

**Does new media journalism represent a genuine alternative to the  
practices and approaches of local news media?**

**Max Raymond**

**0702050**

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**Does new media journalism represent a genuine alternative to the practices and approaches of traditional local news media?**

**Abstract:**

*This dissertation will examine whether new media represents a genuine alternative to the practices and approaches of traditional local news media. I will start by examining the current state of local media as well as examine the rise of new media and new methods of reporting the news. The material that I will be using as case studies include articles from the Evening Standard, the News & Star in Cumbria, the Washington Times, hyperlocal news website Civicboom, and social networking website Facebook.*

## **Introduction:**

As long as newspapers have existed, so have local newspapers. As the national papers have been successful, the local papers have been cruising along because of it. Circulation has been steady, if not as popular as the national papers, and they have developed a regular readership.

Due to the combination of an economic recession and the rise of online journalism, the sales of newspapers have plummeted in recent years. Jobs have been cut at several news organisations across the country, across all journalistic mediums and at national and local level. The same can be said in the USA but their situation is far worse. Some of their news organisations have already folded and many well-known daily newspapers like the Boston Globe have come increasingly close to folding.

The one place where local journalism can still thrive is online. More and more people are finding their news by reading computer screens as opposed to newspapers. This means that the role of a journalist has now become substantially different from what it was pre-internet. Kung, Picard, Leandros, Schroeder and van der Wurff (2008, pp.145) explain this in *The Internet And The Mass Media*:

The media industries are also strongly affected by these developments as content production and publication processes increasingly turn digital: a journalist, for instance, will create digital text, photos, audio or video files. Modern newsroom technology will allow the content publication through content

management systems (CMS) via the Internet from practically every place equipped with an Internet access. Idealistically, the production follows the strategy 'One Source, all Media', whereby a journalist creates the content once and then publishes it in a newspaper, for broadcast or online without alterations.

It also is becoming increasingly common for people who are not journalists to break hard and concrete news stories that the mainstream media completely miss.

Nick Davies (2009, pp.395) wrote about how the world of citizen journalism is now beginning to become more truthful and more affiliated to the traits of reporting than the industry itself, citing an incident in the Middle East as an example of this in his book, Flat Earth News:

Bloggers and citizen journalists do uncover untold stories. There was a very telling incident in the winter of 2005 when, a full year after General Metz's men stormed into Fallujah, it was revealed that his troops had been firing white phosphorus shells not as a source of light but, in breach of the international convention of chemical weapons, as a means of burning insurgents alive. That story emerged, despite official denials from the US State Department, because bloggers found and circulated evidence from an article in a US magazine called Field Artillery, which had been published in March 2005. As the story finally made it into the mass media, the director of Global News at the BBC, Richard Sambrook, was asked by Press Gazette why it had been left to bloggers to dig out the truth, and he replied that 'deadlines and resources dictated that it would always be the case that individuals could find information or have information that the main news organisations would not get.' What an admission! Huge organisations whose sole purpose in life is to gather news are too busy with their churnalism to find out what is happening.

'Churnalism' occurs when news stories are created from pre-packaged material such as press releases and news wires, most of the time without being checked for accuracy but instead published in the rush to fill a newspaper with stories.

The term itself was coined by BBC journalist Waseem Zakir. Zakir (Harcup, 2004, pp.6) has been saying that journalists are frequently moving away from being proactive when it comes to news stories, but instead becoming more reactive:

You get copy coming in on the wires and reporters churn it out, processing stuff and maybe adding the odd local quote. It's affecting every newsroom in the country and reporters are becoming churnalists.

This has also become apparent in local newsrooms as well and is a contributing factor to their decline in reliability and trust.

In recent months a number of social networking websites have been launched that allow users to get local news in their own local area through a consistently updated database of blog and news website articles. These types of websites have been creating what has been dubbed as hyperlocal news. It is because of the rise of social networking and social bookmarking that these websites have already found a sizeable audience and they could potentially be the start of a rejuvenation of local news for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Jeff Jarvis (2009), a journalism professor at the City University of New York and a long-time supporter of hyperlocal news, suggests that the local press is losing out to the internet and that these outlets will die unless a solution is found:

The days of one news organisation owning a town and its news are over; no one can afford to do that any more. Instead, if these experiments succeed, they will do so by collaborating to create a new network - a new ecosystem - of local news.

Their work is vital because I believe such structures will be the building blocks of the future of news - of what will replace or at least supplement the services that will disappear as regional and city newspapers shrink and die. And die they will. In the US, UK and elsewhere in Europe, metropolitan papers and their over-leveraged owners are in dire trouble. We have little or no time to decide what can and will succeed them.

It is being argued in the industry that newspapers are in a downturn that may be terminal. In the UK, circulation of the regional daily press has been falling by 5% every year and that figure could well be increasing as advertising revenues decline. In the US, quarterly print newspaper sales are down 16% in the space of two years – three times as much as in the UK. 2009 was seen by some, like *The Inquisitr* (2009), as the year that newspapers start dying for a variety of reasons:

Community newspapers will fold in 2009 as owners are no longer able to turn a profit, or sustain losses any longer. The killer will be costs: even a small town newspaper could have a staff of 6 or 10 or more (usually more, but I've worked with papers in the past that often have 2 local reporters, with the rest of the paper filled by syndicated content from the company network). Millions a year to run, with no hope in sight of a turnaround in advertising fortunes. The model is dying. Some may switch to online only, a trend that will accelerate this year, but the bloat logic problem still remains: high overhead costs for reporters and editors in small markets.

Local newspapers did not die in 2009, but local media is still struggling badly in terms of sales and revenue. It is now at a point where the industry now needs to find a new business model, if it were to stay alive. A close eye has been kept on social media for months because of the increasing popularity of it, its useful functions for reporting news and the ways in which the mainstream media has collaborated with it and what ways it might do so in the future.

There is also a sense that there is no definitive plan as to the future of local newspapers and how they can survive the age of the internet. In an article for The Guardian about local news, Stephen Moss (2009) describes that there are a range of opinions as to what might happen that differ from positive to negative:

Pundits on the future of the press range from the optimistic - former Guardian editor Peter Preston, for instance, who in his Observer media column this week attacked "self-feeding hysteria" - to investigative reporter Nick Davies, who, at the start of our interview, tells me it can be a short one. How so? "As far as anyone with any sense knows," he says, "there isn't a future for local media. There isn't actually much of a future for national media."

Websites like EveryBlock, Outside.in and Patch have already been set up in the US and are among the most popular hyperlocal sites. They also potentially represent a change in reader attitudes when it comes to news. Most people now get their news information from the internet and services like Google News and Google Blog Search (essentially a search engine for hundreds of news reports or blog posts on any subject entered in the search field). It is giving the reader more choice than a newspaper would. These hyperlocal sites operate with the same principle – collating a variety of reports from all over the web and supplying the reader not only with information but also with a choice.

In the UK there has been a slight reluctance to do something that resembles either of the above. Some local newspapers have been slow starters in adapting to the current technological age and have been left behind. For a long time, local newspaper websites like the Surrey Advertiser have based their websites on publishing re-prints

of news that appeared in print - almost as if they did not want to put a lot of time and effort to developing the online side of the newspaper. It is only in recent years that it has finally put more emphasis on online content but had they started earlier they might have found themselves in a better position. There is a possibility that the UK might follow the US trend and start launching websites for users to submit news items in their local area in order to make local news more accessible to a modern audience. This will put local news media in its traditional formats in even more trouble.

## **Hypothesis:**

Because of the dawn of new technologies, the way that certain news events are covered has changed. Events that involve a lot of people (e.g. natural disasters) now lead to more user-generated content that, as well as assisting news organisations in terms of telling their own accounts of what happened, is being shown to a potentially global audience. Compared to a time before the internet, it is a major transformation.

John Pavlik (2000, pp.229-237), in an article called *The Impact Of Technology On Journalism* for *Journalism Studies*, was one of the first people to write about how this new wave of technology could affect the working practices of the journalist:

Technological change influences journalists in at least four ways. Technological change affects: (1) the way journalists do their job; (2) the nature of news content; (3) the structure and organization of the news room; and (4) the nature of the relationship between and among news organisations.

There are also, however, law and libel issues that factor into some of the new online methods of journalism. Of these issues, there are two main ones that dominate. Firstly, there is the possibility of a user posting an article, photo, audio or video that might be potentially libelous. Just because something is being put online does not mean it is exempt for the law. As Dan Gillmor (2006, pp.192) states in his book *We The Media*:

Online journalists are no less required to follow the law than anyone else. A blogger who commits libel may have to face the consequences.

Libel itself is perhaps the most common case of legal action. Blogger and law professor Glenn Reynolds (Gillmor, 2006, pp.275) states: “To be libelous, a statement must be (1) a statement of fact, not opinion; (2) false; and (3) such as to materially injure someone's reputation.”

Secondly, there is the potential for the integrity of a grassroots newsgathering organisation to be damaged by an individual(s) that is commonly classed on the internet as a troll. Ward Cunningham (2006) wrote a detailed description of a troll on his Wiki site:

A troll is deliberately crafted to provoke others with the intention of wasting their time and energy. A troll is a time thief. To troll is to steal from people. That is what makes trolling heinous. Trolls can be identified by their disengagement from a conversation or argument. They do not believe what they say, but merely say it for effect. Trolls are motivated by a desire for attention by people and can't or won't acquire it in a productive manner. Someone may be insufferable, infuriating, fanatical, and an ignorant idiot to boot without being a troll. Also note that a troll isn't necessarily insulting, snide, or even impolite. Only the crudest, most obvious, forms of trolling can be identified so easily. If you find yourself patiently explaining, at length and in great detail, some obscure point to someone who isn't even being polite to you, then you are probably being trolled.

Many forums, message boards and real-time chat services have been hampered by trolls, disrupting any form of meaningful, on-topic discussion. It is also an obstacle that could potentially severely hamper the value of user-generated content.

In summary, it is argued that local news media could be changing the way that traditional local news journalists work and even the structure of local news itself. However, there is also a possibility that user-generated content being used might be rife with either editorial errors or possibly libel material.

### **Methodology:**

I will, using the above hypothesis, question whether new media represents a genuine alternative to the practices and approaches of traditional local news media. This will be done by looking at case studies such as the Dean Street Fire in July 2009, the Cumbria floods in November 2009 and a story in the Washington Post in December 2009 that was written as part of its 'citizen journalism' section. I will also be examining the legal issues by applying them to all three of my chosen case studies.

## **Analysis:**

### **Case Study #1: Dean Street Fire:**

One of the major social networking trends to emerge in the last few years has been ‘hyperlocal’ websites. These are websites that allow users to look up news in their local communities through a series of links. Most of these links are directed towards local blogs, meaning that the content is, for the most part, created not by professional reporters but by untrained reporters. They also hold information about their local area that is gathered from local government and other sources. For example, you could go to a website like EveryBlock and, in addition to finding out what is happening in New York City, find out information like crime reports, restaurant inspections and so on. This is the kind of information that is rarely published in any local newspaper (and whatever information like this is published in local newspapers isn’t as detailed when compared to the several graphs and charts that are provided by EveryBlock). One criticism that has been leveled at hyperlocal sites is that the quality of its content will dip if credible sources like newspapers die out. However, Adrian Holovaty (Cain Miller & Stone, 2009), founder of EveryBlock, told the New York Times that he doesn’t think this will be the case: “In many cities, the local blog scene is so rich and deep that even if a newspaper goes away, there would still be plenty of stuff for us to publish.”

In the UK, the market for hyperlocal news has developing at a slightly slower pace, but Civicboom is possibly the most well known hyperlocal website in the

country. Elizabeth Hodgson (2009), the director of Civicboom, spoke about how the idea came about and fulfilling its purpose to Journalism.co.uk. She also explains why these websites are popular and how it could be opened up to a more mainstream audience:

When I was a travel writer, I realised that what I was seeing on the ground and in the press were two completely different things. I was shocked at the difference. We were always told that news is from the top down and that news is what other people tell us. It was quite a liberating thought that I didn't need anyone to give me permission to do this [set up the site]. Stories start with people.

People are getting on and doing stuff because there's a passion about news and a passion about journalism and a passion about the community. There are opportunities here for organisations to get themselves out there to collaborate with other people that aren't part of 'the big team'.

We don't want it to become a club, which is why we are very keen to open it up to mainstream media to look at ways that they can use it. In the same sense that we want it open to everyone, we want it to be used by everyone. Mainstream media hasn't quite got a grasp of what individuals and bloggers can actually do. I don't think it's very helpful to think, that you are doing this and we are trying that and we shall never mix. Mainstream media has the expertise; journalists are trained for a reason. But bloggers are immensely important in our world, because they do the challenging.

The London Paper (Deauville, 2009) reported the news story on their website as usual (this story wouldn't have featured in the newspaper itself since the fire occurred after they went to print on the Friday and by the Monday edition it would be old news) but they described something that was very significant in the development of this story: “Hundreds of evacuated workers and tourists gathered in Frith Street and Oxford Street taking pictures on their mobile phones.”

One of the sites that capitalised on this was Civicboom. The website is what has been branded as a ‘hyperlocal’ news sites, allowing its users to submit their own reports, photos and videos about events in their area.

When a comparison is made between an article written by a professional journalist and an entry that was made on a hyperlocal news site, there are some clear differences. The Evening Standard (Prigg & Davenport, 2009) reported the incident as follows:

More than 60 firefighters battled to contain a dramatic blaze in Soho this afternoon. Hundreds of people were evacuated from buildings around the fire in Dean Street. There were no reports of any casualties. The London Fire Brigade said 12 fire engines went to the scene after they were alerted at about 2pm. Three quarters of the office building, the former home of Future Films next to the Red Fort restaurant, was alight by 3pm.

The story itself begins with the usual writing conventions of print journalism, as it uses the 5 Ws concept to explain what happened. The most important detail is revealed straight off (a blaze in Soho), followed by the second most important (hundreds of people evacuated), followed by the third most important (no reports of casualties), and so on. What follows after the selected quote is a more detailed description of the event and quotes from various people in the area, from business owners to local citizens.

On Civicboom (2009), one entry was made about the fire and the way it was reported was substantially different. The user who made the contribution, known by his alias as 'rcarpmael', simply posted as text:

There's a fire on Dean Street in central London. I can smell it from Covent Garden. Horrible. London Fire Brigade advises that they are in attendance.

You can already tell there are several differences. The first, and most obvious, is the length of the article. The Evening Standard article is 468 words long. The user-generated story article is just 26 words long. However, in those 26 words, it tells you all you need to know about the event. The report is also far more personal and slightly more opinionated than a professional story. The writer talks about him/herself in the first person at one point and describes the smell of the fire as horrible.

There are other features of the articles around the written words that separate them. Even the headlines have different meanings and implications. The story on Civicboom simply has the headline 'fire on Dean Street' that, as well as having improper grammatical conventions, is basic and tells you the heart of the story. The headline in the Evening Standard article is 'Hundreds flee Soho fire as blaze brings chaos to West End' and gives you not only the heart of the story but also some added details (the 'hundreds flee' and 'chaos to West End' parts) that give the reader a more detailed idea of what has been going on.

However, there is a difference of emphasis between the two accounts of what happened. Whilst the Evening Standard focuses its emphasis on detailed information and quotes from people that were in the area, the user on Civicboom has made his own video, which shows the fire from what is presumed to be the user's location at the time. It is only a short twenty-second long video but it has an advantage over traditional methods of reporting in the sense that, as the Evening Standard is trying to give their readers as much information as it can so that the report can be as visceral as a video report, it is showing the reader exactly what happened. This would explain the brief aforementioned article to supplement the video, as the user knows that the video was going to be more effective. (It should be pointed out that the article on the Evening Standard website did have a YouTube video showing a first hand account of what happened, but it is so far down the page that it still makes the written article the main part of the story.)

The fascinating thing about the story is that, despite the inevitability that it would find its way into traditional media outlets anyway, it was something that people knew about via social networking. Before any professional news source reported anything, the public had already seen pictures of the fire through sites like Flickr and social networking tools like Twitter and had seen videos through sites like YouTube. It could be argued that, by the time the 'real' reporters got to the scene of the incident, it was already old news, meaning that the people on the ground had already beaten them to the story. Sarah Dobbs (2009) wrote on The Wired Blog about the quickly ascending nature of the development of the news story via social networking tools and websites:

After we'd stopped gawping out of the window, we carried on watching the fire online. A quick Flickr search for "dean street fire soho" found, initially, about 97 photos – at the time of writing, about an hour later, there are 288, and by the time you're reading this, there are probably several hundred more up. Via Twitter, I came across PicFog, which is a real-time service pulling photos from Twitter and Twitpic, and there are several hundred photos of the fire there too. It's odd – there's been plenty of talk of crowdsourcing and citizen journalism taking over from traditional news media, but I think this is the first time I've watched a news story happen without ever going near a newspaper or news website – my info has come, thus far, entirely from user-generated content on social networking sites.

Another interesting point is the style of the stories that were run by the traditional media. It could be argued that, in an age where camera phones and social networks were non-existent, a lot of stories would have relied on several vox pops from passers-by or people in the area. In the present day, most of the news media are now incorporating these user videos and pictures into their stories (except for local radio who would still be pushing for vox pops). It is possible to argue that the whole idea of a vox pop is changing. Whereas once a reporter would have to hunt down people in the area to interview, all they need to do now is source people at the incident through sites like Flickr and Twitter.

## **Case Study #2: Cumbria Floods**

In November 2009 parts of the UK experienced an unusual amount of torrential rain. This led to flooding in some areas, but the worst affected was the area of Cumbria, which was underwater for a few days, leaving its citizens trapped with no way out of their towns. The damage was devastating. As the flood took out bridges, killed members of the public (including PC Bill Barker) and ruined several hundred homes in the area, and it left people without any means of sustainable living.

As the story developed, the relationship between the local media and the community changed dramatically. Before the media was merely just telling its readership a story; now they were collaborating with members of the community so that they could give a definitive account of what was going on in the area and keep others informed of recent developments.

One of the local newspapers that adapted their coverage of the floods was the Cumberland News & Star, part of the CN Group. Whilst they had reporters who could talk to people at the scene, they were overstretched. All they had to cover the event were twelve reporters and eight photographers from across the local papers at the CN Group. Neil Hodgkinson admitted to The Guardian (Tryhorn, 2009) that it was exhausting for everyone involved but justified the work, saying:

You have to be out there, to be in the middle of it and to get community stories. We are expected to be part of the community. We don't come in and leave, we live here.

Thankfully, they were assisted by the amount of material that was going up on the internet via various social media websites.

Perhaps the largest example of social networking being used to contribute to local news was on Facebook. On the 20<sup>th</sup> November 2009, a group called Cumbrian Floods 2009 was set up so that news, photos, videos and any other information about the floods could be shared by people in the area. It would also act as a central news hub, supplying links to any news stories on the web regarding the floods. It proved to be instantly popular, as it had acquired 568 members in the first twelve hours of the group being online.

The creators of the group made sure that every development was mentioned soon as possible. In the first twelve hours, they posted the following information on the group page:

- User-generated pictures of the floods.
- Workington Police Station is flooded
- A woman trapped in a house in Workington before being rescued.
- River Derwent bursting its banks.
- Links to BBC webcams of Cumbria, BBC News 24 web stream, and the story of the collapse of a bridge from BBC News.
- The death of PC Bill Barker due to the collapsed bridge.

- A weather update of more rain for the following day, including 41 flood warnings.
- Videos from professional news sources and citizens on the ground.
- The evacuation of Keswick and the warning that the River Gretna was expected to give way.
- An appeal for help to anyone living near Cockermouth.
- A video of the floods provided by Cumbria Live.
- A warning that the River Cocker was expected to flood again, along with news that there were 1,000 homes without electricity and that the weather was set to be dry overnight.
- Link to a Cumbria news site listing all closed roads.
- Information on how to pay tribute to PC Bill Barker.
- A note was created detailing how to help with the clean up.
- More photos sent in by users.
- Links to listen to BBC Radio Cumbria live.
- Another tribute to PC Bill Barker.
- More user-generated photos.

This is not counting all the comments left by users on the wall of the group or on the discussion boards.

There are some similarities between this case study and the aforementioned Dean Street Fire case study. Whilst, the local newspapers all wrote stories that were

written in the traditional newswriting style, the Facebook group was basically acting as an aggregated news wire, keeping people informed of what was going on through a variety of different sources, professional and amateur, through many different means, whether it be by text, photo, audio or video.

To illustrate this, the way that the evacuation of Keswick at the very beginning of the floods was covered is a good example of the different reporting styles. This is how the News & Star (CN Group) reported the news on their website:

All of the town's care homes have been evacuated as a result of flooding or potential flooding. Eleven elderly residents from Ravensfield Care Home in High Hill were being taken out, amid rising floodwater. The majority were being taken to Keswick School while the three most vulnerable were being moved to Penrith hospital. Meanwhile, residents from Millfield residential home were being moved to the Keswick Convention Centre, and all those from homes in the centre of town were being moved to the Skiddaw Hotel. Once the evacuation was completed, it was hoped they could be moved to other care homes for the remainder of the flood crisis. Names of each resident and where they are housed will be compiled so family members can get in touch.

However, the Facebook group (Anon., 2009) that was set up at the time posted a much briefer and more direct message, in all capitals:

....KESWICK IS BEING EVACUATED! RIVER GRETNA  
EXSPECTED TO GIVE WAY! 41 FLOOD WARNINGS!

This news flash type of post explains not only the basic situation in Keswick but also a couple of other incidents in the process. It also has a few things that would

never be allowed to go into a local newspaper: an all capitals post, and a pretty big spelling mistake (the word 'expected' is misspelt 'exspected'). The spelling mistake in particular is a very basic thing and, even though it could very likely be a typo, cannot afford to be repeated, otherwise the group may lose a certain amount of credibility.

Another thing that should be noted is the lack of any photo, video, or audio to back up this message. In defence of the group, there may be contributing factors as to why this is the case (e.g. not being able to hang around the scene of the story long enough and guarantee their own health and safety), but even so, it would have helped to validate the story if it had had something to back up the claim. However, it could also be argued that news wires work in this way anyway: slowly adding new information on a certain story when more information becomes available.

The Facebook group was also key because of how quickly the information it was getting was being distributed. Anything remotely associated to the floods was reported to its members, meaning that they were never kept out of the loop. The local press, even in its online mediums, was never going to be anywhere near as quick as the social networks.

There are some differences though to the Civicboom case study in both context and attributes. This was a news event that was on a far greater magnitude than the Dean Street Fire. The fire would only get a mention but not a lead story. The Cumbria floods were not just the top story shortly after they happened, but also for the next week. These floods were unprecedented and, as such, it was something that

most UK-based journalists, national and local, would not have encountered before in their careers.

The coverage of the Cumbria News was a unique example of an older practice being done in a completely new and modern way. In a time pre-internet, the local press would be relying on things they would have heard from people in their own community to fill their paper. This was also at a time when staff numbers were much higher than they are today. Because of a reduction of money, meaning unfortunate job cuts, falling circulation numbers, and the strong reliance on 'churnalism' to make news out of pre-packaged material, the bond between a local newspaper and a local community is not as strong as it once was.

However, for a week at least, this bond was brought back together, yet it wasn't through the traditional methods at all. It was through using social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook to contact people and find out information from them, using media-sharing sites like Flickr and YouTube to get user-generated content like photos and videos. This was a news story that felt less like a case of the local press telling the community what was going on, but more like a collaboration between both press and community to get the news out to as many people in the area as possible. It also gave the real journalists room to breathe, knowing that there were people out there uploading all kinds of information, which saved them valuable time when it came to research.

### **Cast Study #3: The Washington Times:**

The debate over whether or not citizen journalists are journalists has rumbled on for a few years. One of the people in the opposing camp is David Simon, who was a former reporter for the Baltimore Sun, although he would later in life be known more for creating an acclaimed TV series called *The Wire*. Simon spoke at the United States Senate Committee, Communications, Technology, and the Internet Hearing on the future of journalism (2009), arguing that people who are not as skilled or as knowledgeable cannot replace seasoned and trained reporters:

They don't know what they don't know - which is a dangerous state for any class of folk - and to those of us who do understand how subtle and complex good reporting can be, their ignorance is as embarrassing as it is seemingly sincere. Indeed, the very phrase citizen journalist strikes my ear as nearly Orwellian. A neighbor who is a good listener and cares about people is a good neighbor; he is not in any sense a citizen social worker. Just as a neighbor with a garden hose and good intentions is not a citizen firefighter. To say so is a heedless insult to trained social workers and firefighters.

Newspapers have been constantly trying to find new ways to bring in new readers and stay alive. An example is *The Washington Times* who recently announced plans to devote an entire page to reports made by local people who were untrained journalists. This is a way of bringing citizen journalism from the modern online medium, where it mostly originates, to a more traditional medium of newspapers. John Soloman (Harper, 2009) explains why the paper has decided to undertake this project:

We know there are many issues and communities we have not been able to fully cover within the confines of a newsroom budget, and we are excited to empower citizens within those communities to provide us news that will interest all our readers. While we are expanding our reach through this project, we will not be diminishing our editorial quality. Citizen stories must meet the same rigorous standards for accuracy, precision, fairness, balance and ethics as those written by our newsroom staff.

Each citizen journalist picked by the Washington Times is provided with a set of rules and guidelines for their reporting and newswriting, as well as a copy of the Washington Times policies governing ethics, a list of anonymous sources to contact and a list of other journalistic standards that they must abide to. This is essentially giving all the tools of newswriting to people who may have potentially never written a news story in their life. This project is operating on the hope that reports by these citizen journalists will be what local people themselves would want to read.

A quick glance at the archive of stories featured under the Citizen Journalism shows a number of stories that would not be out of place in any other local Washington paper. The range of topics featured are diverse yet pretty solid news topics like education ('Improving minority education'), same sex marriage ('Same-sex marriage fought'), and the economy ('Cities seek jobs plan, more cash'), which are hard-hitting and have a lot of news value attached to them.

By examining the stories even further, they read very much like how a news story should be written. An example of this is the story 'Group likens Obama, 'evil' policies to Hitler'. (Young, 2009). This sample is from the opening paragraph:

Members of the Lyndon LaRouche movement have circulated political tracts picturing President Obama with a Hitler-like mustache, handing them out on Connecticut Avenue and Q Street Northwest in the Dupont Circle area. Mr. LaRouche doesn't like Mr. Obama's health care reform proposal.

The story clearly provides all the answers to the Five Ws and the H:

**Who** – Members of the Lyndon LaRouche movement, Lyndon LaRouche himself and President Barack Obama.

**What** - Members of the Lyndon LaRouche movement have tried to spread the word that the policies of President Obama are similar to those of Adolf Hitler.

**Where** - Connecticut Avenue and Q Street Northwest in the Dupont Circle area in Washington.

**When** – A part of the article hints that this has been going on from at least the 24<sup>th</sup> November. It is unclear whether or not they started earlier.

**Why** – Because LaRouche are against President Obama's health care reform proposal.

**How** – Members of the Lyndon LaRouche movement are handing out flyers to passers-by.

This story also implements use of the inverted pyramid reporting style. It tells the reader the most important information you need to know about what is going on in its opening sentence, followed by the second most important and so on. The story is also free of any extra length that would be considered unnecessary, contains quotes from two people on both sides (keeping it objective at the same time) and, most importantly, has an angle: a local protest about the health care reform that, whilst

open to be seen as slightly extreme, forms part of a much larger national story about the health care reform.

However, there are a couple of aspects about the article that would show to the reader that the writer might be an inexperienced newswriter. Firstly, the story itself is quite straightforward and, perhaps more critically, bland. It lacks some of the writing skill and flair of a seasoned journalist to make the story seem more interesting and vital.

Secondly, although this could be down to a few factors, it is decisively unbiased and neutral. With most newspapers it is argued that you could uncover what the political beliefs of the writer, which in turn might be the belief of the paper if their house writing style dictates this, usually through descriptive language. This article though uses the most basic descriptive language to describe what happened; perhaps the most advanced word being 'circulated'. This non-judgmental attitude could be natural or it could be because the people at the newspaper have told all citizen journalists to keep a neutral stance in all of its stories.

### **Libel, reliability and trust:**

Citizen journalism has helped create new angles for existing news stories and also has the ability to do so in the local news industry. However, there are also potential new legal challenges created by this new type of journalistic practice. There is currently no 'official' code of conduct to police user-generated content, but there are potential pitfalls over content that cross lines both moral and lawful.

The biggest risk is in social networking and social media, where there is likely to be a great input on user content. This comes with many risks. It is therefore worth analysing the risks that face all three of the aforementioned case studies.

Hyperlocal websites, because of their open-ended nature, tend to come with a set of house rules that any user must abide. A good website will have a long and detailed list of terms and conditions that a user must abide by in order to contribute. Civicboom (2009) is a very good example of this. Their terms and conditions are 7,881 words long, with 31 sub headings that cover a variety of things such as general behaviour towards other users, indemnification, data protection, and confidentiality among others. This brief excerpt, covers jurisdiction and courts of law:

31.1. These Terms and Conditions shall be governed by the laws of England and Wales and the User, Member, Reporter and/or Interviewee from the "Interview Me" process agree to submit to the exclusive jurisdiction of the English courts. The User, Member, Reporter and/or Interviewee from the "Interview Me" process accept that nothing in this clause shall prevent Indiconews [1] from seeking and enforcing any injunctive relief in

any country where this Website is accessible to prevent any infringement of any laws or rules in such countries.

These terms and conditions, as a whole, cover all legal hazards and ensure that both the website and the people using it have as much protection from the law as trained journalists.

Social networking tools also have some issues, but these are more to do with trust than libel. Someone could easily join the Cumbria Floods Facebook group and start posting derogatory comments about the area and/or the people in the area. It would then start up arguments that would then threaten the integrity of the group in terms of its news value and blocks the group from providing its users with information. These 'trolls' are endlessly active on the internet. However, a detailed browse through the Facebook group shows that no derogatory comments have been made about the floods.

Another threat to the integrity of a social networking group like this one is if, and, if so, how often the conversation veers off-topic. Off-topic conversation could damage the flow of the conversation and it might be difficult to steer it back on topic. However, in the Cumbria group, everything on there is to do with the floods in regards to information and comment.

There are also some legal issues concerning the anonymity of the internet. Because you can sign up to a service on the internet as an anonymous user, whether that be through blog writing or on a community message board, it is possible to

publish the most ridiculous lie about any subject in the world and try to pass it off as rumour or fact. If the writer of the post gets found out, and the person on the receiving end of the comment takes action, the case could get taken to court for libel.

But perhaps the biggest problem with this kind of journalism is the fact that there is a lack of any editorial control. Most of the material that has been looked at in this analysis has been posted by people who were on their own with no help from anyone else, whether that is through text, pictures or video. Unlike any professional news organisation, they do not have an editor to show them any issues with their pieces including spelling or grammatical errors, inaccuracies, etc.

With the Washington Times case study it is exempt from this point as the stories that their citizen journalists write are all checked before they feature in the paper (Harper, 2009):

Former Editorial Page Editor Deborah Simmons, a veteran newswoman with close ties to the local community, is supervising the coverage for the District, the suburbs, academia, faith and the charitable communities. Longtime Times columnist Adrienne Washington, a staple on local TV and radio, also will be a part of the outreach and the editing.

In the case of the Dean Street Fire case study the user posting about the fire from their office window manages to keep their spelling accurate and facts accurate. That said, at a glance, there is no massive editorial team to look at every single article. However, if a user decides that there is something dubious in the article like an infringement or inappropriate content (this could range from inappropriate language

to inappropriate links) they can report it and then a moderator would have a look and take action from there.

However, this point can be applied to the Cumbria floods case study. The Facebook comment that I used to compare against the professional news story has, as previously mentioned, a glaring spelling error, spelling 'expected' as 'exspected'. Any repetition of basic spelling mistakes like this, or even perhaps a constant use of shortened words (for example, 'before' becomes 'b4') might give off the impression that there is a very amateur approach to running the group.

However, as a whole, communities on the internet like the ones described in this analysis are now very well-regulated. It has been just over a decade since the internet boomed in popularity and in this time the guidelines in terms of posting content ethically and legally that pose very little risk to the user have been well fought out.

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[1] These terms and conditions originate from when the site was called Indiconews, before it changed its name to Civicboom.

## **Conclusion:**

There are many examples of how new media represents an alternative to the practices and approaches of local news and how it changes the way in which stories are told. The Dean Street Fire was a story that illustrated this perfectly. Thanks to hyperlocal news and social media sources, it changed the relationship between the media and the public, changed the way that journalists did that job that could allow them in theory to spend more time in the newsroom collating information like videos and images from the internet, and has changed the way in which the local media can tell the story.

It is clear that the relationship between the media and the audience is changing and how local media can seize on these opportunities. To fully adapt to the changing nature of local news, organisations must be willing to change the way they interact with their readership. In the case of the Washington Times, they have taken a format that has thrived on the internet – citizen journalism – and have taken it into the newsroom, allowing untrained journalists to write hard-hitting stories for the people. It doesn't change the old method of storytelling, but instead it presents a new relationship to be established. Readers of the Washington Times are now reading stories that are being told by reporters who are not necessarily trained journalists but regular people in their own neighbourhoods.

Even though there are several challenges to these new methods in terms of law and ethics (defamation, libel, fact-checking etc.), as long as there are rules and

regulations that can curb anything that might be deemed libelous and/or inaccurate, these are challenges that can be overcome. Whilst in an ideal world a reporter would have someone available to check over their work, it is still entirely possible that the reporter themselves would have checked their own content and eradicated the original faults with their own articles.

The one emerging theme from all of the research conducted was that all of these examples took place outside of the newsroom. As John Solomon explained, newsrooms have a real challenge on their hands as they try to increase their performance, even though their newsrooms are confined and they do not have lots of money to spend on improving their working environment and practices. The most difficult aspect of this is maintaining a high standard of editorial content despite the problems they face.

As the Cumbria floods case study proved, an extra amount of information available on social networking sites, no matter how untrained or unskilled the authors are at journalism, can be of real assistance to a tiny news squad like the News & Star. Both journalists and non-journalists can work together to build an accurate and informative portrayal of what is going on, using a variety of platforms, whether that is through print, video, audio or photos.

In conclusion, online journalism does represent a genuine alternative to the practices and approaches of traditional local media. User-generated content can paint a picture that is more personal and detailed than a typical local press report. Also, due

to the fact that, for the most part, you can be uncensored on the internet, a user is free to publish anything they want and may even post information that would have gone unnoticed in the local media. The local media, which is still in a decline, could look at these methods and try and learn from them to rebuild a connection between the media and a community. If this new way of reporting is not utilised by the traditional local media, then the fears that traditional hard-copy news could die off may materialise for real.

## **Appendices:**

### **Case Study #1 material:**

Both enclosed case studies, alongside media including pictures, video, and audio were originally published at <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23718359-hundreds-flee-soho-fire-as-blaze-brings-chaos-to-west-end.do> and <http://www.civicboom.com/article/view/203> respectively as of 1<sup>st</sup> February 2010.

### **Hundreds flee Soho fire as blaze brings chaos to West End**

Mark Prigg and Justin Davenport, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009

More than 60 firefighters battled to contain a dramatic blaze in Soho this afternoon.

Hundreds of people were evacuated from buildings around the fire in Dean Street. There were no reports of any casualties.

The London Fire Brigade said 12 fire engines went to the scene after they were alerted at about 2pm. Three quarters of the office building, the former home of Future Films next to the Red Fort restaurant, was alight by 3pm.

Ann Hunter, who works for a media buying agency in Great Newport Street, said: “The first we knew was when we saw a huge plume of thick black smoke. But then power went out all across Soho, and people starting coming out of pubs and restaurants onto the street to see what was going on.”

A pall of smoke was visible from as far away as Canary Wharf and the Oxo Tower. There was traffic chaos as police sealed off roads and nearby office workers poured into the street. A fire service spokesman said: “There is a lot of confusion in the area. The smoke is very thick and dense.”

Alex Tew, who runs an internet firm, was on Dean Street having seen the fire from his office: “There's an absolutely huge plume of smoke visible throughout London, and everyone is leaving offices in the area to come and look.”

Hundreds of messages and pictures of the fire were posted on Twitter.

Nino Ripani, manager of nearby restaurant Signor Zilli's, said: “It's really shocking, it's something that you don't see every day. It's really getting to serious stuff now — we can see the black bits coming out.”

A staff member at the Groucho Club said employees inside the club were not being allowed out: “We cannot see anything, they are not letting us outside.”

The fire is believed to have started in the basement at 76 Dean Street. Other reports said an air conditioning unit may have exploded.

The building is the former base of British movie company Future Films, which produced Bend It Like Beckham. According to an ex-employee of the adjacent restaurant The Red Fort the company renovated the building and moved last year. It was said to be occupied by a new company.

Firefighters placed a perimeter around the area of the blaze with Soho Square closed.

The house, which dates from the early 1730s, has been described as one the best-preserved 18th-century homes in London with historically important murals and staircases.

Soho resident David Bieda, who lives at number 68, said: "It's very sad as it is one of the most important early Georgian houses in London."

It is the second blaze to hit Soho in as many days. Yesterday, fire crews were called to a building in Newport Place, housing a restaurant and offices.

No one was hurt.

**News: fire on Dean Street**

Article by rcapmael, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009

There's a fire on Dean Street in central London. I can smell it from Covent Garden. Horrible. London Fire Brigade advises that they are in attendance.

## **Case Study #2 material:**

The enclosed case study, alongside accompanying pictures can be found at [http://www.newsandstar.co.uk/news/reception\\_centres\\_set\\_up\\_as\\_kestwick\\_old\\_folks\\_homes\\_evacuated?referrerPath=news/cumbria\\_floods](http://www.newsandstar.co.uk/news/reception_centres_set_up_as_kestwick_old_folks_homes_evacuated?referrerPath=news/cumbria_floods). The Facebook group case study, although not in this appendix, can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/CUMBRIA/CUMBRIAN-FLOODS-2009/212431856141?v=walla>. Both case studies are correct as of 1<sup>st</sup> February 2010.

### **Reception centres set up as Keswick old folks homes evacuated**

CN Group, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2009

All of the town's care homes have been evacuated as a result of flooding or potential flooding.

Eleven elderly residents from Ravensfield Care Home in High Hill were being taken out, amid rising floodwater.

The majority were being taken to Keswick School while the three most vulnerable were being moved to Penrith hospital.

Meanwhile, residents from Millfield residential home were being moved to the Keswick Convention Centre, and all those from homes in the centre of town were being moved to the Skiddaw Hotel.

Once the evacuation was completed, it was hoped they could be moved to other care homes for the remainder of the flood crisis. Names of each resident and where they are housed will be compiled so family members can get in touch.

The move comes after the Met Office issued an “extreme” weather warning across Cumbria with up to eight inches of rain predicted in 24 hours.

The warning came as emergency services held a crisis meeting this morning to plan their response.

Emergency services chiefs have set up a temporary headquarters in Keswick Town Hall, where they are monitoring the situation.

Keswick School was shut at 9.30am, as water levels started to rise in the surrounding streets.

Town clerk Lynda Walker said: "We're contacting our network of flood volunteers to go out and help with sandbagging and provide support who people who need it. I know the police are closing some roads and we've had to cancel our council meeting tonight."

The heavy rain combined with current high tides could lead to coastal flooding along the Cumbrian and Dumfries and Galloway coasts, Environment Agency bosses warned.

Six flood warnings were issued early this morning on rivers across north and west Cumbria.

They included two on the Greta at Keswick, the Eamont at Eamont Bridge near Penrith, the Ehen at Egremont, two on the Cocker at Cockermouth.

Parts of Keswick and Cockermouth were under water this morning as the rivers Cocker, Greta and Derwent overflowed with heavy rain.

The A6 was closed between Shap and Kendal, while the A591 was flooded and littered with debris between Keswick and Grasmere.

The A69 at Warwick Bridge was affected by a flood 70 metres long, between the B6263 and Waters Meet.

Worst hit was the village of Shap, which experienced 40mm (1.6in) of rainfall in 12 hours. Thirty millimetres (1.2in) of rain fell in Keswick between 6pm yesterday and 6am today.

A Met Office spokesman said conditions should clear for a time tomorrow, but the county could expect another six to eight hours of heavy rain on Saturday.

Alan Goodman, Met Office Regional Advisor for North West England, said: “Rather than an ordinary severe weather event, we’re looking at an extreme weather event, which is a much rarer breed.

“There’s bound to be river flooding, because there’s just so much rain that’s going to fall, particularly on the high fells.

“It should start to clear by tomorrow, but it will already have done its damage by then.”

Agencies including the fire service, police, NHS and local authorities held an emergency meeting in Penrith this morning.

Mike Smythe, Head of Resilience for Cumbria County Council, advised householders in low-lying areas to think about protecting their valuables.

He said: “Try and make sure the drains are clear of leaves, so rain will clear more easily, and think about moving your car to higher ground. Make sure your valuable documents like certificates, insurance documents and wedding photos are safe.

“We’ve had persistent heavy rainfall since this morning so the ground is very wet and the water will run off very quickly. The outlook is bleak in terms of flooding.”

A fire service spokeswoman said: “We’ve just started getting calls in this morning, although it was fairly quiet overnight. We’ve got crews from Keswick and Ambleside out at the moment, but the worst of the weather has come later than they predicted.

“I think this might be the start of something.”

Police urged drivers to take extra care and avoid unnecessary journeys, after a rise in road collisions yesterday.

A police spokeswoman said: “While there’s not been a significant rise in injuries, there has been a trend of single vehicles leaving the road due to standing water. People need to be reminded when they’re hitting large puddles that it affects the steering of the car.”

The North West Ambulance NHS Trust and NHS Cumbria urged people to take care as heavy rainfall was expected to continue overnight tonight and into tomorrow.

Paul Kudray, of the North West Ambulance Service, said: “We are urging members of the public to take care of themselves, and others, in the expected adverse weather conditions.

Everyone's health can be affected by bad weather, particularly excessive rainfall with greater risks of road traffic collisions, slips and falls.”

He asked those living next to elderly people to make sure they were safe and dry over the next few days. Drivers were advised to avoid unnecessary journeys, reduce their speed and take extra care while passing flood waters.

### **Case Study #3 material:**

The enclosed case study, alongside accompanying pictures can be found at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/dec/02/group-likens-obama-evil-policies-to-hitler> as of 1<sup>st</sup> February 2010.

#### **Group likens Obama, 'evil' policies to Hitler**

Joseph Young, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2009

Members of the Lyndon LaRouche movement have circulated political tracts picturing President Obama with a Hitler-like mustache, handing them out on Connecticut Avenue and Q Street Northwest in the Dupont Circle area. Mr. LaRouche doesn't like Mr. Obama's health care reform proposal.

In the magazine-like tract, titled "Pound of Flesh! Act Now!" Mr. LaRouche said: "The kindest thing that could be said about President Obama's currently adopted policies is that they are not only evil in the specifically fascist intentions which they express in practice, as in notable instances which are essentially exact copies of Adolf Hitler's policies, as in the case of his current health-care and so-called 'environmentalist' policies: even though they might be viewed as honest mistakes made by the clinically insane."

Mr. LaRouche, 87, is a native of Rochester, N.H., who has run for president eight times since 1976, including once as a Labor Party candidate. He sought the Democratic Party nomination seven times. He also is a former felon, having been convicted of conspiracy to commit mail fraud and tax code violations.

One Dupont Circle passer-by said of the handouts on Nov. 24: "I thought [LaRouche followers] were cool until I saw that picture of President Obama with a Hitler mustache."

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