

Rethinking the Reader's Role in Community Journalism

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Take this scenario: You open your clothes dryer to discover that someone has left chewing gum in the pocket of a pair of blue jeans. While the entire load of jeans is inexplicably clean and gum-free, there's a webbing of gum baked onto your dryer drum. Grab a wet paper towel and start scrubbing. Now there are bits of paper towel stuck in the gum. While you could try countless ideas, the best one is to head for your computer. Typing "removing gum from dryer" into a search engine string results in roughly 23,000 hits – most of which have been contributed by people exactly where you are now. Five minutes later the gum is gone and you can add your own gum-removal success story to the cacophony of the Web – "removing gum from dryer" hit number 23,001. Remarkable.

So, yes, the World Wide Web is the coolest thing – perhaps ever. It's no wonder that many people have replaced editors with search engines as they hunt for information that fits their immediate needs. But the hunt for information and the community-building mission of journalism are not the same thing. Unfortunately, the only people who seem completely to grasp the difference are journalists, journalism educators, and media critics. This paper strives to map the schism between journalistic ideology and Web reality – particularly in terms of reader participation. This will be accomplished by first exploring the traditional relationship between community journalists and readers, then tracing the development of the Web and online journalism. Finally the paper will present a case study of a journalist who set out to re-invent community journalism by playing on the strengths of both print newspapers and the Web – most notably, without the Web.

The Slow Evolution of Journalism

Despite increasingly intense competition for both advertising dollars and attention span fostered by technological advancement – from radio, to television, to cable television, to the

Internet and World Wide Web – journalism has been lumbering along, bringing up the rear with a Fourth Estate banner that people are less and less likely to acknowledge, understand, or recognize. In part this reflects to the nature of journalism, which traditionally has assumed a role relating to the maintenance and evocation of a society's values, particularly with regard to a community's historical record. Originally, competition between newspapers alone required reporters to seek out sensational news and hard-hitting stories (Tuchman, 1978). With each additional communication option, however, the mass audience targeted by journalists has been increasingly fragmented. This is partly because people did not discard older communications media as new ones arose, but accumulated sources of news, information and entertainment to the point of information overload (See Gitlin, 2001; Keen, 2007; and Postman, 1985). The rise of the World Wide Web and surge of social networking in the past five years seemed to trigger some sort of critical mass, with journalists now facing competition not only *for* consumers, but also *from* consumers, who have the ready capacity to gather and produce their own information – rules be damned. Of late, this has led to the widespread realization that the mass market business model that sustained journalism for more than a century is broken.

Journalism once was considered a craft, with reporters and editors responding to the allure of writing well, and the call of the democratic mission and its corresponding ideals (Tuchman, 1978). With the rise of the non-partisan press in the late 1800s, the journalistic norm of objectivity began to take hold. And, as the workforce became progressively better educated in the years following World War II, so did reporters. Today journalism leans more toward a profession, with reporters and editors expected/required to hold a bachelor's degree in journalism or a related field. These are people trained to value nonpartisanship and factual accuracy, as well as to value the voices of official sources (McChesney, 2004). The rise in journalistic

professionalism has been facilitated largely by the changing nature of newspaper ownership, which has shifted from roughly 75 percent family ownership to 73 percent corporate ownership over the course of the past 60 years (Bagdikian, 2000; Compaine & Gomery, 2000). Consolidation of newspaper ownership has resulted in an increased focus on the means of production, particularly in terms of reducing the somewhat messy, complicated matter of documenting life in a community to a reproducible formula. Correspondingly, professional journalism also tends to require specialized functions that can be applied regardless of place – news processed in an unnatural cycle that routinizes, imposes order, and enforces adherence to deadlines (Tuchman, 1978). That has resulted in journalism becoming laden with rules that govern editorial processes, largely aimed at increasing efficiency and consistency – and journalists who are notoriously intolerant of those who don't play by a largely invisible set of rules.

On Saturday the Red Hat Ladies Met for Lunch...

“Dear Editor,

“Please publish the attached news release from my organization. As a fellow journalist (I wrote for my high school newspaper), I appreciate you getting my organization's news to the public in a timely manner...”

Surely every journalist has heard the “I wrote for my high school newspaper” line. Rather than building kinship with the helpful reader, this ubiquitous comment tends to bristle the busy journalist, who silently (we hope) fumes: “Excuse me, but I write for a real newspaper with real news and real deadlines. I'll decide what news is. And your ‘news’ will run if I deem it worthy.” True journalists are trained in particular writing styles and primed to seek out clarity, consistency and accuracy in the conveyance of the news. Stories not written in journalistic style are immediately suspect, as journalists are, to a great extent, encouraged to be writing snobs. As a result, public relations practitioners also are trained in journalistic writing so that news releases pass the journalistic credibility sniff test. That doesn't mean that those news releases will be

published verbatim, but a journalistically clean news release submitted by a PR practitioner via e-mail may be more likely to reach publication in some relatively intact form than the hand-delivered submission of community news that is hand-written on lined paper and riddled with grammar, spelling and (horrors!) AP errors. The person submitting the former may be pleased to see a reporter-bylined story, while the latter may be dismayed to discover that his or her four notebook paper pages of news has been condensed into a blurb or calendar item.

This was a journalism that worked well, until there was an alternative source for community members to publish their own news – in whatever form they chose. As The Sacramento Bee’s public editor noted in a late 2006 column that explored the many changes facing journalism, “newspapers were the content gatekeepers. We had the monopoly on news and information. If you as a reader weren't happy with our performance, too bad. You had very few alternatives. Not so anymore, and there isn't any going back” (Acuña, 2006).

The Astounding, Confounding Rise of Online

To figure out just how quickly journalism has been swept aside by the rise of online news, it’s important to understand how the world of information and communication has changed. Drawing from the work of Web consultant Vin Crosbie and scholar Françoise Bar, Online Journalism Review editor Larry Pryor (2002) mapped out three general “waves” of online communication that are useful in understanding the progression of the Internet and the perceived threat to classified advertising it posed, to the World Wide Web and the genuine threat to the survival of newspapers it all but promises. A modified summary of Pryor’s work (the weapon analogy is my own) follows, with a fourth “wave” added to emphasize how the role of the reader has changed – from passive consumer to active participant in the gathering and conveyance of news – in less than 20 years.

The First Wave – 1986-1993

It is amusing, if not helpful, to categorize the waves of online journalism in terms of the capacity of various weaponry to blow holes in stuff. The first wave thus can be categorized as the “bazooka approach,” in that the emphasis was on the mass audience. Now, imagine that mass audience as a large, red barn, with the bazooka taking out as much of the barn as possible on the first shot. Much as the bazooka is designed to blow big holes in things, first wave technologies were taking aim at the audiences of cable television and, sticking to the traditional mass-market model, were trying to reach pretty much everyone with the same message. In the first wave, newspaper companies like Knight Ridder and Times Publishing partnered with AT&T to send news via 900-baud modems that sat atop television sets. The news, all text and presented in glorious black-and-white, would scroll down the screen. The system had the advantage of taking control of the television and preventing viewers from watching cable, but it had the disadvantages of being unattractive and slow. For some perspective on how slow, consider the fact that today about as slow a modem that can be purchased is 14.4K. That’s a transfer rate of 14.4 kilobits per second, as compared to the 900-baud rate of .9 kilobits per second. On a 14.4K modem it would take more than five minutes to open today’s home page for *The New York Times*. Theoretically, because it probably couldn’t even happen, it would take nearly an hour and a half to open the same page while using a 900-baud modem. By way of comparison, many newspaper readers today have broadband connections that take about 20 seconds to fully open a home page the size of *The New York Times*, with most elements appearing immediately and the user barely noticing the download is happening.

The first wave also marked the introduction of chat rooms. In 1984, the Mac had just come out and the PC was beginning to get a hold in the market. The same partnership – Knight

Ridder, Times Publishing, and AT&T – came up with technology that would allow people to log in by telephone, facilitated by the leap to 1200-baud. This was a text-based system, that allowed people to use their personal computers – including the ever-popular Commodore 64 – to interact with other people. The goal was for people to discuss issues of import to their community, while also being exposed to text-based advertisements. What the media partnership learned, however, was that most discussions in the media-hosted chatrooms quickly turned into sex chats. The system was shut down. By 1986, a handful of companies, including AOL, Prodigy and CompuServe, stepped in as the media partnership bailed out, basically saying, “hey, if you want to come over and be anonymous and talk about sex, be our guest.” In short, these companies listened to the end users and offered them exactly what they wanted. The early lesson for online journalism was the uncomfortable notion that customers rule.

The Second Wave – 1993-2001

The second wave can be categorized as the “shotgun approach,” in that the emphasis was on mass-customization in an effort to reach parts of the greater audience. Keeping the same large, red barn in mind, think of the shotgun as being able to target various parts of the barn with varying degrees of accuracy. The second wave was facilitated by the invention of the World Wide Web. The first Web browser, Mosaic, was available to the public in 1991 and people had to pay to use the proprietary technology. As a result, the World Wide Web gained only about 50 Web sites in the first two years. When browser technology was unleashed, the Web took off, with more than a million sites online by 1994. During the second wave – the dawn of Web 1.0 – the end user gained control of the network with the assistance of the dynamic duo of self-publishing systems and personal computers. Online journalism was in its infancy at this point, with most publishers recognizing the threat and being very concerned as Web customers rejected

ads and registration and demanded more personalization. Newspapers tentatively began making the leap to the Web, with most resorting to “shovelware,” or simply dumping print content on the Web for free.

It wasn't until 1999 that the World Wide Web began to take off as a source of news, information and entertainment. A turning point was the release of the Starr Report in 1999 and its subsequent posting on the Web. People were encouraged to go online and read the findings of the Starr Commission, the committee appointed to investigate President Bill Clinton. What made the Starr Report so popular on the Web? The salacious details of the president's affair with intern Monica Lewinsky. The cigar. The blue dress. The interest of the public in finding the Starr Report was helped along by the popularity of up-and-coming search engine Google, which had made its debut in mid-1998.

The Third Wave – 2001-2004

The third wave can be categorized as the “BB gun approach,” in that the emphasis shifted to the needs and wants of the individual. Whereas the bazooka had the capacity to take out the large, red barn in one shot, and the shotgun allowed for the targeting of specific parts of the barn, the b-b gun analogously took aim at the chicken scratching for feed in front of the barn. The third wave cemented the Web as an excellent source to turn to for breaking news. It began in about the fall of 2001, when people around the world turned to the World Wide Web as a source not only for news on the happenings of 9/11, but also as a place to post their own images, feelings, and news. Other significant developments of the year included Apple's release of both iPods and iTunes and the debut of Wikipedia.

The third wave of online journalism was characterized by three things: personalization, participation, and partnership. In terms of personalization, readers now were able to customize

news sources and headline feeds that appeared on Web browser home pages such as MSN.com, iGoogle, and Yahoo! The third wave also introduced open-source news sites like OhMyNews and WikiNews that sought “citizen reporters” to add to the news content. Participation became a hallmark of so-called Web 2.0 sites, many of which relied upon crowdsourcing, or the collaborative generation of information. User participation during this time grew exponentially to include blogging, commenting on articles, review of products, generation of wiki content, and the uploading of user-generated photos, audio, and videos. In terms of partnership, the idea in the third wave was that both the end user and the system owner and manager had to give up some power in an effort to achieve cooperative growth. People became more accepting of advertisements on Web sites and the need to register and/or “sign” user agreements before accessing information and features on individual sites. People also demonstrated a willingness to pay for quality services, whether by providing demographic information on registration or buying month-to-month site subscriptions. In exchange for end user cooperation, site owners learned to listen very closely to what the users wanted.

The Fourth Wave – 2004-present

If the first wave of online journalism can be likened to a bazooka, then the fourth wave is akin to a magnifying glass directing a sunbeam onto an ant. The large, red barn is still there, but it simply doesn’t matter as much anymore.

The fourth wave marked the rise of social networking sites, including Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, and Twitter. For perspective in how fast these Web-based communication sites grew, one need only look at YouTube. The now-ubiquitous user-generated video site was started by three people in February of 2005, then sold to Google for \$1.65 billion just shy of two years later. The fourth wave also introduced peer-recommended news sites such as Reddit and Digg,

where readers could “vote” for stories they like – stories from any source on the Web – and the stories would be aggregated on the site, ranked by popularity and linked to the original source. In late 2006, The Sacramento Bee’s public editor pointed to the significant toll the Web already was taking on traditional media:

Part of the uncertainty enveloping the future of newspapers comes down to this question: What do readers want? In my view, they want everything, and they want it free. They want news, and they want it right now and wherever they are. They want audio and streaming video. They want events and issues analyzed and explained in-depth. They want their newspapers to be independent and to be watchdogs of government and the community. They want to know what is happening in Washington and in Iraq. They want to know how their local high school football team played Friday night. They want to know about the best night clubs and the newest restaurants in town. They probably always wanted it all, but couldn't get it until the Internet came along. (Acuña, 2006)

By 2009, the Associated Press was threatening to sue companies that own search engines and news aggregators for copyright violation (Pérez-Peña, 2009). In particular, the AP took aim at Google News, a site that relies upon Web-wide traffic analysis and readership patterns, all tracked by complex computer algorithms, to rank stories by reader interest. Not only did the AP want to halt the mass dissemination of its articles without compensation, but it also wanted to stop independent bloggers from taking large chunks of articles for their own use. An article in *The New York Times* noted that “many news executives, including some at The A.P., have voiced concern that their work has become a source of revenue for Google and other sites that can sell search terms or ads on pages that turn up articles” (Pérez-Peña, 2009). The article noted that, “in essence, the A.P. has taken on the role of acting as a representative for the entire industry, particularly the newspapers — including *The New York Times* and virtually all large newspapers — that are the group’s owners.” The AP’s stance was echoed days later when the British newspaper industry “asked the government to intervene on its behalf to force Google to stop using newspaper articles without paying for them.” The traditional media’s delayed challenge to

Google is eerily reflective of the film “EPIC 2015,” produced by Robin Sloan and Matt Thompson. In the nine-minute film, the prediction is made that the “news wars of 2010” will be between Web-based companies like Google, Amazon and Microsoft, and that they will proceed with the notable absence of the traditional media (Sloan and Thompson, 2005). When the “slumbering Fourth Estate” at last awakens in 2011 and sues the fictitious Googlezon (a merging of Google and Amazon), claiming that “the company’s “fact-stripping robots are a violation of copyright law,” it is too late.

Writer Thomas Baekdal took the “EPIC 2015” idea a bit further, tracking media trends from 1800 to present, then offering some predictions up to the year 2020 based on the rapid changes taking place since 2004. Baekdal (2009) noted that

The new Internet is completely dominating our world. The newspapers are dead in the water, and people are watching less TV than ever. The new king of information is everyone, using social networking tools to connect and communicate. Even the traditional website is dying from the relentless force of the constant stream of rich information from the social networks.

While Baekdal is not alone in his claims of a society of information overload, he does make the interesting observation that Web users in 2009 are in a position not just to consume information, but to “be the information.” An apt term for this phenomenon was coined in the 1995 book “Being Digital” by MIT professor Nicholas Negroponte, who predicted the rise of “The Daily Me,” as digital communication began to allow the intense tracking of personal interests in lieu of mainstream news. In an opinion piece for *The New York Times* that explores the impact of “The Daily Me,” Nicholas D. Kristof (2009) noted that “when we go online, each of us is our own editor, our own gatekeeper. We select the kind of news and opinions that we care most about.” Perhaps most reflective of the concerns of contemporary journalists, Kristof opined, “if that’s the trend, God save us from ourselves.”

A key – if not belated – trend during the fourth wave of online journalism has been increased recognition that what makes good journalism is what makes good online journalism – and that good journalism costs money and has a societal value. Many bloggers have admitted that if frequent news reports from traditional news sources were not available, they wouldn't have as much to talk about in their blog entries. News search engines and aggregators also would have far fewer headlines to market to Web consumers. Other concerns particular to the fourth wave, include an increase in the digital divide, fragmentation of all media markets, and changing definitions of “local” and “community.”

The changing role of journalists in this mix is the real question at hand. How do journalists do it all with so much less? This quandary is exacerbated by collapsing corporate newspapers and a disastrous world economy. The following section explores the experiences of a journalist who decided to challenge notions of what journalism is and see how a newspaper might work better for a community in the Web 2.0 world.

Re-thinking Reader Involvement

In April of 2006, the editor and publisher of *The Western News*, a twice-weekly newspaper in Libby, Mont., was diagnosed with lung cancer. Reporter Brent Shrum knew he needed to support his ailing editor and keep the newspaper strong, a transition that was all but seamless for the newspaper's readers. Four months after his diagnosis, Shrum's boss died and Shrum was named editor, with the newspaper's advertising manager promoted to publisher. Shrum recognized that the shift could mean a greater focus on the business side and less understanding of editorial issues. Still, Shrum had worked with the new publisher for years and thought they'd make a pretty good team. A variety of significant changes and complicated disputes with the publisher and the newspaper's corporate owner followed, and Shrum

discovered one day that his job was being advertised on JournalismJobs.com. He left the newspaper the next day – frustrated with corporate ownership and on a mission to reinvent community journalism. To this point, this story reflects the normal ebb and flow of employment in the newspaper business. It's what Shrum did next that makes things a bit more interesting.

After 12 years working as a reporter and editor for *The Western News*, Shrum realized he had developed a strong attachment to Libby and had little interest in leaving the community. He also said he was just plain tired: “Honestly, at that point I just wanted to take a week’s vacation and just not do much of anything for a few days and get some rest” (Shrum, 2007). Within 24 hours, however, he approached a friend, Lee Bothman, who had fairly recently left a long stint as ad manager at *The Western News* for ownership of the local print shop. Shrum said the two had discussed starting their own newspaper before:

The first time he and I had talked was not too long after Hagadone bought the paper. At some point where there were issues going on and we had just talked “What if we were to do our own paper? How would we do it? How could we do it?” Just some talk. Never got to the point where we thought it was feasible enough to do it. (Shrum, 2007)

One of the significant obstacles to the pair starting a new venture was the popular editor/publisher of the newspaper, who would be a force to be reckoned with in the community. After his death and Shrum’s unpleasant experience as editor for the Hagadone-owned newspaper, Shrum found his loyalty to *The Western News* was strikingly diminished. Shrum approached Bothman and asked him to “start putting some numbers on paper and seriously looking at this thing.” The pair met frequently – just about every day – and the newspaper plan began to take shape.

Shrum and Bothman launched the *Kootenai Valley Record* on May 7, 2007. It is important to note that Libby is a small community that already had two weekly newspapers. This required the *Kootenai Valley Record* immediately to differentiate itself from the corporately-

owned *Western News* and the locally owned *Montanian*. The result is somewhat of a hybrid between the two. *The Western News* takes the traditional journalistic approach of bylining staff-generated stories and running edited blurbs from reader-submitted copy. *The Montanian* runs straight news releases – whatever people send or bring in – even on the front page. Shrum noted,

It's like the stuff we always had on the inside of *The Western News* is on the front page of *The Montanian*. We always knew in the back of our minds people pick it up for that because they get to read that whole story of the quilt guild that we condensed down to two paragraphs and buried inside the paper somewhere. Well it's on the front page of *The Montanian* and we can kind of scoff at it, but there's a market for it. People are picking it up and they're reading it. (Shrum, 2007)

Shrum chose to focus not only on traditional journalistic values and credibility, but also on the Web 2.0 imperative of reader participation. And he opted to do it in print, without a Web site, which marked either great stupidity or pretty revolutionary thinking for the 21st century. Shrum noted that every newspaper he'd worked for had stubbornly clung to the mandates of journalistic writing and the AP Stylebook. When people brought stories in, the contribution was assessed for news value, mined for information and processed for consistency. The result was a pleasingly homogenous mix – a newspaper “voice” that read the same throughout. The unintended consequence was the alienation of readers, who often were told that their club happenings or bowling scores weren't news. Shrum said the burgeoning success of social media and blogs told him that readers might want more.

I think [*The Western News*] was always seen as maybe a little too rigid. Maybe we were taking ourselves a little too seriously sometimes. What I'm getting at is, for the story about the quilt guild that's sent in by the secretary of the quilt guild. People bring that stuff to *The Western News* and we totally rewrite it – gut it. What if we keep that stuff more or less intact? Let's face it, AP's not going to pick this story up. We can be a little looser in our standards. Sure, I would have written it differently, but I'll keep the structure. It's still going to be edited for punctuation and grammar and basic style, but we can preserve the hominess of it and the small town quality. (Shrum, 2007)

Shrum's idea for the *Kootenai Valley Record* was to reserve section fronts for traditional news coverage and to allow community members to submit stories that would be run with their bylines. His plan was to minimally edit the community contributions and to let the styles and voices of the writers shine through:

What if we had this paper that had this really good front page? Usually this sort of community newspaper you see these homey, folksy little weekly newspapers, but there's no separation between what's on the front page and what's inside and that homey quality runs throughout. That quilting story is on the front page or whatever and it's all sort of slapped together. What if we did a really professional front page and a really nice layout? I've done that for years and I know what my strengths are. But then, we have the inside, as much as possible to be a kind of community bulletin board. We give bylines to people who submit things. (Shrum, 2007)

Just more than two years later, Shrum's experiment has been a decided success. He said that the majority of what is published in the newspaper originates with members of the community in some form, adding "we generally have very little worry about filling the inside of the paper, with all the things people bring to us" (Shrum, 2009). He has found the benefits of this arrangement to be two-fold: 1.) It creates less work for the newspaper's small staff; and, 2.) Involvement with and commitment to both the community and the newspaper is enhanced. As Shrum noted, "If you don't totally revamp their stuff – cut down the story they spent three hours writing to two paragraphs that retains nothing of their voice – they'll bring you another story and their friends will. It fills a hole, it makes them happy." Shrum said contributors seem to "get" that they can have bylines and that their news will be run more or less as they wrote it.

One of my favorites is a "soccer mom" who goes to all the youth club soccer games and writes stories and takes photos for us. One of our county health department nurses also writes columns from time to time on timely issues like the flu season or bee stings. The fact that they take advantage of the forum we give them on such a regular basis seems to confirm to me [that the KVR's dedication to providing community news matters]. I have had several people who bring items to us from time to time thank me very sincerely for providing a service to the community, which is very rewarding.

Items that appear on the newspaper's inside pages with no byline generally are short items that Shrum has put together from notes or fliers – “something that doesn't come to us in the form of a story, but requires ‘assembly’” – news releases from agencies like the U.S. Forest Service, or news items that come in with no name attached to them. Shrum said he feels more free with his editing of these, adding “if it comes to me in the form of a story, that someone has obviously put some work into, I try to keep it as intact as I can and give the author a byline” (Shrum, 2009).

The KVR has no Web site and Shrum has no plans to launch one in the immediate future. Instead, the newspaper contributes a couple of stories each week to an independent site that runs news that already has been in the KVR and promotes happenings in the community. Shrum noted that this “gives us some Web exposure for very little effort on our end” (Shrum, 2009). While it seems noble for Shrum to spurn a Web site, it's largely a practical consideration:

One of the issues with a Web site is simply time; the other is the eternal issue of how does a newspaper run a Web site and not lose money on it? Give too much away, folks won't buy the paper. Try charging for it, they won't use the Web site. It's really a conundrum for a small paper like ours and I don't have the answer.

Other Approaches to Reader Participation

It's not uncommon for newspapers to solicit news from community members. In fact, it's pretty much standard practice for community newspapers to encourage readers to submit everything from engagement notices to club news to pet photos. Many newspapers offer some sort of “writing a news release” brochure and some editors hold mini-seminars on how clubs can write their news for submission. In general, however, the goal of the news organization is to get something that more closely resembles standardized news writing. Editors want the public to realize that *their* news isn't necessarily *news*, and that there are news values to be met and writing rules to be followed. In fact, reader submissions are often segregated into separate sections of a publication or Web site, as well as being labeled in ways that make it clear that they

are not reporter generated. Such labels serve to “place a barrier between the problematic story and other stories” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 98). One method of labeling is to provide one standard byline for reporters and another for community contributions. For example,

By Brant Sherman
Times Staff Writer

versus

By Lisa Andrews
Special for the Times

Another method would be to omit credit for non-reporter-generated submissions entirely. Such barriers mark the stories as “other” – something that may not achieve the high standards of traditional journalism. For example, in May of 2009 the Chico, Calif., *Enterprise-Record* began asking readers to submit photos of and short write-ups about community happenings to appear on the “Community Snapshots” page of the newspaper each Monday. As a news article explaining the request noted,

With only three staff photographers, many news-worthy activities in our communities go uncovered. Help us see those events and activities get the coverage they deserve by submitting your photo for inclusion in our new weekly feature. It’s like a scrapbook with photos of community-oriented events. . . . Just make sure there are people in the photo. (“E-R seeks photographs,” 6 May 2009)

The page generally features group shots and grip-and-grins, all presented with long captions. In fact, a lengthy photo caption under a black-and-white picture of 18 young women is almost as large as the photo, which is a magnifying-glass-to-see-their-faces 5” wide by 3.25 inches high (“Community Snapshots,” 8 June 2009). While it’s clear from the accompanying solicitation for submissions that the photos are reader-generated, there’s something notable missing that – if we draw from Brent Shrum’s experience – might engender not just reader participation, but reader loyalty: Bylines and photo credits. Larger photos and a little color couldn’t hurt, either.

Most community newspapers already are doing something akin to what Shrum does at the KVR. The difference is that the KVR has been thoughtfully engineered to be a community-anchored, community-generated, community-generating newspaper. Community news is neither

segregated to a particular part of the publication, nor strategically labeled as something other than journalist created. And Shrum is seeing the results:

I really do feel people have a stronger connection to our paper as representative of their community because of this. I've had people thank me for running their story/photo more or less intact where the "other" paper either didn't run it at all or severely edited it. I think our readers in general appreciate this, but moreover, I believe that each and every one of those people who submit something to us at some time, and either get a byline or see that we value their submission and run it prominently, takes some ownership and will feel some loyalty to us as a result. (Shrum, 2009)

Discussion and Conclusion

Journalists once were part of the “defense system” that protected the public from information overload, along with social institutions such as the legal system, healthcare, religion, schools, and the family (Postman, 1992). Each of these institutions has been charged with enforcing particular standards that relate to the meaning and filtration of information. But journalism, along with those other social institutions to varying degrees, is broken – but perhaps not beyond repair. In order to retain dedication to history and democracy – two of the core missions of journalism – it may be necessary to loosen the hold on standards and embrace personalization, participation, and partnership. Perhaps journalists need to allow individual voices into the mainstream news mix, invite genuine participation in the presentation of community news, and allow community residents to partner with news leaders in community building. The role of a journalist today must be seen as more of a guide and less of a slave to a “broken” institution. In order to engage readers, we need to engender shared ownership of the news process. After all, a significant social role of a newspaper is its communicative ability to shape the present and draw attention to the past. Unlike libraries and museums, which preserve and showcase the past, newspapers bear an active role in the shared creation of a historical record and culture for a particular community, effectively serving as its *locus memoriae* – the

keeper of place. Preservation of a community's legacy requires that its history and culture be both accessible and given continued relevance; they must be communicated to its residents. As

Lowenthal (1985) noted,

Unless history displays conviction, interest, and involvement, it will not be understood or attended to. This is why subjective interpretation, while limiting knowledge, is also essential to its communication. ... History is persuasive because it is organized by and filtered through individual minds, not in spite of that fact; subjective interpretation gives it life and meaning. (p. 218)

Lowenthal's claim nicely illustrates the traditional mission of community newspapers, which was to interpret, document, and convey the day-to-day happenings in the life of a community.

But Lowenthal also uses a word anathema to traditional journalism: "Subjective." While many a journalist may curse the rise of blogging, social networking, and tweeting, there are those who recognize that blind adherence to professional journalism has outlived its usefulness. James

Carey (1997), for example, pointed to the lack of participation afforded news consumers:

It is a journalism of fact without regard to understanding through which the public is immobilized and demobilized and merely ratifies the judgments of experts delivered from on high. It is, above all, a journalism that justifies itself in the public's name but in which the public plays no role, except as an audience. (p. 247)

And this doesn't fly in the Web 2.0 world. Like a modern day Pandora's Box, the personalization, participation, and partnership afforded by the Web has been unleashed on a public that does not desire their re-containment. For those who live – and love – community journalism, Brent Shrum's experiment offers a glimpse of the hope that remains inside.

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