

Encouraging user participation

Online audiences want to interact with their news.

Some of us like to sit back and absorb media like a sponge. Others — an ever-increasing number of us — prefer to get involved, to make our voices heard. To interact. To *participate*.

Thus, today's media producers need to provide options that allow their audiences to participate in every news story and every TV show, whether it's a gun-control debate or an episode of "American Idol."

User participation. It's one reason why the Web became so popular so fast. The old, traditional media — newspapers, TV and radio — were one-way information delivery systems. *They spoke; we listened.* Consumers had no control, no choice but to swallow what they fed us. And we were rarely allowed to comment or contribute.

But the Web changed all that, reversing centuries of journalistic tradition. Online users now expect — *demand* — to contribute and comment. And smart journalists provide ways for them to do it.



In early 2009, a jetliner made an emergency landing in New York's Hudson River. Before the news media even knew the plane was down, Twitter user Janis Krums had snapped this photo of the plane with his cell phone and uploaded the picture to TwitPic, along with this message: "There's a plane in the Hudson. I'm on a ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy." Digital technology now allows non-journalists to transmit eyewitness reports, photos and videos from news scenes before journalists even arrive.

THE PROS AND CONS OF USER PARTICIPATION

ADVANTAGES

◆ **Web users are everywhere YOU'RE not.** They're on the scene at disasters, accidents and riots. They can provide eyewitness accounts, photos, videos, opinions and options for additional coverage you might never find otherwise.

◆ **Web users have untapped expertise.** Almost everyone's an expert at *something*, which means your Web users (who might visit your site from anywhere in the world) can add content and credibility that journalists simply *can't*. That makes your stories richer, more diverse, more authoritative.

◆ **Web users want a communal experience.** They want to know what other people are thinking and saying, how they're coping with day-to-day concerns. They want the Web to be an information democracy, unfiltered and free, where their voices are heard and their interests are reflected — and they're loyal to news outlets who respect that.

DISADVANTAGES

◆ **Readers are unprofessional.** They mistake opinions for facts. They whine. They lie. They spoof. Their grammar and spelling are terrible. They're often 13-year-old pottymouths masquerading as informed adults. They don't respect copyright, which means that photo they "took" on their vacation was actually lifted from a travel magazine.

◆ **Readers are unreliable.** It's hard enough getting trained staffers to produce stories and photos when they're needed; readers are even less dependable. They contribute when they're motivated, *not* because they're obligated. So it's risky to expect they'll automatically generate usable material.

◆ **It takes time and energy** to set up and maintain user-friendly Web elements. Monitoring and editing this extra material can be a headache for understaffed newsrooms.

THE DARK SIDE OF READER COMMENTS

An excerpt from "Death By Moran" by SF Gate columnist Mark Morford:

I was, for years, an enthusiastic advocate of the egalitarian, free-for-all, let's-level-the-playing field aspect of the Web. More voices! More feedback! More participation! Bring it on!

Not anymore. I now tend to agree with "West Wing" creator Aaron Sorkin, who said, "Nothing has done more to make us dumber or meaner than the anonymity of the Internet."

Anonymity tends to bring out the absolute worst in people, the meanest and nastiest and least considerate. Something about not having to reveal who you really are caters to the basest, most unkind instincts of the human animal.

Do not misunderstand: It is far from all bad, and many intelligent, eloquent, hilarious people still add their voices to comment boards across the Interwebs. But the coherent voices are, by and large, increasingly drowned out by the nasty, the puerile, the inane, to the point where, unless you're in the mood to have your positive mood ruined and your belief in the inherent goodness of humanity stomped, there's almost no point in trying to sift through it anymore.

At many news sites, the most popular form of reader participation — often, the *only* form of reader participation — is the comments section that accompanies blogs and news stories.

It's usually the most problematic, too.

As a reporter, you want your stories to stimulate discussion, generate feedback and trigger ideas for follow-up stories. But too often, comments are hijacked by spammers (who bombard sites with ads and misleading links) and trolls (who post insults, obscenities and threats).

As author Benjamin Dolnick put it: "If you ever want to lose faith in humanity, read any comments section on the Internet."

For years, news sites allowed anonymous, free-wheeling, unedited discourse. But a growing number of online editors now filter reader comments by requiring registration (often with names, phone numbers and e-mail addresses), rejecting all objectionable remarks, and allowing users themselves to bury or promote others' comments.

But wait — there's more. "Surely we can do better in the reader-engagement department than many newspaper sites that offer only user comments as an interactive element," says online expert Steve Outing. "It's time (past it, actually) to integrate staff content and information from your community."

How? On the next page, we'll examine other, *better* ways to get readers involved.



COMMENTS AND DISCUSSION

With a simple **CONTACT US** link, users can respond to any story by sending an e-mail message to the reporter or editor. But is that enough? E-mail messages are *private monologues*; it's much more empowering — and productive — to let users engage in *public dialogues*.

That's why most news sites encourage feedback, discussions and suggestions through:

◆ **Comment sections** following news stories, blogs, columns and reviews, where users address both the writer *and* each other (and the writer can weigh in, too). Comments are a terrific way to gauge the impact and accuracy of what you've written and generate ideas for new stories.

◆ **Moderated forums** where users discuss news topics — the economy, yesterday's earthquake or, most popular of all, sports — or debate music, movies, restaurants, cars, etc.

◆ **Live chat** where users can ask questions and react to the responses of visiting newsmakers, politicians, experts and celebrities.

SURVEYS, POLLS & QUIZZES

Never forget: **online polls** are *not* scientific. But though they may be statistically flaky, they still engage readers. Increase page views. Provide graphic interest. And they can steer news coverage by taking the community's pulse on a variety of topics.

Most polls ask simple yes/no or multiple-choice questions, which make it easy to tabulate results. Imagine, for instance, an Oscar ballot that lets users predict the winners in a dozen major categories, then tabulates the overall voting percentages.

Even better, asking an essay question can provide quotes and sources you can use in a follow-up story.

Unlike polls, **tests and quizzes** often have correct answers — asking users to rate their knowledge of political history, sports trivia or health risks, for example. If they're visual and interactive enough, quizzes become more than just sidebars — they can function as the central element of your story.

And as we'll explain next, the more interactive, the better.

INTERACTIVE MEDIA

The Web is all about *links* — clicking links. And the more clickable choices you provide, the more users can customize their own newsscape.

This is especially true with online graphics. **Charts, graphs and maps** are flat and static in traditional media, but online they can be richly layered, responsive to your touch — and, with Flash animation, gorgeously fluid. You can make a volcano erupt. Stroll through the wing of a new museum. Click on different parts of a painting to learn what the artist was thinking.

Searchable online databases let users zero in on the facts they need. How do test scores at your local high school compare to others? How did your county vote in the last presidential election? Transforming data into a Google mashup map is an easy way to let readers explore where local crimes have occurred — or where gas prices are cheapest.

The Web amasses mind-boggling heaps of data. But it's the *journalist's* job to organize and display that data in an accessible, customizable way.

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

Smart, forward-thinking journalists know that news delivery isn't just a one-way monologue — it's a two-way conversation, an *information exchange*. By tapping into the resources of your readers, your stories become stronger. Your audience becomes more engaged.

Many online newsrooms ask users to submit their photos and videos, their anecdotes and opinions, their suggestions for stories. That's a good start. But news sites often shove that "amateur" content off to the side.

What's needed, instead, is more consistent integration of "pro-am" content: enlisting user contributions for more stories more often. When a fire ravages a college dorm, why not run a sidebar inside the main story soliciting eyewitness accounts or photos? For a story on bike theft, why not ask victims (or thieves) to share their experiences?

It's called **crowdsourcing**: using the collective wisdom of a large group to achieve what individuals can't. For solid online journalism, it's essential.



CITIZEN JOURNALISM: MEDIA POWER TO THE PEOPLE

When a tsunami devastates Asia or protests erupt in Iran, ordinary citizens often become instant journalists. They blog firsthand reports, post fuzzy cell-phone photos and tell stories that the mainstream media *can't*. Unexpectedly. Accidentally.

But other ordinary citizens commit their acts of journalism *deliberately*. All over the world, untrained, unprofessional citizen journalists are writing blogs and creating news sites so their voices can be heard. What's driving this growing trend?

◆ **A distrust of mainstream media.** Not surprisingly, many people feel the traditional media are biased, profit-hungry elitists. Citizen journalists believe they can provide more accurate, unfiltered news coverage.

◆ **A need for more localized news.** Big media simply cannot provide the extremely local — *hyperlocal* —

news people need: news about community events, Little League games and neighborhood burglaries. But using teams of amateur reporters, online newsletters try to deliver material that Big Media usually overlooks.

◆ **The sense of empowerment** that new media offers. In the past, you needed a printing press and a fleet of trucks to deliver newspapers to the masses, but today's technology gives everyone a potentially powerful voice — especially minorities and young people who've been excluded or marginalized by traditional media.

Unfortunately, citizen journalism can result in dull, distorted and unreliable content. It will never displace the mainstream media, but it can help encourage journalism professionals to incorporate more voices, more viewpoints and more user-generated content in their online news presentations.