

7 things you should know about...

Citizen Journalism

Scenario

When the G8 Summit came to town, a local university sponsored a citizen journalism project to cover the event. For three days, the G8 leaders gathered to discuss issues including trade, the environment, international security, and social welfare. The summit also drew protesters from a number of countries, and the project addressed not only the summit itself but also the issues raised by critics. Students from disciplines including journalism, economics, political science, sociology, and environmental science were recruited to participate. They would write stories dealing with their areas of study, posted on a Web site along with photos and video of the event. Before the meeting began, the students researched the G8, its positions, and the agenda for the summit. The sociology students interviewed members of some of the groups protesting the meeting and posted stories to the site about efforts to raise awareness of what the groups saw as shortcomings in the G8's approaches to a range of environmental and economic issues. Two groups of protesters were from the university, and this connection gave the sociology students greater access to, and understanding of, those protesters than the throngs of mainstream media could obtain.

As the summit got under way, students from the environmental sciences department used their understanding of water laws and climate to inform their stories about a G8 statement on water rights in developing countries. Similarly, students in economics and political science incorporated their subject-matter expertise, writing articles with a more precise understanding of the context than most stories in mainstream media. These and other stories, including coverage of the ongoing protests, were regularly posted on the citizen journalism site, which was read by thousands of Internet users every day. The site allowed user comments, and some stories sparked lengthy debates among readers, both within and outside the university community. In some cases, individual protesters submitted angry, even hostile comments to the site. As long as they didn't violate the site's prohibitions against obscenity or libel, however, the comments were allowed to stand as part of the broad picture painted of the summit. As bloggers picked up some of the stories, readership increased sharply, as did the comments submitted. In the end, the students made important contributions to the news while developing a keen sense of how not only to make insightful observations based on discipline-specific knowledge but also to communicate those ideas in a balanced way to a general audience.

What is it?

The term *citizen journalism* refers to a wide range of activities in which everyday people contribute information or commentary about news events. Over the years, citizen journalism has benefited from the development of various technologies, including the printing press—which provided a medium for the pamphleteers of the 17th and 18th centuries—the telegraph, tape recorders, and television, each of which offered new opportunities for people to participate in sharing news and commentary. With the birth of digital technologies, people now have unprecedented access to the tools of production and dissemination. Citizen journalism encompasses content ranging from user-submitted reviews on a Web site about movies to wiki-based news. Some sites only run stories written by users, while many traditional news outlets now accept comments and even news stories from readers. The notion of citizen journalism implies a difference, however, between simply offering one's musings on a topic and developing a balanced story that will be genuinely useful to readers.

Who's doing it?

The list of citizen journalism sites is long and includes sites limited to nonprofessional reporting, such as NowPublic and CyberJournalist, and divisions of traditional media companies that feature citizen journalism, such as CNN's I-Reporter. Some people use blogs, wikis, digital storytelling applications, photo- and video-sharing sites, and other online media as vehicles for citizen journalism efforts. Many projects take a local approach, centering on news about a city or even a specific neighborhood, or focus on special-interest topics, such as financial matters or gender issues. Many academic programs combine the study of traditional journalism with new media, and these programs typically address issues of citizen voices in reporting. Some institutions sponsor initiatives that focus directly on citizen journalism and other forms of user-created content. Scoop08, founded by students at Yale University and Andover, is a Web site devoted to coverage of the 2008 presidential election. It bills itself as “the first-ever daily national student newspaper,” with hundreds of high school and college students across the country submitting stories about the election.

How does it work?

The issues surrounding how citizen journalism works involve policy more than technology. In simple terms, a blog can embody citizen journalism. A Web site that only includes stories from nonprof-

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sional journalists might be fully open, with all responsibility for the content resting with the contributors, or it can have some level of editorial oversight, in which case decisions must be made about the kind of oversight exerted, such as checking facts or editing grammar. For a mainstream news outlet that allows public comments or story submissions, policies must be established about these issues as well as those that could affect the organization's credibility. Citizen journalism projects can use a range of technologies, such as digital audio and video, online tools for posting and accessing stories, authentication protocols to restrict who can submit or edit content, and RSS tools to facilitate efficient dissemination of content. Some citizen journalism initiatives use wikis or collaborative writing and editing tools, and some applications encourage users to link to online resources, such as Flickr photos or YouTube videos, that support their stories.

Why is it significant?

Citizen journalism epitomizes the belief that the experiences of people personally involved with an issue present a different—and often more complete—picture of events than can be derived from the perspective of an outsider. Due to limitations of access and time—and in some cases ulterior motives to present just one side of a story—traditional reporting risks at least the perception of being skewed. By granting access to anyone to cover the news, citizen journalism presents a more personal, nuanced view of events and has the potential to cultivate communities of people with a common interest. Through blogs, citizen journalists have broken stories about political corruption, police brutality, and other issues of concern to local and national communities. Research has shown that traditional news outlets believe that participation by readers improves the quality of the news, and such participation tends to increase the trust that the community has in the news. Citizen journalism forces contributors to think objectively, asking probing questions and working to understand the context so that their representation of events is useful to others. These activities get people involved in new ways with the world around them, forming a deeper connection with the subjects of their investigations. For students, these are the same kinds of activities that lead to deeper learning and to taking more responsibility for contributions made to a collective understanding.

What are the downsides?

The quality of any citizen journalism project reflects the contributions of those who choose to participate, and such projects can be havens for triviality or unreliable content. At the same time, many users are inclined to trust material they find online, particularly if it is called “news.” In this way, citizen journalism projects have the potential to implicitly validate content that might be inaccurate, offensive, or otherwise lack credibility. A tool intended to boost

the trustworthiness of reporting might therefore result in a loss of confidence in the news. While conscientious professional journalists are careful to separate supportable evidence from opinion or speculation, many citizen journalists have a weaker sense of what constitutes a reliable story, free of conjecture. Consumers of citizen journalism should understand that however well-intentioned a citizen journalist might be, reading the news with a skeptical eye is a good practice.

Where is it going?

Some contend that citizen journalism efforts need to develop protocols to evaluate the veracity of content and to increase understanding about appropriate uses of user-produced content. From ratings of books or lawnmowers to op-ed columns and amateur video of political rallies, online content increasingly comes from untrained people. Citizen journalism reflects a movement away from highly produced content to information that is local and more individually pertinent, and mechanisms will need to be implemented to manage this growing body of content. Citizen journalism tools will increasingly be applied to niche audiences, such as coverage of a conference or other professional development event, sharing the experiences of those at the meeting with other attendees and those unable to attend. It may also become an important part of any discipline, to share information among colleagues in a profession or as a recruiting tool to attract students by providing an insider's perspective on what it's like to work in that field.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

An important corollary to learning how specific applications work, such as video-capture and online publishing tools, is understanding how the products of those tools can be used to present a particular version of a story. Citizen journalism encourages students to think critically about what it means to be unbiased, to present competing viewpoints, and to earn readers' trust. It also forces students to consider what separates a mere anecdote from a legitimate news story. Participating as citizen journalists can help students hone their media literacy skills, making those students better able to assess online information and use it in appropriate ways. Citizen journalism gives students the opportunity to receive community feedback on their contributions, helping them gauge their comprehension of a subject, and it provides students with authentic learning tasks, engaging with communities of users beyond the walls of the classroom.