# The Rise of the Citizen Journalist

**Kenton** *Good*

**So there I was,** at the corner of Queen and Yonge, desperately looking for a creative way to capture your attention. And then it hit me! The headline from the January 31st *Toronto Star*: "A nasty brawl between a motorist and a bike courier in Kensington Market has become a major hit on the Internet after photos of the incident were posted on blogs."[1]

The Kensington Market brawl story is one small example of citizen journalism – labelled participatory journalism by Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis, authors of "We Media: How Audiences Are Shaping the Future of News and Information." Bowman and Willis define participatory journalism as: "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."[2]

Citizen journalism, enabled by an explosion of free publishing tools, is influencing traditional media and giving an independent voice for points of view previously disenfranchised by the corporate media. Librarians have an opportunity and responsibility to incorporate citizen journalism into our library services and collections.

## An antidote to convergence

Citizen journalism empowers the average person to become a journalist and share their voice. At its most basic, it requires nothing more than access to the Internet and the ability to publish to it. Signing up for a free blog account is only one of many options to start the process. The citizen journalist has the power to break a story, create some attention for that story in the blogosphere and, if the story develops some traction, influence the corporate media into covering that story. Citizen journalism delivers on the original promise of the web as a democratic enabler. It is looked upon by some as an antidote to the narrowing of voice currently found in the converging corporate media.

Critics of citizen journalism, like critics of the wildly popular Wikipedia project, point to the issue of authority. How are we to tell whether the story is factually correct? And what about objectivity? Is the author approaching the story with the same objectivity that traditional media outlets theoretically attempt to achieve? Indeed, the quality of citizen journalism can vary widely, from former print journalists freelancing in the world of citizen journalism to extremist groups with clear and not so hidden agendas.

The citizen journalism tool kit is accessible and inexpensive. Free or low-cost publishing tools (e.g. blogs, RSS and tagging), blog content aggregation services such as Technorati, and photo-sharing services such as Flickr[3] are just a few examples of the tools required to be a citizen journalist. Inexpensive digital cameras

## Citizen Journalism Toolkit

**Technorati**
http://www.technorati.com

**Google Blog Search**
http://blogsearch.google.com

**Yahoo! Search – News Search**
http://news.search.yahoo.com

**Flickr**
http://www.flickr.com

**Blogger**
http://www.blogger.com

**Wikipedia**
http://www.wikipedia.org

## Citizen Journalism Initiatives

**Wikinews**
http://www.wikinews.org

**The Huffington Post**
http://www.huffingtonpost.com

**Bayosphere**
http://bayosphere.com

**Newsvine**
http://www.newsvine.com

and the ubiquitous wireless and mobile devices for quick publishing to the web further round out this toolkit. Given that the core components of this toolkit are free and that libraries already provide public Internet access, the library community is well positioned to become community hubs of citizen journalist activity. Unknowingly, or at least unintentionally, many libraries may be serving this role already.

Citizen journalism came to prominence in the aftermath of 9/11 as eyewitness accounts and survival stories, complete with photographs, began appearing on blogs and the Internet. The tsunami disaster elevated citizen journalism into the general consciousness when first-hand survivor videos appeared on the web mere days after the disaster. Citizen journalism further entered the mainstream with the London terrorist bombings of 2005. Within hours of the attack, first-hand mobile phone images were published on blogs and on photo-sharing services like Flickr. The next day, these images appeared in daily newspapers and television newscasts around the world. Hurricane Katrina further showcased the power of citizen journalism. While mainstream media, cut off by the devastation of the flooding, struggled to cover the unfolding story in downtown New Orleans, a blogger bunkered down in a New Orleans data centre continued to publish first-hand accounts, photographs and live webcam images throughout the harrowing days following the storm.[4]

## Important voices

Citizen journalism has not gone unnoticed by the corporate media. Recognizing the value of such reporting, they embrace citizen journalism by integrating it into their print and television programming. *The Washington Post* embeds live Technorati updates for each of its stories, providing readers with real-time feedback and reaction from the web community. CNN television has an "Internet Reporter" who monitors citizen journalist blogs in order to identify and analyze the trends in blogger discussion.[5] Within the last year, both Yahoo and Google have launched blog search engines. Notably, Google has also chosen to incorporate blog posts into its Google News service to further supplement the more mainstream news channels indexed by the site. Many news services actively solicit readers to submit citizen journalism content. After the recent fires at the Buncefield oil depot near London, the BBC was inundated with over 6,500 photographs and videos courtesy of those within eyeshot of the accident.[6]

Closer to home, the 2006 federal election provides an excellent example of the power of citizen journalism. On December 22, 2005, University of Ottawa law professor Michael Geist posted to his blog news of a planned fundraiser for Toronto-area MP Sam Bulte – an event sponsored by several leaders of the Canadian entertainment industry. Geist states in his post, "At $250.00 a person, I have my doubts that many of the

artists that Ms. Bulte claims to represent will be present. Instead, it will [*sic*] lobbyists and lobby groups, eagerly handing over their money with the expectation that the real value of the evening will come long after Margo Timmins has finished her set."[7] On January 1, 2006, the story was mentioned in the widely read Boing Boing blog.[8] Within weeks of this post, *The Globe and Mail, National Post, Toronto Star* and *Macleans* all published stories mentioning the potential conflict of interest issue raised by Geist. Would this story have been included in these publications without the attention it first received from the blogging world? In the end, Sam Bulte lost her seat in the election. Perhaps the blog world played a role – we can only speculate. But as Michael Geist writes, "Examining the role of blogs is unquestionably interesting and important. It is difficult to quantify, but I'm fairly confident that the online community had a real impact in Parkdale-High Park."[9]

Given the importance of these new voices, what should be the response of the library community to citizen journalism? How can we ensure that the users of our libraries hear these important voices? Do we even have a role in supporting citizen journalism? Navigating and tackling the issues of the loosely structured world of citizen journalism can seem like a daunting task. However, there are a number of steps one can take to integrate citizen journalism into library services and collections. For starters:

- Become familiar with blog aggregation and search tools such as Technorati or the blog search engines of Yahoo and Google. The Technorati front page quickly provides an immediate and current snapshot of the hot topics and stories being discussed in the blogosphere. Wikipedia is also a useful place to observe first-hand citizen journalism activities, especially with emerging news stories. Next time a big world event occurs, test how long it takes for blogs, Flickr or a Wikipedia entry to be created. Consider using RSS or other web-based tools to push news out to your local community.

- Make your library a hub for citizen journalism. Make the citizen journalist toolkit easy to access and use from your library. Promote the use of blogs and other social software on your library website. Develop programming to expose your local community to the world of citizen journalism. Host a blog that can aggregate different citizen journalist voices from within your local area and help to build an online community with roots in your library.

- Consider expanding your information literacy programming to incorporate media literacy concepts. Citizen journalism means *more voices* and *more diversity*. As a result, media literacy may be even more complex now than it was in the past.

The citizen journalist and the larger blogging community fill an important role in our democracy. The blogosphere is the ultimate accountability check for the actions of governments and corporations. The citizen journalist is at the forefront of this new transparency. Libraries have an opportunity to play a vital role in this equation by supporting citizen journalism within our local communities.

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## Notes

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2. Chris Willis and Shayne Bowman, *We Media: How Audiences Are Shaping the Future of News and Information,* Sept. 3, 2003, www.hypergene.net/wemedia/ weblog.php.
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