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Heard It Through the Newsvine

The lines between citizen and professional journalism are blurring, creating opportunities and risks for media outlets like MSNBC, which recently acquired user-generated news site Newsvine

by [Catherine Holahan](#)

The details of the murder, as reported nearly 20 years later on [Newsvine](#), are more vivid and heart-wrenching than the brief account of the crime that originally appeared in *The New York Times*. While the *Times* succinctly relays the police version of events—a man killed his wife and children before committing suicide—the Newsvine piece paints an intimate portrait of a paranoid drug addict who once forced his wife to shave her head so other men wouldn't look at her.

The Newsvine reader should know, the writer says, that the killer was her brother-in-law, the victims her sister and nephews. But the reader also can't be certain that any of these gripping details are true. No one at the Seattle-based Newsvine, acquired Oct. 7 by [MSNBC](#) Interactive News, has verified her story.

The new details about the 1989 murder, posted in relation to the Oct. 7 killing of six people at a pizza party in Wisconsin, illustrates the benefits and challenges of trying to meld user-generated content—all the rage when it comes to blogs and YouTube videos—with traditional journalism.

EARLY ON THE SCENE AT VIRGINIA TECH

At its best, user-generated content provides extra eyes and unique insights around news events that even media giants with large staffing and resources can't hope to supply for every story. In April, traditional media outlets were able to cover the Virginia Tech massacre more quickly thanks to early accounts from students who were on the scene long before the news crews arrived. "Citizen journalists, I see them as news gatherers," says Charlie Tillinghast, president of MSNBC Interactive News. "And given the state of the media industry, where so much of the news gathering has been shouldered by traditional media, and with cutbacks in that area, one thing to watch is whether the citizen journalists break more news."

At its worst, however, user-generated content can expose a news organization to libel suits and damage reputations. Yet that's a risk news organizations are increasingly opting to take as they lose readers and ad revenue to blogs, information aggregators such as Yahoo! ([YHOO](#)), and citizen journalist Web sites.

To be sure, traffic at most news-sharing sites generally pales in comparison to the audience of an established news outlet's site. MSNBC, a joint venture of Microsoft ([MSFT](#)) and [NBC](#), grabs more than 30 million unique visitors a month, says Tillinghast. But Web sites like Newsvine and [Digg](#), where users post links to articles they find interesting and chat about them, have drawn large audiences in a short amount of time. Since its official launch in March, 2006, Newsvine's audience has grown to more than 1 million unique visitors a month, according to the site. Digg reports 20 million users. Typically, users are intensely loyal to such sites, returning frequently and spending more than an hour per month on them.

TRAINING CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

In response, traditional news providers are incorporating user-generated content as a way to engage the audience and get a jump on breaking news and below-the-radar stories they might otherwise miss. Nearly every major U.S. newspaper and TV station Web site now includes forums for user comments. Many more are gradually adding [space for users to post](#)

(BusinessWeek, 3/06/07) videos, photographs, and short news items.

The hope is that enabling users to post their observations and comments will trigger discussion, drawing readers who want to opine on the news as well as absorb it.

"The news organizations that are the first to figure out how to responsibly, and that is the key word, harness the power that is out there in the citizen trenches will be our most successful news organizations," says Christine Tatum, assistant features editor at *The Denver Post* and past president of the Society of Professional Journalists. Last week, the SPJ announced a program to train would-be citizen journalists so that news sites can be reassured they have some professional grounding.

Nearly two years ago, ABC ([DIS](#)) began incorporating user-generated content on its site with a feature called "Seen and Heard," which enables users to videotape themselves asking a question of a prominent newsmaker, such as President George W. Bush or Senator Hillary Clinton. ABC received so many submissions that it added a community section to the Web site and launched an on-air program this past summer featuring user videos. The program also runs online.

DEVELOPING A LOYAL FOLLOWING

Paul Slavin, senior vice-president at ABC News Digital, says the company started collecting user-generated content both to increase the loyalty of *ABC News* viewers and to augment the organization's news-gathering capabilities. "If users think that *World News Tonight* solicits, listens, and responds to them, they might be a little more loyal to the program... That has a huge impact on the ratings," says Slavin, adding that the news organization was also interested in what its audience had to say. "The other impetus was [that] we aren't everywhere all the time, there is news gathering that goes on outside of our ability to do it."

Indeed, online audiences have proven more than willing to chase news, often for free, in an attempt to join and shape the conversation on local and world events. Rachel Sterne, founder and CEO of citizen journalism site *GroundReport*, which shares advertising revenue with creators, says her site has grabbed more than 1,000 regular contributors since relaunching in August, 2006. "There has been such momentum," says Sterne, adding that she believes there will be more acquisitions or partnerships with user content sites. "I see it as the evolution of news media."

But while opening up news gathering to millions of citizens can increase a news organization's reach, it also increases the chances of publishing inaccuracies. That's why ABC, MSNBC, and others are careful to clearly distinguish between user-generated submissions and their own content. MSNBC, for example, plans to keep Newsvine a separate entity from its own news site. And though it plans to use Newsvine's technologies to augment the MSNBC site's community features, any user content posted to that section will be clearly marked as such.

ABC practices a similar separation between its own content and that generated by users. When a staff-generated report incorporates comments or photos posted in the user-generated content areas on ABC's site, that material is vetted by editors for accuracy.

Clearly, though, the line between citizen journalism and professional news gathering is blurring. David Bankston, co-founder and chief technology officer of [Neighborhood America](#), a site that provides the technology for community message boards and social networks for newspaper Web sites, says his clients are already adding user coverage of local sporting events to their online sports sections. "In the near future, this content will be intermingled throughout the site," says Bankston. Though user submissions will still be clearly marked, they won't be exiled to a section designated specifically for such contributions. "It is a natural evolution."

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