

**When the Crowd Doesn't See the Value: Crowdsourcing, Citizen Journalism, and
the Cultural Production of Local Online News**

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Introduction

Citizen journalism was one of the particularly popular buzzwords in journalism circles several years ago. Dan Gillmor's landmark book, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, For the People*, in 1994 borrowed its title from no less a revolutionary document than the United States Constitution. From 2004 through 2006, with the Poynter Institute carrying several articles on the topic and its best practices (Outing, 2004 & 2005a, b and c; Edmonds, 2005; Howerton, 2005; Gahrn, 2006, Romenesko, 2006) – and this doesn't count the numerous postings from readers adding their own take on citizen journalism to those articles (attempting to act as citizen journalists themselves in many cases). Following closely on its buzzword heels was a specific type of citizen journalism, "crowdsourcing," or the notion that readers could use the tools of Web 2.0 to assist reporters with stories, allowing for a collaborative, conversational, and potentially more transparent reporting and newsgathering process.

Much of the early discussion about citizen journalism and crowdsourcing, the Poynter pieces included, tended to look at how traditional news organizations could harness the power of these two reporting methods to enhance their relationships with readers and ultimately, foster the democratic potential of citizen journalism (Gillmor, 2006; Gillmor & Bowman, 2003). Others disparaged the practice and questioned ethical and quality issues associated with the practice (Edmonds, 2005; Keen, 2008), often urging the traditional news organizations to steer clear of full-blown collaborative reporting between journalist and audience.

However, much of the discussion tends to ignore questions about any potential cultural and financial value of citizen journalism – particularly from the audience standpoint. For example, what do citizens gain from contributing to the reporting process through citizen journalism? How does an individual audience member suggest sources or alternate angles to reporters through an interactive crowdsourcing process? Finally, can it be determined whether audience members acting as citizen journalists feel their contribution to newsgathering and reporting enhances the monetary value of the final news product? In other words, if they are doing a bulk of the work, will they still pay for the work? Or will they value the contribution in more abstract, non-monetary ways? Keeping in mind these questions, this case study seeks to illuminate the role and value of the cultural production of citizen journalism as it works within two local online news sites.

Crowdsourcing and Citizen Journalism

The term “crowdsourcing” has been a part of the journalistic lexicon for a number of years, originally focusing on how readers or viewers could submit their own stories, photos, and knowledge to contribute to a story. In the era of Web 2.0, however, crowdsourcing has become a more recognized tool for reporters in the various types of media. Using iStockphoto as an example of amateur photographers sharing photo files via the Web for a small fee, Howe (2006) postulated that millions of users with expertise and their own bandwidth could seek micropayments for their services, and a new business model would be created; he termed the cooperative work “crowdsourcing.” Defining crowdsourcing as the act taking on a job that is traditionally done by a professional and outsourcing it to a large group of undefined persons, Howe paid credence to the wisdom of the crowd. Rosen applied Howe’s ideas to journalism in founding a project called “Assignment Zero,” which used Internet users from various walks of life to work as reporters on a collaborative news project (Carr, 2007). Others see crowdsourcing as a

solution to many current problems, from shrinking business revenues and production (Brabham, 2008) to changing readership and audiences in the field of journalism (Thorson, 2008; Yar, 2007). Although some see the rise of crowdsourcing as a threat to traditional news values and professionalism within the field of journalism (Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Reich, 2008), as well as a potential harbinger of ethical frailty in the news industry (Yar, 2007; Sands, 2004), media organizations – even giants like Gannett and *The Guardian* -- seem optimistic to seize the potential of crowdsourcing (Carr, 2007; Gahrn, 2008; Bradshaw, 2007).

Citizen journalism encompasses crowdsourcing (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Lasica, 2003), but often refers to a more generalized notion of non-professional journalists contributing to the news gathering and/or reporting process of a professional journalism publication. Because digital media makes this contribution much easier, the trend of citizen journalism has gained traction in news media over the past several years as social networking and personal digital media tools have developed (Gillmor, 2006). Bowman & Willis (2003) provide a thorough definition of the concept that still works with the way it is understood within journalism today:

... (Citizen journalism is) the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires. Participatory journalism is a bottom-up, emergent phenomenon in which there is little or no editorial oversight or formal journalistic workflow dictating the decisions of a staff. (p. 36)

With the concepts of crowdsourcing and citizen journalism in mind, this paper questions the value of citizen-generated reporting by asking questions of its monetary and cultural value within news. Although much of the scholarship in this realm has focused on the value of participatory journalism on a more abstract level, this research study uses two qualitative case studies and interviews with their citizen contributors as well as with the editors and reporters for those sites to seek insight into the value question.

Cultural Production and Citizen Journalism

Bourdieu provides a model wherein social and cultural capital within the specific field in which media is produced—in this case, two online news publications that combine both traditional reporting with aspects of citizen journalism -- maintains a relatively autonomous position in the larger field of economy and power (1983). He argues that while people are often defined by their social position [in the case of citizen journalism, Keen (2008) refer to this as the “noble amateur”], they function within a “network of objective relations” made up of people in different positions of power, and people are able to use various strategies to improve their own positionality within the hierarchy (1983, p. 30). In applying cultural production to the undertaking of the citizen journalist, the seizing of new media tools to tell otherwise-untold stories could be understood as a play for social or political power in a professional field that is generally “favorable to those who dominate (it) economically and politically” (p. 40) – or in this case, the mainstream media. However, it follows that citizen journalists – as cultural producers of news – could gain entrée to this system, provide a valuable product with its knowledge base, and gain social capital through contributions. This paper uses this theoretical framework in order to better understand whether Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production is at work within citizen journalism and if not, to better understand what other value – if any – can be attributed to

collaborative reporting. It does so in asking the following research questions: First, how does the crowd or participant feel about the value of its contribution to a news site? And second, how does the journalist or editor feel about the value of its contribution to a news site?

Bourdieu's understanding of how capital is conferred originally was based on how varying levels of education impacted a person's social standing within a capitalist society (1973, pp. 73-76), but his ideas are quite applicable in the realm of citizen journalism. He explains how capital acts within a system of exchange: Capital – in the form of status and power, in particular – can be conferred when an individual is able to offer a socially relevant good to the greater society. He distinguishes between economic, social, and cultural capital, explaining that economic capital relies upon owning assets and cash, social capital relies upon membership within organizations and societies of influence, and cultural capital relies upon actually having knowledge, education, skills, and appreciation of arts and culture that may contribute to the greater good (1973). Both social and cultural capital could easily be seen in the work of the citizen journalist, and we should question how economic capital might play a role as well; ultimately, economic capital could be a key to whether citizen journalism truly pays off for news sites that employ it as a reporting practice.

Methods

This research takes a qualitative, multi-method approach to better understand how two non-traditional online news sites use both traditional and collaborative reporting approaches to deliver news and insight to their respective audiences.

First, editors and reporters from each of the sites were interviewed. In the case of Locally Grown Northfield, this meant the founder and owner of the blog itself, a journalism professor who oversaw the RepJ project (described in the next section), the

reporter working for the blog for the RepJ project, and some of the citizens who commented and contributed in the reporting process for the blog. In the case of *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, the editor-in-chief and a citizen journalist whose work was published on the site were interviewed.

Second, a case study analysis of each of the sites was performed. This included reading the stories, blogs, reader comments, and other postings on each of the sites, and it was combined with interview data to learn about what happened behind the scenes to keep each of the sites in production. Preliminary findings from the two sites, Locally Grown Northfield (<http://locallygrownnorthfield.org/>) and *Twin Cities Daily Planet* (<http://www.tcdailyplanet.net>), are discussed in further depth below. The sites were chosen because of the researcher's access to them and because each has been cited as an important innovator in the field of citizen journalism (Ingram, 2009; MacMillan, 2008; Townend, 2008, Lincoln, 2006). Furthermore, each site's concentration on local news and lack of tie to a traditional news organization makes it specifically interesting because it suggests the sites have more freedom to develop and experiment with online reporting techniques in a way a traditional news organization often cannot.

Twin Cities Daily Planet

Case Study in Brief

Twin Cities Daily Planet, a non-profit publication in Minneapolis-St. Paul that was founded more than two years ago as an experiment in participatory journalism. Today, the site mixes aggregation from alternative and ethnic press sources within the Twin Cities (many of which do not have a Web presence themselves) with original content written by citizen journalists and professional journalists whom *Daily Planet* editors refer to as freelancers. The site professes that "(c)ollectively, the residents of the Twin Cities have far more expertise and insight than can be found in any one

newsroom,” and executive director/founder Jeremy Iggers – a 22-year veteran reporter for the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* who runs the *Daily Planet* – said the publication’s goal is to bring together professionals and citizens to create diverse content in local journalism.

The site represents a particularly diverse population in doing this form of citizen journalism and runs stories one would not regularly find in the *St. Paul Pioneer-Press* or *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*. Many of these stories do come from the *Daily Planet*’s media partner publications, which include the *Minnesota Women’s Press*, *Hmong Today*, *The Liberian Journal*, *the African News Journal*, *La Prensa de Minnesota*, the *Minnesota Independent*, and many other community, alternative, and ethnic news publications that represent the diverse make-up of the the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area (a combined population of about 3.5 million), which includes both one of the largest Hmong populations in the United States and one of the largest Somali immigrant populations in the United States.

Citizen Journalism and Daily Planet: Editor and Writer’s Perspective

Iggers notes that citizen journalism is a central part of *Daily Planet*’s mission, from the stories published by non-professional writers and by training would-be writers to serve as reporters or bloggers for *Daily Planet*.

“We accomplish citizen journalism by actively recruiting non-professional writers from diverse Twin Cities communities, and by offering citizen journalism classes, skills workshops and weekly writers groups where writers can polish their skills and their drafts,” Iggers said.

Additionally, the site hosts or reprints the blogs of a number of community activists and citizen journalists who write about issues ranging from gay marriage to free broadband to a new stadium for the Minnesota Vikings. Although the site is

professionally edited and staffed by a few part-time professional editors and journalists (who do “quality control”), the focus of *Daily Planet*, according to Iggers, continues to be on the citizen contributors because “the citizens have the knowledge base.”

Daily Planet still embraces some of the traditional values of journalism in that its citizen journalists are trained in news gathering and reporting through workshops and seminars the *Daily Planet* provides for would-be contributors. The site also republishes stories that were already printed in other small ethnic or alternative publications that might not have been read by a wide audience (often, these publications are either printed in a limited run and have no online presence, or they have only a rudimentary online presence and no print component) and are part of their “Community Media Partners.” Iggers said he feels this method is beneficial both to *Daily Planet* and the other publications.

“I think most of our writers and media feel very positive about what we are doing - for the writers, it is an opportunity to get experience and exposure - for themselves, their communities and the issues they care about,” he said. “Similarly, for our media partners, getting republished in the Daily Planet increases their visibility, and drives readers to their websites.”

One writer, college student Lolla Mohammed Nur, said she was in fact, “very excited” when a story she had published in Engage Minnesota, an online publication that covers and “offers voice” to the Minnesota Muslim community, was republished in *Twin Cities Daily Planet*.

“I was so excited to learn my story had been published in *Twin Cities Daily Planet*. It was great exposure for me since I’m just starting out as a journalist and am in college

planning to major in journalism,” she said. “It was also great that the story could be seen by a wider audience than (the publication where it originated) has. “

She said the process of publication did not necessarily feel collaborative – she did not know the story was being published in *Daily Planet* until the editor of Engage Minnesota told her – but she said the experience was still seemed powerful and hopeful that her future pieces would also be picked up by the publication.

This example and the general model of citizen journalism employed by *Twin Cities Daily Planet* suggests Bourdieu’s ideas about cultural production and cultural capital can be supported through new models of collaborative reporting. Mohammed Nur’s comments support his assertion that increased value on cultural production in this collaborative process can be beneficial both for the news source (in this case, *Daily Planet*) and the citizen journalist who contributes her knowledge to the process and in turn, receives increased cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983) for that contribution. However, she ultimately hopes to work as a paid, fulltime journalist, suggesting that economic capital still is important in the reporting process – at least to some of the citizen contributors.

Locally Grown Northfield and the RepJ Project

Case Study in Brief

Locally Grown Northfield (LGN) is a community news blog founded in 2004 by a Northfield, Minnesota community activist/former online editor for Utne Reader named Griff Wigley. The site itself was produced primarily by Wigley and is a combination of community news, opinion, and entertainment, and it contains visual components – photo slide shows of area events, for example – as well as podcasts and multimedia, even drawn from material from a weekly community radio show that Wigley does with two other members of the Northfield community – one of whom serves on the city’s downtown development commission and another who is a local

business owner; the other radio show members also contribute to Locally Grown as bloggers. Northfield, which is located about 30 miles south of Minneapolis, has a population of about 17,000, and hosts two local colleges, Carleton College and St. Olaf University. Many residents in the community said in interviews that they consider Locally Grown to be a direct competitor to their local newspaper, *The Northfield News*, which is a traditional community newspaper that publishes weekly.

In late 2007, Professor Len Witt from Kennesaw State University decided to launch a “representative journalism” (RepJ) project within the blog, which already attracted a loyal community of followers. His idea was to place a full-time reporter within an-already functioning blogging community in order to provide professional newsgathering and reporting for that community. Using grant funding, he hired and funded a full-time community reporter, Bonnie (who relocated from Massachusetts). The mission of Locally Grown – particularly with the addition of Bonnie – was in part to “lift the level of the conversation” about Northfield, Wigley said. “There’s a lot of stuff – issues, jargon, information – and the need to have a conversation about it, pull together pieces as reporting,” Wigley said. “All of that helps people get their arms around an issue. It helps them have intelligent conversations about it and to go beyond what I call just ‘bar talk’ – a fairly casual uninformed conversation you’d have at a bar.”

Although her work with LGN -- which included multimedia reporting and blogging about the stories she worked on – often seemed like traditional news reporting, she also used crowdsourcing by soliciting community members’ comments and contributions to further stories. In stories about a large local heroin bust and ownership change of a local cable company, she posed questions to the community members and bloggers themselves, and she explained what she had found so far in her

reporting – maintaining an open, transparent process advocated by the pro-citizen journalism experts (Gillmor, 2006; Bowman & Willis, 2003). Wigley sees this practice as an important part of the RepJ portion of the project and Locally Grown, “where we’re trying to get more professional journalism to happen, with citizen participation/crowdsourcing on the part of the journalist required (transparency and collaboration),” he said.

Upon mutual agreement from the time she was hired, Bonnie would only work in the position for nine months to a year, and in late March 2009, she left Locally Grown to live with her fiancé and plan a wedding on the East coast. In the meantime, the Locally Grown and RepJ collaboration continues in a new form. Six freelance journalists have been invited to take Bonnie’s place, beginning in May or June, and they will pitch either stories or beats. Wigley hopes the reporters will be funded by the community – specifically in the form of micropayments that Locally Grown readers will pay in order to see their stories come to fruition. He also sees funding coming from four other sources in addition to the citizen micropayment donations, and these would be business sponsorships, local media (The Northfield News and KYMN radio), cable access (PEG) money, and local foundations. Its founders hope to maintain the spirit of collaborative reporting and practice of crowdsourcing in its reporting while moving forward with an eye toward *crowdfunding* as well. ¹

Locally Grown’s Editors/RepJ Reporter on CrowdSourcing

¹ The analysis for this article was taken from the first nine months of the RepJ collaboration with Locally Grown in order to make the presentation deadline for the Online Journalism Symposium in April 2009. The research on both publications is ongoing, and this manuscript is still a work-in-progress at this point.

Beginning in January 2009, Locally Grown's fulltime reporter, Bonnie, started using the site to outline her reporting process and ask the people who regularly commented and read Locally Grown, if they had suggestions for whom she should talk to for pieces.

"Often, the readers come up with some great suggestions, and I feel like it has worked pretty well for us. I can think of a couple of specific stories where it worked really well," she said. "I have gotten to know the community pretty well in my time here, but a lot of the readers have so much more history than I do. Their comments and suggestions have helped me."

Wigley said he likes the direction in which the collaborative reporting has moved.

"It's not democracy yet," he said. "We don't have everyone's input, we are not necessarily taking action on anything here, but we are bringing more voices to a story than in ordinary reporting."

Witt said it is important to note that it is not the ability to comment on stories alone that give value to the news-as-conversation process.

"I don't care about people's opinions," he said. "I want people to bring new information to the discussion. RepJ is moving in that direction. It's an open-ended discussion process, and the (professionally reported) stories are not the be all and end all, but they are an important starting point ... "I ... see this as a means to tell a whole story better. The construction of the story is interesting in and of itself and it's nice when the reader can see the process."

Contributors' Perspective on Crowdsourcing and Citizen Journalism

Although the professional editors and reporters from Locally Grown and *Daily Planet* articulate the importance of citizen contributions and collaboration, citizen contributors to the sites expressed varying opinions about the importance of their own contributions. In a town hall style meeting where many of the citizens who regularly

commented on the Locally Grown site gathered to give feedback to Witt and Bonnie, an overwhelming number of the people in attendance said they did not value the notion of contributing to the news at all.

“I definitely don’t see the collaborative reporting as important here. It’s great that we have (a professional reporter), who is a trained journalist who has worked in journalism as the person who we can count on to make sense of all of this,” said one person who commented regularly on the site and contributed a contact for Bonnie for one of the stories she worked on. Many people in the room nodded their heads in agreement at the comment.

When the idea of incorporating more community voices into the Locally Grown coverage was raised (no specific method of incorporation was mentioned), one of the readers in attendance said he was vehemently against it for fear the voices would be biased or attempting to carry out their own agendas within the community.

“I don’t think you should hire a whole bunch of bloggers who are just following the (whims) of the readers of Locally Grown and the people who are always commenting on the stories,” she said. “It’s better to have (the current reporter), or some other reporter who really knows the whole community and the important stories.” Another person in attendance agreed.

“I am primarily a lurker on the site, but I personally see a very small community that participates on Locally Grown, and a repetition of the same people commenting, and that can make for a biased point of view,” he said.

Only one Locally Grown reader/contributor said she disagreed.

“I find the comments and suggestions helpful,” she said. “It really lets you see different angles.”

Much of the data gathered from the conversation and other interviews with regular reader/participants dismisses the value of the citizen-contributed content – with citizens

themselves often functioning as the most dismissive.² In addition to contradicting their own behavior, this dismissive attitude regarding crowdsourcing and citizen journalism seems to work against Bourdieu's notion of cultural production as a process that allows for empowerment among contributors with less access to power -- or in this case, limited access to media outlets read by large audiences. Unlike the *Daily Planet* citizen contributor, the citizens contributing to Locally Grown did not feel they had increased their cultural capital by contributing to the reporting process of the publication. They saw the most value in Locally Grown as the parts produced by professional journalists and the contributions simply as "user comments."

Conclusions and Implications

Although the sample size of contributors interviewed for this article is far too small to make generalizations about how a system of capital works within citizen journalism, the findings here do raise questions for discussion about how citizen journalism is used within a site and how/whether the contributors themselves value it as much as the traditional journalists running the news sites. Clearly, the editors and founders of the two sites in this case study value the contributions of their audiences – whether in the form of actual stories from untrained journalists who might not otherwise have an outlet for publication or from readers' comments and suggestions for how to conduct reporting on the story. This is evident both from their interviews but also the way the sites themselves showcase the stories, placing them on the front pages of the respective sites. Both sites showcase these styles of reporting transparently and reward contributors with well-reported stories with

² Wigley said he believes the group of citizens represents a very intelligent, articulate group of traditionalists who would voice these beliefs in most circumstances, and that the Locally Grown audience also consists of people who are more excited about using citizen journalism techniques in reporting.

angles that might not have been covered had traditional newsgathering skills been employed in the reporting process.

However, the contributor on *Daily Planet* seemed most excited about her increased cultural capital as a result of working as a citizen journalist for the site. Perhaps this was because she was a student who aspired to be a professional journalist after she finished college, and any byline at this point in her career was a welcome addition to her portfolio. But her answers conveyed a sense of excitement in seeing her name in print – as a byline. The collaborative stories on *Locally Grown* still used Bonnie, the RepJ reporter’s name in the byline. She did the reporting legwork and actual newsgathering and wrote the stories, after all; the contributors gave her direction, but this was direction that she was not required to follow, and if she did, the contributors (who do use their real names on *Locally Grown*) were only given thanks in an acknowledgement following the story, or were able to follow what she was doing with their leads when she published her reporting process. Perhaps the contributors would have valued the contributions more if the contributions themselves were more substantial and they were given more prominent credit in the final published product.

However, the contributors’ skepticism of publishing untrained reporters’ work was palatable in the interviews with them. They seemed to value the relatively objective, informed position of the professional reporter; they disparaged the idea of hiring untrained journalists for fear of ethical lapses and biased reportage. In other words, they valued the professionalism associated with the RepJ project on *Locally Grown*. Although few would comment about how much – if anything – they would pay for that professionalism, it seems that the contributors saw capital has having to contain all three prongs – economic, cultural, and social -- in order for the production to be worth their time and money as audience members.

These findings bring up important questions about whether such collaborative reporting and citizen journalism models can be funded; indeed, if the contributors themselves question the value of their contributions, then one should question whether the rest of the audience would find their work valuable enough to pay for it. Conversely, both sites see tremendous value in the more traditional professionalism of journalism, even within this somewhat “unprofessional” world of citizen journalism. In the case of *Daily Planet*, this is clear in that the editors provide training for their citizen journalists to improve upon their craft; in *Locally Grown*, a professional, paid reporter is literally hired to report for a blog and its community. Both news sites in this analysis function as non-profits largely supported by grants, but each wishes to become self-sufficient through other channels of revenue. However, the data from this research suggests that sites like these will have to go beyond dependence on mere crowdsourcing techniques in order to achieve profitability and sustainability. In addition to providing citizen contributors with cultural capital, editors using citizen journalism techniques must also better understand how and whether the abstract sense of cultural capital can translate into the very real dollars and cents required to keep their publications alive and thriving in an era that has proved difficult for even the most profitable of news media outlets.

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