

Community Blogging The New Wave of Citizen Journalism

BY JULIE FANSELOW

On June 20, 2007, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* published an article about methamphetamine in Minnesota. The story focused on signs of progress against meth abuse, but the last paragraph mentioned reports of a heroin network among high school students in Northfield, a community of about 19,500 people forty-five miles south of the Twin Cities.

This was news to Griff Wigley, the founder of a community blog called *Locally Grown Northfield*. So Wigley called the local police chief, who confirmed that he was investigating the issue. Wigley then wrote the first of what would be more than a dozen posts on the topic.

“We lit the fuse,” he recalls. “We were kind of ground zero and took a huge amount of abuse for it.” But Wigley says that positive changes happened as a result of the increased publicity. Posts and comments at *Locally Grown* recount these changes: updated curriculum and more counseling at local high schools, increased local treatment options, and plenty of honest conversation over substance abuse.

Wigley is one of a growing number of local bloggers and citizen journalists who write about and advocate for their communities in sustained, organized ways on the Internet. These blogs (the word is shorthand for Web log) and local news sites are run as a labor of love by one or more writers, most with no formal journalism training. The best blogs evolve into online communities where dozens—sometimes hundreds—of citizens regularly comment, offer news tips, and generally gather around these blogs just as they might meet at a local coffee shop.

Community blogs are having a sizable impact on traditional journalism. Many serve a watchdog

function, just as investigative reporters from the “legacy” media used to do (and sometimes still do, newsroom budgets and corporate ties permitting). Paraphrasing A. J. Liebling, *New Haven Independent* editor Paul Bass writes, “Power of the press now belongs not to those who own one, but to those who own a modem. We own a modem.” Some civic-minded bloggers take a critical tone with local government; others are less combative. But no matter what the prevailing tone, these blogs give readers a rich sense of place.

In fact, “placebloggers” is the collective name for the citizens who generate locally driven blogs and news sites. A Zogby survey released in February 2008 found that 70 percent of Americans say journalism is important to maintaining community quality of life, but that nearly as high a number—67 percent—say the traditional media are out of touch with what citizens want out of their news. Bill Densmore of the Media Giraffe Project at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst says the rise in community blogs has happened as local newspapers cut staff, adding, “People hunger for community, but the economic reality of the mainstream media is that they can’t supply that need anymore, or choose not to.”

The Media Giraffe Project recently welcomed community bloggers, journalists, and researchers to A Passion for Place—New Pamphleteers/New Reporters: Convening Entrepreneurs Who Combine Journalism, Democracy, Place, and Blogs, a conference held jointly with the Minnesota Journalism Center at the University of Minnesota. “It’s clear there’s more momentum for these things,” says Wigley, who was among about 180 people attending the conference in June 2008. “I was encouraged to the point where maybe I ought to write a book on

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this.” Wigley certainly has the background: in 1991, an *Utne Reader* neighborhood salon in Northfield considered, as its topic, how the then-fledgling Internet could be harnessed for the public good. That discussion led to the founding of an organization called Northfield Citizens Online and an online bulletin board, which became a blog, *Northfield.org*, in 2003. Wigley went on to launch *Locally Grown* and has also become an Internet coach whose Website notes that Wigley and Associates specializes in “leadership blogging, citizen media, and weapons of mass collaboration.”

On the Web, On the Air

The heroin story was somewhat atypical fare for *Locally Grown*, which also exists as a weekly podcast (audio show) that airs on a local radio station. As they write the blog and create the audio show in their own time, Wigley and partners Ross Currier and Tracy Davis (both of whom are active in the business community and sit on the Northfield Planning Commission) tend to focus at least as much on what’s good in their communities as what’s wrong. Wigley asked to delay his interview for this article so he could take photographs of the mock kidnapping of a team of judges visiting Northfield for the “America in Bloom” competition.

Yet *Locally Grown* doesn’t hesitate to call local leaders into question. Recently, for example, the city cut down a dozen trees with no notice. Wigley took pictures, put up a blog post, and gave his neighbors a place to vent their frustrations online. In another instance, Northfield blog posts questioned the city practice of burning tree waste at a city lot. The chief complainer got appointed to a city commission overseeing the lot, and the panel decided to do wood

chipping instead of burning. “We’re trying to get city leaders to see [that] you have to communicate in this new world,” he says. He wants to see more candidates for office write blogs, and continue blogging if they win.

Locally Grown is also the first pilot site for the national Representative Journalism project, which is exploring the idea of having a community support its own journalists. Bonnie Obremski, a young but seasoned reporter, came to Northfield in June 2008 to do more in-depth stories that run on (but are editorially separate from) the *Locally Grown* site. She reports not to Wigley and his partners but to Leonard Witt, a journalism professor at Georgia’s Kennesaw State University who founded the “RepJ” project, and to Chris Peck, the editor of the (Memphis) *Commercial Appeal*, who give editorial guidance. Witt’s vision is that someday there may be professional journalists plying their trade on community blogs and news Websites across the country. A similar project funded by a Knight News Challenge grant, Spot.us, is promoting “community-funded reporting” that, according to its Website, “allows an individual or group to take control of news by sharing the cost [crowdfunding] to commission freelance journalists” to investigate and write stories on specific topics.

Evidence of how community-driven journalism differs from traditional reporting could be seen in an August 2008 post that Obremski made at *Locally Grown* the morning of a public hearing for the city’s planned annexation of 530 acres of farmland from an adjacent township for industrial use. At the top of her story offering background on the issue, Obremski offered this “Note to readers:”

Please keep these questions in mind when reading the feature below and respond, if you would like, to help me move forward with coverage: What are more benefits and shortcomings of a plan that would ask Northfield residents to pay for water and sewer lines to extend to newly

annexed properties along the city's northwest border? Who can give current estimates of the cost of the proposed project to lay that infrastructure? What do residents envision as the best use of the undeveloped farmland? Are there questions surrounding the annexation proposal I have not yet attempted to answer?

The online medium makes it easier for reporters to collaborate with the community to ensure coverage that is truly “fair and balanced,” and the unlimited space allowed on the Internet—as opposed to the finite amount of column space or airtime faced by traditional media sources—may mean much more comprehensive coverage as stories evolve. Obremski says that although she'd been in Northfield for only a few weeks, people began stopping her on the street to talk about the community: “I'm not sure this would happen in every community. Northfield is a very civic-minded community, to say the least.”

Obremski had a journalism background, but Jan Schaffer, executive director for J-Lab, the Institute for Interactive Journalism, notes that many new citizen-driven blogs and news sites are run by “people who don't necessarily aspire to be journalists, but aspire to help community life go well.” According to Schaffer, these activist-minded bloggers are covering neighborhoods in a way that traditional media sources aren't, “unless there's some horrible crime. They're adding feet on the street at a very hyperlocal level.”

Take the *West Seattle Blog*, run by the mom-and-pop team of Tracy Record and Patrick Sand (who actually *are* trained journalists). In December 2006, Seattle was socked by a ferocious windstorm that knocked out power to parts of the city for up to a week. Record, a TV news veteran who'd launched her neighborhood blog one year before, happened to have the week off from her day job. She swung into action with dozens of posts offering block-by-block information on the power outages and other related hazards spawned by the storm—information that

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neither City Hall nor the local electrical utility nor Seattle's daily newspapers could match.

Record and Sand knew they were making a difference for their neighborhood when they heard from people who, although they were without power, had called family and friends far from Seattle, asked them to get online, call up *West Seattle Blog*, and read the latest storm-related posts to them. Traffic to the blog more than doubled during that period, from a thousand page views on December 14 to twice that a week later. As of August 2008, *West Seattle Blog* had about fifty-four hundred unique daily users and seventeen thousand page views per day in a neighborhood of about seventy thousand people. It's also become a full-time business for its founders, and it has about thirty local businesses signed up as regular advertisers.

A New Breed of Watchdog

Some community blogs have a proudly adversarial relationship to governments and officials they monitor. Professional photographer and avowed “growthphobe” Dave Frazier was an avid governmental watchdog long before he started his *Boise Guardian* blog in 2005. There's even an Idaho Supreme Court decision named for him, one that upheld the Idaho Constitution's mandate that local government entities cannot hold debt for more than a year without a two-thirds vote of citizens. Frazier's *Guardian* has been successful enough that a spin-off effort, the *Caldwell Guardian*, started in a nearby suburb in 2007. The *Guardian* blogs would never be mistaken for government house organs; in fact, Gary Deulen, a chief deputy for the Canyon County Sheriff's Office, called *Caldwell Guardian* blogger

Paul Alldredge and Deloris Cram of *Canyon County Watch* in nearby Nampa “CAVE people: Citizens Against Virtually Everything.”

But Frazier says he has no doubt the blogs serve a need that was going unfilled by traditional media sources. “I’m doing the job of the news media and I’m doing the job of the city, and I shouldn’t have to,” he says. All too often, when confronting local officials with claims of fiscal irresponsibility or ethical missteps, Frazier says “the first thing they say is ‘You’re wrong.’” Pushing his hands in front of him in a “back off” gesture, he adds, “Rather than, ‘We’ll take a look at this.’” At first, Ada County would not send him its press releases, claiming he was not a legitimate journalist, but relented after the president of the Idaho Press Club wrote a letter on Frazier’s behalf. Indeed, Frazier is a third-generation journalist whose father and grandfather both worked for newspapers in Michigan, and who himself shot news photos for top newspapers and magazines worldwide before turning to stock photography in the 1980s.

Frazier says that, after three years of blogging, city and county government employees frequently come to him with tips. Sometimes, he even takes things into his own hands, as when he stepped up to pay \$4.78 in late fees for a local man who’d had a lien placed on his home. (The late fees had accrued when the Nampa-Meridian Irrigation District initially sent the bill to the wrong address.) The case wound up on page one of Boise’s newspaper, the *Idaho Statesman*. Soon after the coverage, the Nampa-Meridian Irrigation District reviewed the taxpayer’s case, waived the late fees, and sent Frazier a check for \$4.78.

Tracking Increased Engagement

In another category of place-based blogs, organizations that promote civic engagement have recently begun helping communities use blogs and other online tools to record their work, document their

successes, and attract new participants. The Northwest Area Foundation decided to use blogs as a key component of its Horizons program, which helps small rural and reservation communities across seven states in the Upper Midwest, Great Plains, and Northwest move “from poverty to prosperity.” “One of the things we wanted to try and understand and capture is what was happening in these communities,” explains Jerry Uribe, an NWAFF director who oversees the Horizons program.

Blogs, he adds, have given the foundation a front-row seat—from a distance—into what’s happening in the communities: “Our philosophy is, we don’t like to interject ourselves at the community level, but blogs allow us to have a sense of what is happening across 140 or 150 communities.” Each Horizons blog post is numerically keyed to one or more of a dozen goals (among them “Building knowledge and awareness around poverty” and “Building skills and mobilizing around leadership”) that all Horizons communities are pursuing, allowing NWAFF, its regional Horizons delivery organizations, and individual communities to track which goals are being addressed.

NWAFF hired Wigley to help put blogging tools in place for the program, and to coach communities in using the Internet, both through in-person sessions and online screencasts. Wigley was encouraged to make the tools work “at the speed of dial-up,” Uribe says, especially since many rural and reservation communities still lack access to high-speed broadband service.

An August 2008 survey from the Communications Workers of America showed that of the five states with the slowest broadband Internet in the United States, four of them—Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, and Wyoming—are in NWAFF’s service area. NWAFF doesn’t require Horizons communities to have blogs, but many do. “It’s highly encouraged,” Uribe says. “We are going to continue this blogging strategy because there’s value to it.”

One of the best Horizons blog serves Eveleth, Minnesota, a community known as the home of the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame and the site of Sen. Paul Wellstone's 2002 plane crash. The mining town has seen tough times lately as its population dropped from just over four thousand in 1990 to about thirty-six hundred today. Steady population and economic declines are among the reasons Eveleth decided to become involved in Horizons, and in June 2007 several participants launched a blog as a way to share the information, ideas, and action projects that were bubbling up out of the project.

The first post was a reprint of a local newspaper story on the wrap-up of community dialogues (called study circles) held in Eveleth. Before long, however, the *Eveleth Horizons* blog was turning into a chronicle of happenings in Eveleth—a way to record progress, bring the community together, and offer a valuable service in a town where the traditional weekly newspaper is not available online. By the time Eveleth had its community visioning event in November 2007, the blog had not only promoted the event with several advance posts but boasted coverage of the actual event the very night it happened. In short, in a global 24/7 media culture ruled by breaking news, scandal, and celebrity gossip, the *Eveleth Horizons* blog is serving as a major source of the news that matters most to the people in Eveleth.

Is it hard to do? Blogger Stefanie Jarvis (who also works, goes to school, and raises two young children) is one of three Eveleth residents who collaborate on the project. She says that she sometimes spends three or four hours a week on the blog, but it's been a good creative outlet. She likes to find new ways to jazz up the blog, such as scrolling text and an "email us" button using code she copied from a MySpace page. It's also cheap: there's no charge for Google's Blogger tools, or for most of the widgets that are abundantly available on the Internet. (See the sidebar for resources on starting a community blog.)

Everyday Democracy, formerly the Study Circles Resource Center, has also reached out to help communities access the Internet. In September 2007, Everyday Democracy launched a blog called *DemocracySpace* that frequently features guest posts from communities that are taking advantage of the organization's methods of using large-scale, inclusive public dialogue to solve pressing local problems. Executive director Martha McCoy says that a growing number of citizen leaders realize the importance of using the Internet, especially to reach people who are unable to attend town meetings; to recruit participants, especially younger residents, for new programs and projects; and to generate a lively multimedia record of progress for supporters, officials, and even funders.

Keep It Fun; Use Lots of Photos

What are the hallmarks of a great community blog? Given people's hectic lives and the amount of hours most of us already spend online, fun has to be one component. "First and foremost, they ought to be a place where people can, in an enjoyable way, put on their citizen hat, converse with people and become a little more knowledgeable than they were before," says Wigley.

It's hard to measure, he adds, but it's always been the *Locally Grown* team's hope that the more people who read the blog and hear its related podcasts, the more will attend local city council and school board meetings and be better informed when they show up: "We're sort of modeling, in certain ways, that being a citizen is fun. It's engaging. It's not just voting; that's at the bottom of the civic ladder."

In his recent article for *National Civic Review*, Brad Rourke explained how the blog he started in 2007, *Rockville Central*, grew quickly to gain notice from local officials and give citizens a way to plug into their community. "It's a space for people who otherwise aren't involved in public life," he says. But it has also built community away from cyberspace, as at

Links to Community Blogs

Locally Grown Northfield <http://locallygrownnorthfield.org/>

New Haven Independent <http://newhavenindependent.org/>

West Seattle Blog <http://westseattleblog.com/blog/>

Boise Guardian <http://boiseguardian.com/>

Eveleth Horizons <http://www.eveleth.blogspot.com/>

Rockville Central <http://www.rockvillecentral.com/>

The Knight Citizen News Network has a directory of nearly 850 citizen-run news sites and blogs:
http://www.kcnn.org/citmedia_sites/.

Griff Wigley created a series of screencasts as visual aids for communities starting blogs through the Northwest Area Foundation's Horizons program:
http://www.kcnn.org/citmedia_sites/.

The screencasts tell how to set up a blog in WordPress, one popular blogging platform (<http://wordpress.com/>). Other popular and easy-to-use platforms include Google's Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com>) and SixApart's TypePad (<http://www.typepad.com>).

monthly lunch meetings that are announced on the blog. Rourke, Frazier, and Wigley are also big proponents of putting lots of photos on local blogs, to add visual interest and strengthen threads of community.

All bloggers, whether individuals or traditional media members, wrestle with the greater freedoms the Internet allows for anonymity and dialogue that might not pass muster in the print edition of your local paper.

The best civic blogs tend to set a civil tone that encourages people to remain neighborly, and many discourage anonymous commenting. According to Wigley, *Locally Grown* seeks to be a place where citizens and leaders can “mix it up, not to be where things are decided, but so issues can be teased out over time. I think we have a really good track record with that,” he says.

In the end, most place-based bloggers are investing countless hours (usually for free) because they love their communities and want to see them be the best place they can be. Is this sustainable? Some local sites such as *West Seattle Blog* are evolving into more traditional, advertiser-supported news outlets. Others may fund reporting through the methods being tried

by the Representative Journalism and Spot.us projects. But few community bloggers, even those who get paid, are in it for the money. “It’s a labor of love. It’s almost a form of volunteerism,” says Jan Schaffer. “They can give back to their community through the media, through media participation. They’re citizens who are paying attention to their communities and are helping others pay attention.”

References

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Julie Fanselow, who served as online organizer for Everyday Democracy, formerly the Study Circles Resource Center, has been following the rise of community blogging for the past five years.
