I knew my PWR 1 course, “Rhetoric, Social Media, and Virtual Worlds,” would attract remarkable students. After all, what would better suit freshmen attending a University in the heart of Silicon Valley than a course focused on the relationship between rhetoric and new frontiers of electronic life? I took it for granted that these remarkable students, whoever they might turn out to be, would be budding coders, scientists, or entrepreneurs, but Patricia challenged my assumptions. A journalist in high school, Patricia came to class already armed with a strong sense of what she wanted to write about and, befitting her vocation, was one of those PWR students who, during office hours and conferences, always, intensely listened.

Discussing her desire to write about citizen journalism, I casually suggested that she consider conducting interviews with subject-matter experts. I make this same suggestion to every student, but Patricia was one of the few who actually went out and did the interviews. Later in the quarter, as she was exploring ways of making her topic more specific, I mentioned a hyperlocal journalism experiment based in San Francisco called Mission Loc@l. Again, Patricia picked up on my suggestion and ran with it. Dedicated and diligent, she wrote a fabulous paper that pulls off a rare balancing act in student research: finding the local or particular example that perfectly opens up a universe of larger questions.

Patricia’s tremendous legwork allowed her to explore the topic of hyperlocal and citizen journalism in a way that would have been impossible for a more conventional paper. Patricia’s argument—that citizen journalism promises to supplement but not replace traditional journalism—takes on weight and depth because of the detail with which she documents the triumphs and troubles of Mission Loc@l’s experiment in recruiting a cadre of citizen journalists. Her general inquiry into the potentials and pitfalls of this new form of journalism becomes all the more convincing because of the cumulative, lived experience of Mission Loc@l that she meticulously documents.

—Lee Konstantinou
Citizen Journalism: Locally Grown, Community-Owned

Patricia Ho

In the wake of a violent gang shooting in San Francisco’s Mission District, an article published in The San Francisco Chronicle offers a brief report of the incident. The five-sentence article begins, “A man was shot and killed early Saturday,” lists the time of death and related suspects, and ends with a terse, “No arrests have been made” (Tucker). On the surface, this brief achieves its intended goal—it reports the incident in a timely manner, reveals key pieces of information from a reputable source, and describes the event in a concise, objective manner. A typical reader of the Chronicle may glance quickly at this article while skimming through the rest of page C4, perhaps noting to himself the prevalence of big-city crime. Ultimately, he remains removed from the event, which appears unfortunate, but not particularly earth-shattering.

However, to a person living in the Mission, the Chronicle’s coverage is abysmally uninformative. Three days later, no follow-up stories attempt to provide clarity to concerned neighbors and friends in the area. While the brief’s terseness may have resulted from the Chronicle’s push for a timely initial report, its effect is to raise several unanswered questions and create a sense of distance between the publication and the community it serves. For locals who may have heard about the shooting from next-door neighbors, while bumping into friends at the Mission Grocery where the event took place, or worse—having seen the gunfire themselves from their apartment windows—the brief simply confirms what they already know. While searching for more information, these community members may be understandably frustrated as they wonder, who exactly was involved? What caused this violence? And most importantly, how can we pre-
vent this from happening again?

Mission Loc@l, an online hyper–local initiative based in the Mission, depicts a different story. The website’s initial account of the event paints the scene in great detail, from the reactions of terrified onlookers to the sound of rain hitting the plastic bag that encased the victim, effectively capturing the tension and alarm that surrounded the incident. For increased context, the hyper–local report includes an extensive description of the police response, and places the incident within the context of ongoing gang activity within the Mission, noting that the shooting is only one of five violent attacks within the past three weeks. Photos of newly–sprayed gang graffiti defacing the Mission’s Solidarity mural emphasize that the shooting, far from being an isolated incident, is a cause for ongoing concern. Most importantly, the article addresses the community’s response to the issue, gathering reactions and information from sources close to the victims of violence. These conversations anticipate real–time discussions in reaction to the story itself; the page includes a feed with related tweets, as well as a comment section where a debate of over 20 contributions has begun.

Overall, Mission Loc@l’s community focus allows it to provide a more thorough account of a locally–based issue, accounting for a large gap in coverage that professional sources cannot fill. Given that gang violence is nowhere near resolution, the website provides answers where it can, but more importantly, makes a convincing attempt to ask the right questions. Mission Loc@l’s efforts to engage community members in the reporting process illuminate its strengths and weaknesses as a model for hyperlocal citizen journalism. Ultimately, the site indicates that successful citizen journalism initiatives can supplement, but not replace, the work of professional reporters. As user–generated content continues to grow and expand, it will present a challenge to media conventions established in the era of print journalism; given the rapidly changing nature of journalism’s transition to an online platform, this challenge is inevitable and indeed, necessary to continue advancing our media industry into a Web–based century. However, some form of authoritative oversight remains necessary to keep our news grounded in core journalistic values of accuracy and professional responsibility. We must seek a compromise; although journalism ventures should be grounded in traditional conventions and standards, a successful initiative ought to rely on the interests of community contributors to shape its voice.

From the First Amendment to “Just the Facts”: Journalism’s Shifting Values

When determining the challenges that citizen journalism poses
to traditional media, we must consider its role in a historical context. From the penny press to blogs, the definition and values of the profession have undergone significant changes since its inception in the seventeenth century. Then, emerging journalists attempted to assign values such as impartiality, truth-telling, unbiased observation, and credible informants to their work, which made a crucial first step towards documenting important social issues. The media industry’s subsequent conflict between objective and interpretive journalism characterizes the debate leading up to the introduction of citizen journalism. At the time, the press functioned as a public service, prefiguring the civic-minded initiatives found in today’s user-generated content. As the industry expanded into the public sphere of the late eighteenth century, a new generation of “liberal” journalists began defining themselves as reformers, commentators, and revolutionaries, and viewed their work with a new goal—to “protect the public and its liberties” (Ward). These journalists set a precedent for the social influence that the press continues to wield today, as they were more focused on advancing society with their ideas than presenting hard facts: “Many... had little concern for what we now call objectivity. Papers had points of view, reflecting the politics of their backers and owners” (Gillmor 3). Here, media reflected the ideals of democracy and the freedom to share varying perspectives: “[Journalism] stressed a free marketplace in the world of ideas and in the economy” (Ward). By revealing significant issues and problems that society would have otherwise ignored, these truth-tellers set a standard for the type of investigative and personal journalism that continues to develop today. With the nineteenth century’s mass commercialization of media, journalists sought a different definition for their profession and equated their work with the values of objectivity and accuracy. Advocating a philosophy of including “just the facts,” these reporters aimed to become “independent, objective observers of events” (Ward), eliminating their opinions from the news as much as possible.

The conflict between interpretive and objective journalism has come to a head with the introduction of citizen journalism, which has the potential to create a compromise between the two concepts. Today, with the introduction of online news, the industry has encountered a growing global audience. Furthermore, the Internet has cultivated an increasingly open attitude towards news production, as our information is becoming universally accessible and interactive (Gillmor xiii). These shifts have culminated in the development of user-generated content, which promises to expand the profession to include amateur contributors. In determining whether these concerned citizens and experienced journalism can be given equal footing within the industry, we have come full circle in the process of defining the profession. By establishing a focus on “personal choice, assisted
by the power of personal technology” (Gillmor 7), citizen journalism questions the ideals of absolute objectivity and verification established in era of corporate print publications. At the same time, it marks a return to the fundamental goal of representing society’s voice in the news, and takes this concept one step further—by involving community members in the process of reporting, user-generated content blends the concepts of objective and interpretive journalism, with the understanding that the truths of a community can only be revealed through its own words.

The Emergence of Citizen Journalism: An Inevitable Movement?

Preceding the development of initiatives like Mission Loc@l, a much larger set of changes have been taking place online, as our news converges with the development of Web-based information-sharing tools. Increasingly, readers have taken to their blogs, smart phones, and Twitter accounts to provide their unique perspectives on issues that directly affect them. In addition to joining online discussions, many of these readers seek a more active role in the process of disseminating information. Dubbed by Jay Rosen as “the people formerly known as the audience,” amateur contributors no longer wish to be “on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way…with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another.” Given new opportunities to engage with a larger, far-reaching community created in the context of the Internet, amateurs are naturally motivated to make their voices heard. Because of these developments, Rosen argues that former audience members have created a role for themselves within the media, dividing the ownership of the press between professionals and amateurs: “There’s a new balance of power between you and us.” This development, defined by Deuze as “any kind of newswork at the hands of professionals and amateurs, of journalists and citizens” (323), has been the subject of much debate. While proponents view citizen journalism as a necessary response to existing problems with the media, critics attempt to dismiss the movement on the grounds that it would compromise journalistic values, undermine traditional media, or at best, be too ineffective to be taken seriously.

On the whole, critics share a limited perspective of the citizen journalism movement. Rather than considering the potential for positive synergy between experienced and amateur reporters, naysayers exhibit a largely unjustified aversion to change. For example, The New Yorker columnist Nicholas Lemann assumes that citizen journalists can only be taken seriously if they can directly compete with, and potentially replace, our current media industry: “Citizen journal-
ists bear a heavy theoretical load. They ought to be fanning out like a great army, covering not just what professional journalists cover, as well or better, but also much that they ignore.” Here, Lemann views reader contributions and professional expertise as mutually exclusive concepts. By limiting the future of citizen journalism to only two options—what we have now, or a complete overhaul of the system—Lemann exhibits his refusal to accept changes in the media industry. Like several critics of citizen journalism, Lemann views the mere threat of an alternative as reason enough to dismiss the movement entirely.

Meanwhile, given the decline of traditional media and an increased demand to participate online, proponents argue that citizen journalism is emerging as a necessary and inevitable response to these developments. Experts provide different theories to explain the industry’s failures: while some defend it as an unwilling victim of the economic downturn, writer and former columnist Dan Gillmor argues that conservatism and corrupted financial interests have driven the industry to its demise. This development has “led to a hollowing–out syndrome: newspaper publishers and broadcasting station managers have realized they can cut the amount and quality of journalism, at least for a while, in order to raise profits” (Gillmor xv). By shifting its focus away from journalistic standards, the industry has sacrificed its quality and integrity for a single–minded obsession with profit. As a result, society loses vital information that corrupted publications deem to be insignificant. Furthermore, this leads to a growing conservatism in our news, which Gillmor defines as a separation or decline of communication between professionals and their readers: “Big Media, in any event, treated the news as a lecture. We told you what the news was. You bought it, or you didn’t. You might write us a letter; we might print it” (xiii). By disregarding the interests of their readers in favor of profit incentives, these publications assume complete control over disseminated information. Their attempt to wield authority over our news reflects their shift away from seeking the truth and expressing the voice of society.

The industry’s growing weaknesses stem, therefore, from fundamental problems that cannot be reversed immediately. Rather than attempting to fix the complications and potential corruption plaguing Big Media, we might turn to alternatives types of news, such as user–generated content. Deuze argues that citizen journalism, as a supplement to traditional media, marks a positive revival “toward a civic, communitarian, or public journalism” (“Future of Citizen Journalism” 256) powered by the proliferation of digital media: “What is important about these [participatory journalism] sites is that they provide clear and workable alternatives to the traditional separation of journalists, their sources, and the public” (“Prepar-
Even before the establishment of a profit-focused press, a clear divide between journalistic experts and their audience already marked the industry. With user-generated content, there is an opportunity to level the playing field, as publications can use reader input to enhance coverage, rather than dismissing their suggestions as before. Given this theoretical background, our next step must be to study models that effectively harness the enthusiasm and unique perspectives of readers. **Voices of the Mission: Setting Up the Conversation**

Mission Loc@l provides a compelling model to examine the successes and failures of hyper-local ventures. With its limited staff of only 20 editors and reporters, Mission Loc@l's endeavors to engage community members in every way possible—from online discussions to the reporting process itself—are particularly admirable. By targeting smaller, more intimate audiences, these types of initiatives harness the collective power of experienced, dedicated locals to provide a rich database of information unique to the community, ultimately creating a much more dynamic, personal version of our news. In this way, a regional citizen journalism project is much more feasible; rather than creating a brand new online community, its task is simply to gather existing neighbors onto a Web platform, around issues that are already relevant to their lives. However, as relatively new developments, hyper-local websites also face several challenges; without the reputation or the manpower of larger publications, these initiatives have a limited ability to expand coverage or maintain citizen contributions in the long term. Additionally, they rely on small staffs of experienced editors to ensure the quality of the disseminated information, indicating that the enthusiasm of aspiring amateur reporters cannot replace journalistic expertise.

As the main project of her course at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, founder and managing editor Lydia Chavez created Mission Loc@l in 2008, with the intention of training her students across platforms and providing them with opportunities to gain experience in the field. Funded by a foundation grant, the project aims to provide hyper-local coverage of a “journalistically underserved community” (Chavez). To distinguish Mission Loc@l from traditional publications, the website’s section titles reveal its unique community focus; in addition to sections titled “City Government” for local political news and “Trouble” for crime reports, the website devotes three sections to art, food, and photography. Because of its origins in Chavez’s journalism course, the publication’s content shifts by semester; in the fall, graduate students contribute a larger portion of Mission Loc@l’s content to fulfill their requirement of gaining intensive experience in the field, much like a reporting boot-camp—during this semester, user-generated content will only make up ten
to twenty percent of the site’s content. In the spring and summer, as graduate students shift their focus to pursue other tasks, this number will increase to thirty to forty percent and the site includes more general community members. After speaking with several readers and contributors, Chavez found that the majority of amateurs prefer to contribute photography, as “fewer people feel comfortable contributing writing.” The staff has therefore worked to present participation as an enjoyable activity, rather than attempting to force the daunting task of original reporting and fact-checking on first-time or casual readers. Additionally, the site presents readers with a clear payoff for their efforts, whether by providing a base for discussions with other readers, or by incorporating their contributions into original content.

After finding its niche within the San Francisco community, Mission Loc@l’s gradual integration of citizen contributions into its overall content provides insight into its strengths and weaknesses as a model for user-generated content on a local scale. The website’s structure supports the natural, spontaneous growth of citizen reporting, as it subtly encourages readers to contribute in a variety of ways. Using well-known features such as reader comments, polls, and social media tools, Mission Loc@l creates a sense of interactivity throughout the website and enhances dialogue between its readers and reporters. Overall, these features initiate conversations about topics that directly affect community members, which can later develop into more substantial contributions from readers. Although Mission Loc@l uses many of the same tools as professional news sites, the staff works to ensure that their readers’ efforts to participate are much more rewarding.

At a first glance, Mission Loc@l’s “Post a Comment” section, placed at the bottom of each story, is nothing out of the ordinary. As on most news websites, this feature prompts readers to share their reactions and opinions to an article. So far, Mission Loc@l receives a modest number of comments in comparison with larger publications; its most popular stories have fifteen to twenty comments each. However, Mission Loc@l takes advantage of its smaller readership; with fewer comments, the staff is able to manage input and engage with readers more effectively. To achieve this, reporters make an effort to participate in these discussions themselves by responding to their readers’ suggestions and comments. For example, in her story about recent crime activity, reporter Heather Smith posted follow-up comments to directly address and thank individual commenters for their input. One such post reads:

Dean—we followed up with the police department, but no word as to what the shots were that you mentioned. Jorge—we stopped by the Mobile Command Center. They said that they were definitely there because of the shootings this week, and did say that it was
probably gang–related, and unlikely to be focused on ethnicity. Thank you both for commenting, and I’m updating the article to reflect this” (Smith, “Follow–up”).

Smith’s reply reflects Mission Loc@l’s open–minded attitude towards its readers; by not only responding to readers’ comments, but by also updating her article to reflect their suggestions, Smith shows that readers’ contributions are valuable to the reporting process. After engaging readers in this process, Mission Loc@l’s coverage becomes much more dynamic and transparent, with input from various contributors. Therefore, Mission Loc@l takes its comment section a step further than most news websites; not only does the feature provide a base for reader discussions, but the website also ensures that these conversations are part of the news itself. In this way, Mission Loc@l views the comment section as an opportunity to hone in on the issues that readers are most curious about, allowing the website to better serve its audience. Overall, this attitude is a necessary prerequisite to encourage more significant contributions from readers.

The site also uses this approach for more serious topics; for example, a feature on the front page with the title, “Know of a Problem? Report it!” encourages readers to take part in improving their community by speaking out about problems they may encounter throughout their neighborhood. The feature, created by a website called SeeClickFix, uses a map to display the locations of reported issues, which include broken streetlights, noise pollution, loitering, and drug activity. In addition to reporting original problems, readers can vote on existing issues; currently, the problem of most concern to readers, garnering eleven votes, reads, “Excessive Speed on South Van Ness—the speed limit is 25 MPH!” (“Know of a problem?”). By harnessing media and social tools, SeeClickFix aims to engage local government and concerned community groups in a joint conversation with the goal of improving a neighborhood. This feature reveals two assumptions that hyper–local and citizen journalism make about their readers: that they are familiar with the neighborhood, and are concerned enough about its well–being to contribute their day–to–day findings and suggestions. Individual stories also make assumptions about readers’ familiarity with the Mission; while describing the customers inside a coffee shop, reporter Heather Smith references a local college campus: “[It] allows you to muse—if you remember New College—about how long it’s been since you met someone in the Mission who was majoring in goddess religions or social change” (Smith). With esoteric references to places and people in the mission, Smith’s story speaks to a specific reader—one who has lived in the district for a substantial amount of time, and is therefore familiar with changes it has undergone in recent years. In this way, Mission Loc@l takes advantage of the existing connections among neighbors
in the district, to emulate the same sense of intimacy in its online community. Finally, the SeeClickFix feature exemplifies Chavez’s approach to encouraging reader participation—people are only willing to contribute if they are presented with a potential benefit from doing so. Here, readers are drawn by the opportunity to engage with other readers and local government to change the scenery of their own neighborhood.

Striking a Balance: A Contributor’s Experience

For amateur reporter Melissa San Miguel, contributing to Mission Loc@l was a chance to reconnect with her hometown. Having grown up in the Mission, Miguel discovered the website while following local news online, and found that it provided a more thorough, balanced portrayal of the district than traditional publications. Despite her lack of prior journalism experience, Miguel eventually approached Chavez to ask about potentially becoming a community contributor. Miguel felt that her unique background as a Mission–native would allow her to provide a historical perspective about the changes that the neighborhood has undergone while surviving difficult economic times: “I think my experience could mean something for Mission Loc@l because I remember how things were before—even the little pieces of information, like the liquor store on the corner that’s been there forever. It seemed like a good chance for me to get into writing and to do something that mattered to me—I wanted to take down the history of the neighborhood.”

While Mission Loc@l attempts to equate amateurs and professionals in the reporting process, its experiments have faced logistical difficulties. While Miguel exhibits a strong personal initiative to tackle the responsibilities of a journalist, not all community members are as proactive; in its attempts to expand the quantity and quality of user–generated content, the staff has faced several challenges with recruitment. At best, Chavez considers community reporting to be part–time volunteer work: “Most of the people who are contributing from the community have other jobs, so their ability to do that on a sustained level is minimal; they can add around the edges, and we value that.” While they may be actively involved with the site, amateur reporters alone cannot fulfill the necessary commitment to ensure sustained, in–depth coverage of a community, given their more pressing priorities. Furthermore, active recruitment attempts have generally failed; the staff often sets up informational tables at local events, and has led a poster campaign around the neighborhood to reach community members in person. According to Chavez, the turnout from these efforts have been disappointing, generally leading to only one or two requests from citizens interested in
becoming regular contributors. Therefore, readers continue to depend on Mission Loc@l’s professional staff to provide a foundation for the website’s content. This conclusion leads naturally from Mission Loc@l’s origins, given that the site was founded and is now managed by experienced journalists.

Therefore, the website targets a specific group of contributors—dedicated, long–term amateur reporters, such as Miguel—to ensure that user–generated content will be sustained in the future. Given that these community members already approach the site on their own, the staff aims to reward them for their voluntary work by including them in the Mission Loc@l team. Unlike casual participants, these dedicated contributors can potentially build up experience and background knowledge in the topics that they cover, allowing for continuous coverage. For Miguel, her involvement with Mission Loc@l was only possible because of her relatively free schedule; she initially balanced reporting with a part–time job: “Journalism was always something that I wanted to try, but since I was focused on other things before, I didn’t have time to do it. But that being said, coming back to the Mission as an educated professional gives me a better perspective than I had before.” Although reporting demands a large time commitment, Miguel finds the activity personally enriching, as she is led by a personal sense of curiosity while covering her own community. For contributors like Miguel, Chavez says that further encouragement is helpful, but not necessary: “My sense is that people find us when they want to; the people who end up contributing in the long–term are very passionate.” Instead, Chavez seeks to maintain their dedication by building the website’s reputation for professionalism and responsiveness to readers. Chavez chose to equate the titles of staff and community reporters after posting work by Jon Logan, an amateur photographer at Mission Loc@l: “When I put Jon’s work online for the first time, I listed him as a community contributor in the byline. But then I realized that this was wrong; I wouldn’t put up his work unless I thought it was good.” By choosing not to differentiate Logan’s work with his byline, Chavez exhibits Mission Loc@l’s open–minded attitude towards its contributors, who work alongside professionals as equals. Accordingly, the staff works to provide adequate accommodation for contributors’ efforts: “We’ll put the photos into a slideshow ourselves, so they can see that we’re very responsive” (Chavez). Here, Chavez makes sure to reward contributors for their efforts by showcasing their work and thus paying respect to their dedication.

By showing her respect for their work, Chavez attempts to limit her role as a gatekeeper of the news and thus sets herself on an equal level with community members. While pursuing her first few stories, Miguel worked closely with Chavez, who encouraged her to work
independently while conducting interviews and gathering information, despite her lack of experience: “She gave me a lot of room to explore and try things out on my own. I would go through the process of putting together the story myself, and she would just ask me questions to fine-tune my writing. I felt that I had a lot of freedom to figure things out by myself.” Rather than imposing authoritative control over her contributors’ work, Chavez trusts that these reporters will fulfill any necessary tasks to complete a comprehensive report. In return, reporters trust Chavez’s journalistic expertise to ensure that their work preserves their unique opinions and perspectives, without sacrificing accuracy. At the same time, Miguel does not feel that editing process is out of her control; rather, she often agrees with Chavez’s assessments of her stories: “I really liked getting her opinion about my writing because she’s been a professional in the field for so long. But even when she caught mistakes in my writing, her edits made sense to me—none of them were random or out of the blue.” Trust and open communication throughout the editing process are crucial elements to successful teamwork between amateurs and professionals. By taking a step back in this process, Chavez allows contributors to learn on their own, which is beneficial in the long term; contributors will apply the skills and knowledge they have gained while pursuing future stories. Finally, this shows that a balanced approach to citizen journalism is necessary. Both contributors and editors recognize that experience and oversight can provide a sense of guidance in the reporting process.

Challenges and Considerations

As Mission Loc@l attempts to expand citizen contributions and its influence on the Mission community, it faces several challenges. With the exception of a few particularly courageous and passionate amateurs such as Miguel, the site’s readers have not yet made a complete shift from participation to original reporting. Although Mission Loc@l engages with participants who are willing to step forward on their own, the website does not fully reflect this attitude; with an outdated, limited means of communication between casual participants and the staff, the site limits its reach towards less ambitious readers—those who may have great ideas and contributions, but are more hesitant to provide them, or are unaware of their ability to do so.

Unknown to most of its readers, Mission Loc@l’s newsroom is a hub of creativity and collaboration; its unique atmosphere embodies the convergence of collaboration and professional oversight necessary to achieve a balanced model of citizen journalism. For example, Miguel has sought advice from other staff members to gain reporting experience and knowledge, which she described as an interactive
and engaging experience: “The other reporters and editors made me feel welcome—I would tell them about my stories and ask questions, and they would give me informal feedback. The editors always made themselves available; everyone offered help, and sometimes I’d take them up on it.” Local initiatives such as Mission Loc@l have the added benefit of being based in a physical community; with the convenience of a local newsroom, contributors can work alongside their fellow reporters—whether amateur or professional—to learn about news coverage firsthand. Overall, this allows for a much greater ease of coordination, which ultimately creates a sense of equality among staff members.

However, as the staff increases its outreach to participants, it must ensure that the website functions as a virtual extension of its unique newsroom, reflecting its origins as a community–based initiative. Overall, the site is currently limited by its initial approach to hyper–local coverage, given that the initiative was spearheaded by experienced journalists, as opposed to community contributors themselves. Furthermore, the site’s origin as a Berkeley course increases the separation between community members and staff reporters; Miguel noted that while she was able to work closely with Chavez and other full–time editors, she felt that her intentions were very different from those of the graduate students who write for Mission Loc@l during the school year; although they may be invested in the reporting process, they primarily aim to excel in a class, rather than working solely for the Mission’s interests. Therefore, the equality between these students and community contributors may only be expressed in principle, and not in practice. Eventually, the site must expand beyond its educational purposes to fully integrate its work into the broader community.

Furthermore, the site’s current method of communication between staff members and readers functions as a type of unintentional gate–keeping by the staff. Currently, community members can only submit story ideas to a staff e–mail address, with the understanding that their contributions will be read and potentially approved by editors. At best, Chavez will conduct an individual e–mail exchange with each community member to discuss his suggestions. However, this adds to the divide between aspiring team members and the team itself; without an open, interactive method of communication, the site unintentionally limits contributions from less proactive contributors. To achieve this, the site could implement an open forum or instant chat tool on its front page for readers and editors to discuss potential story ideas or provide suggestions on issues that need further coverage. This forum would also allow for real–time collaboration, as contributors could combine different pieces of information to build a comprehensive story. Additionally, reporters could use
the forum to organize schedules to divide the work of interviewing and researching amongst themselves. Finally, first-time reporters and experienced journalists could use this tool to discuss challenges and share advice about their experiences. Any tool used to facilitate these conversations would indicate that the input from staff reporters and readers are equally valuable.

While citizen journalism offers readers a voice in the news, the process of revising this work relies on an editorial hierarchy to ground their input in journalistic standards of accuracy and objectivity. Chavez strongly believes that citizen journalism should not be viewed as a direct competitor to traditional media: “We’re really open to local contributors, but I think the notion that citizen journalism will replace journalism and that it will all be done for free is ludicrous; I don’t see that happening at all. I think that as we get more higher-profile, people will want to contribute in different ways. But we do all the work with editing and oversight.” Indeed, Chavez fact-checks and edits every story before it is published, and oversees the expanded revision process with the help of only three assisting editors. Similarly, Downie and Schudson acknowledge readers’ increased demand to contribute online, while maintaining that experienced journalists are necessary to evaluate news quality: “Even if news organizations were to vanish en masse, information, investigation, analysis, and community knowledge would not disappear. But something else would be lost, and we would be reminded that there is a need not just for information, but for news judgment oriented to a public agenda and a general audience.” Therefore, while citizen journalism grows naturally and inevitably, it can only succeed in the long-term if facilitated by authoritative experts in a balanced manner.

Becoming a Reporter: Future Implications

Initially, Melissa San Miguel was hesitant to identify herself as a reporter; despite her enthusiasm and unique point of view, Miguel doubted that her work had qualified her as a member of Mission Loc@l’s team, and that she had truly crossed the threshold into the realm of reporting. It was only after several staff members, including Chavez, convinced her otherwise that Miguel was able to confirm her newfound identity as a citizen journalist, or a community voice integrated into the news. As media veterans and newcomers continue to grapple with the challenges presented by citizen journalism, success stories from experimental ventures provide inspiration for future attempts. Ultimately, the most effective initiatives empower their readers to share their opinions, tell unique stories, and make their voices heard within an online community.
Expanding the hyper–local movement poses an intriguing challenge; given that these initiatives are focused within tight–knit communities, they aim for thorough coverage and an involved readership, as opposed to maximizing the website’s hits or total number of unique visitors. Unlike a traditional publication, these initiatives are focused on depth, not breadth. Therefore, their efforts can only spread conceptually, as each venture can provide inspiration for another community to emulate its efforts. However, each initiative must adjust according to the unique demands and interests of its own community, whether by focusing its content on specific issues, or by encouraging reader participation with different methods. To provide momentum for this growth, traditional journalists must embrace the concept that establishing a sense of equality between professionals and amateurs is necessary to set the stage for their collaboration. Because different citizen journalism initiatives will inevitably have unique staff dynamics, Miguel’s experience with the Mission Loc@l staff is only one example of the new relationships formed between amateurs and professionals, and the negotiations that are necessary to maintain them. In this way, citizen journalism is characterized by constant experimentation—it will be impossible to find a one–size–fits–all model.

As journalists find new ways to integrate into an online platform, their readers’ expectations for their news are rapidly changing. Not only do they assume that information will be updated instantaneously, but readers also seek new ways to consume their news. On the one hand, new journalism models have the potential to provide more in–depth and long–term coverage in comparison with print newspapers; on the other hand, content farms such as Demand Media exemplify an extreme emphasis on breadth, as they employ vast crowds of freelance journalists to amass information and stories. Therefore, an ideal future model for journalism remains unclear. Throughout these experiments, proponents and critics alike must recognize that new opportunities on the Internet may pose a challenge to journalism conventions, but should not stray from core values of free speech, accuracy and transparency; regardless of who provides our news, it should always be in pursuit of the truth.

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