



# Discussion paper Citizen Journalism, Scenarios for the future

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Vlaams Nederlands Huis deBuren – Kunstencentrum Vooruit – IBBT - KHLim c-md – Nieuws.be - StampMedia

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Prepared by: Ann Laenen, PhD



## 1. Definition

Before setting the frame of this discussion page I looked for a useful definition of Citizen Journalism. I want to propose a definition currently proposed by Jay Rosen: When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's citizen journalism. (Pressthink, [www.journalism.nyu.edu/](http://www.journalism.nyu.edu/))

## 2. Context

December 2006 Time, not a celebrity on the cover but a screen and one word 'You' are the man/woman of the year. And why? *For seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game. Time's Person of the Year is you* (Lev Grossman, 2006). With this choice Time pinned down what cannot longer be ignored. Media has changed shape. Today, news is no longer solely linked with the current media providers. But due to recent technological developments it is omnipresent and easy to access. More and more citizens post their news on the web. It is present on websites, Blogs, Youtube, Facebook, Twitter and other social media spaces, and is created by you and me, citizens wanting to share information with others. Citizen journalism is not new (people already participated in news making in the pre-internet era, it seems to be difficult to pin down when the term *Citizen Journalism* first popped up) but the ways they use to participate changed.

Everyone remembers the amateur pictures and films traveling the web of the bombings in the London Underground, the Tsunami and so forth. We are already used to see/find these images next to the ones offered by the mainstream media. As Dan Gillmor highlights in his book 'We the Media' '*I seek a balance that simultaneously preserves the best of today's system and encourages tomorrow emergent, self- assembling journalism*' (2004: XVII). '*The rise of the citizen journalist will make us listen. The ability of anyone to make the news will give new voice to people who've felt voiceless – and whose words we need to hear. They are showing all of us – citizen, journalist, newsmaker – new ways of talking, of learning*' (2004:XVIII). Those taking part have become critical consumers. They also have the feeling they can make a difference since they at least have the impression they were able to have a part in the end result (Bowman & Willis 2004).

In other words one could say that 'packaged goods media' turned into 'conversational media' as John Battelle describes in his article (Battelle media post 17.12.2006). It is indeed in the dialogue between creative users and providers the traditional media and content providers might be forced to reflect on the 'openness' of their content and on the way this content is presented to the public. It is also reasonable to presume that conversational media is there to stay.

Over the last couple of years traditional media has tried to formulate an answer to this development in finding a balance between print – and online information, in keeping track with the newest technological trends to present their information and in figuring out how to integrate citizen journalism within their (online) information channels.

But there is much doubt about the credibility and the quality of the material created by citizen journalists. Critics of participatory journalism and User-Generated Content also tend to say that what these citizen journalists and creative users leave on the Net is not always reliable and that they thus mislead us with their information. They do not believe in what James Surowiecki describes as the *wisdom of the crowds* or the view that a large group of people is smarter than a few, no matter how brilliant they are (2004). To Andrew Keen for instance *the wisdom of the crowds is not in the crowd but in the people with talent and experience* (Debate 2.0), they have the authority.

Indeed there is a risk with the quality of information spread over the Internet, but this is a risk that has always existed. Sources always needed to be checked and that is what also happens in cyberspace, as mentioned earlier quite some users link in to self-regulating communities, within which they do not want to lose their credibility.

Quality shows even in the vast amount of information available on the World Wide Web today. Therefore Chris Anderson, writer of The Long Tail, does believe in a form of crowd behavior. More specifically: *That the crowd is good at spotting merit and making it more visible so that it can get the audience it deserves* (Debate 2.0). Good information will thus be spotted, less accurate or mediocre information will get lost within the large amount of information available on the Web. Or as Alex Iskold states in his article on the attention economy: it is important to give the user the opportunity to choose for the information s/he is interested in at the moment s/he wants. *For example news feeds illustrate the point well, since they ask for consumers attention in exchange for the opportunity to show him/her advertising. The Search engines are similar in that respect, because they show ads in exchange for helping users find answers online. But it is important to realize that the key ingredient in the attention game is relevancy. As long as a consumer sees relevant content, he/she is going to stick around - and that creates more opportunities to sell* (read/write web – attention economy). If you take this thought a little further one has to agree that what is relevant to one person might be totally irrelevant or less relevant to others, which illustrates how relative the label 'validity' can be.

### 3. Questions and discussion frame

Regarding the context sketched above, this paper wants to reflect on the following paradigms:

Technology evolves fast, faster than most 'traditional media providers'. There are reasons to believe their fear for online and mobile technology is linked with ignorance, which leads in discussions about content and reliability. In what way **technological developments** will influence the way we deal with news and information. Will they empower us more, will new constraints appear and will the old ones be sorted in time? Is there a possible role for guides/filters and who would these filters be (newspapers, well known bloggers ...)? And in line with the later, is there a possible role for guides/curators guiding non-expert users through the information in an open way build on trust and reputation?

Citizen journalism sites have been started, some successful (Ohmynews, Hasselt Lokaal, NowPublic ...), others less successful (Skoeps.nl, Bayosphere ...). Gillmor learned through the Bayosphere-project that to make citizen journalism work there is need for a framework, tools and support from experts (Bayosphere post 24.01.2006). But as the context illustrates there are quite some constraints in **working together with citizen journalists**. What are the possible ways forward?

Newspapers try to find a balance between on- and offline information, but this seems to be a difficult task for quite a lot of them. Online news is often taxed as less important, quicker and thus superficial, although more and more people consult online news. The importance of online news cannot be ignored. What are **feasible/workable models for the future?**

## References

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## ***Blog Links***

**Battelle Media** – John Battelle's Searchblog: Packaged Goods Media v. Conversational Media: <http://battellemedia.com/archives/003199.php> (accessed online March 2007)

**Bayosphere** - From Dan: A Letter to the Bayosphere community:  
[http://bayosphere.com/blog/dan\\_gillmor/20060124/from\\_dan\\_a\\_letter\\_to\\_the\\_bayosphere\\_community](http://bayosphere.com/blog/dan_gillmor/20060124/from_dan_a_letter_to_the_bayosphere_community) (accessed online March 2007)

**Pressthink**, [www.journalism.nyu.edu/](http://www.journalism.nyu.edu/)

**Publishing 2.0** – Scott Karp on the convergence of Media and Technology: <http://publishing2.com/>

**Read/Write – The Attention Economy : An Overview:**  
[http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/attention\\_economy\\_overview.php](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/attention_economy_overview.php)