions; first, whether citizen journalists qualify as “journalists”, and second, if this hybrid model can create profit? Local governments afford traditional journalists certain rights, such as keeping sources confidential (shield laws) or having access to executive meeting sessions. Furthermore, within the journalism community, there are ethical and stylistic considerations to which trained journalists adhere. However, citizen journalists, who have no formal training or recognition, do not receive such benefits or follow normal journalistic practices. This is a long-standing problem that will not be resolved easily; nonetheless, if traditional news media and citizen journalists can create a working relationship, it can begin to address these underlying issues.

It is also unknown whether citizen journalism is a profitable field. Most citizen journalists simply follow a “hobby model”, in that reporting on local news is not their primary job or concern, but a passion. Traditional news organizations may be reluctant to add evolving forms of media if there is little monetary benefit. Nevertheless, citizen journalism, through its hyperlocal focus, can draw advertisers through online traffic.

Newspapers have been able to hold on to the idea that not everyone can be a journalist, and consequently to elitism, by equating credibility with tradition and establishment. The fourth estate effectively impugns different methods of journalism by refusing to take them seriously. Granted, not all forms of alternative journalism will be accurate and reliable. But credibility will not improve if there is no cooperation between types of journalism. If journalism's lofty goal is to act as a watchdog of government and democracy, it must encourage and allow all types of journalism to thrive.

## Endnotes

[1] Lauterer, Jock, *Community Journalism: Relentlessly Local*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Press (2006): 43

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