

On Local Sites, Everyone's A Journalist

By Leslie Walker

The Washington Post

Thursday, December 9, 2004; Page E01

When fire destroyed a historic building in Brattleboro, Vt., in the wee hours of Saturday, the local daily newspaper had already been put to bed. But by dawn, local residents had posted photos and their own stories about the blaze on iBrattleboro.com, a local Web site where anyone can write the news.

Residents in the town of 12,000 spent the weekend using the site to publicly discuss ways to help the 11 people who had been hurt or displaced -- and even look for lost cats.

"It served its purpose," said site co-creator Christopher Grotke. "For many people, it was the only place to find any news throughout the day."

One-year-old iBrattleboro.com is at the vanguard of the latest wave of Web publishers trying to build audiences by delivering local news. What's different about their efforts from those in the past is that they are relying on a new ally: local residents.

Several notable ventures have launched or raised money this year to create local news sites online in which readers contribute all or most of the news. The big idea is that citizen-generated content lowers costs and creates more loyal audiences.

The Brattleboro site hasn't sold many ads yet -- Grotke says it's still mostly a labor of love, though he hopes it might turn a profit one day.

Others are bullish on the business prospects for citizen journalism. Advocates say do-it-yourself Web news supported by advertising is more viable today than in the 1990s -- back when Microsoft shuttered its Sidewalk network of entertainment guides and the rival CitySearch network went deeply into the red. That's because more people are online, and they're using faster connections and growing increasingly comfortable posting their thoughts via forums, blogs and other formats. The dream of local Web entrepreneurs is to reel in a new generation of hyper-local advertisers -- those dry cleaners and car washes that rarely advertise in big, daily newspapers.

"The business strategy is if we can get a critical mass of very local content and a local audience, then we can target ads better than we ever could down to a town level," said Jeff Jarvis, president of Advance.net, the Internet arm of Advance Publications.

Jarvis said his firm, which owns a string of community newspapers and Web sites, is preparing to launch citizen-journalist Web sites in six towns in Oregon, New Jersey and Massachusetts. The sites will essentially be town blogs, in which postings from different residents will be grouped together and presented in a newsy format.

One intriguing experiment started in May when the Bakersfield Californian, a daily newspaper with a circulation of about 65,000, launched a community Web site called the Northwest Voice

(www.northwestvoice.com). The site has no paid writers except for a lone editor. It employs only four people full-time, gets most of its content from readers, and -- in a twist that delights ink-stained wretches like me -- publishes a print version with highlights culled from the Web every two weeks. Each print issue is distributed free to the 21,700 homes in northwest Bakersfield, about 115 miles north of Los Angeles.

"One of our business goals was to grow our reach among small and medium-sized businesses in the community who could not afford to be in the daily newspaper or preferred not to be," said Mary Lou Fulton, publisher of the Northwest Voice (and a former editor of washingtonpost.com). "In a typical edition of Northwest Voice, 40 to 50 percent of our advertisers are new or were infrequent [newspaper] advertisers.' "

Locally, an Internet start-up called Backfence LLC is planning to launch reader-generated news sites in Reston and McLean by April. The plan, according to chief executive Susan DeFife, is to develop eight to 10 community sites in Fairfax and eventually go national, creating similar sites in 16 metropolitan areas within three years. Unlike Advance.net or Northwest Voice, Backfence plans no companion print products and won't be hiring reporters. (The company's co-founder, Mark Potts, is a former Washington Post reporter.)

If they don't hire reporters, how do citizen journalism Web sites work? Northwest Voice lets registered users submit stuff in specific categories -- news articles, events, photos, letters to the editor and general feedback -- by filling out a form online. The editor screens submissions but does not censor or rewrite them. Non-local stories or articles touting businesses are among the few items the site won't publish.

Northwest Voice gets its revenue mostly from ads in the print edition, which are mirrored on the Web site. The venture is hovering around breaking even, Fulton said.

Other local media companies are watching Bakersfield closely.

Advance.net, for example, is moving into citizen-journalism in stages. The company already offers readers in a few towns space to post journals or blogs online, and its local Web sites aggressively link to independent blogs in communities where it owns newspapers. Coming soon in six trial markets, said Jarvis, will be group-publishing software similar to Bakersfield's that lets readers post articles, listings, photos and the like. The software will group what readers submit into a common display area.

Jarvis wants to create a network of online journals so local businesses can negotiate one deal and have their advertisements appear on several sites simultaneously.

"It is not easy now to go out and buy ads to appear on the top 10 blogs in New Jersey or Washington," Jarvis said. "Somebody needs to create that ad model."

Others are testing the grass-roots journalism approach in national and international news. Last month, a community-edited site called WikiNews went live, inviting readers to collaborate on producing a general Internet newscast. Anyone can contribute to WikiNews (www.wikinews.org) by editing a published story or submitting one for public "peer review." But the site is off to a slow start, in part because its peer-review process is cumbersome.

Journalism schools are getting into the act, too. Students at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism launched a citizen news site, GoSkokie, in Skokie, Ill., early this year. And last month, the J-Lab Institute for Interactive Journalism at the University of Maryland announced a \$1 million grant program to fund what it calls "micro-local" Web news experiments around the country. Funded by the Knight Foundation, each initial grant will amount to \$12,000 and go to nonprofit groups creating community news sites.

Why would communities form their own news sites instead of ceding the turf to media companies? "Many

feel they are dissed by mainstream news organizations," said Jan Schaffer, executive director of J-Lab. "They can't get their news published, and they can't afford their [media's] ad rates."

That was the thinking that led Grotke and a partner to start iBrattleboro.com, which so far has attracted 2,100 stories from readers and more than 12,000 comments on those articles and serves an average of 3,000 page-views to readers a day.

"Each day it changes," said Grotke. "Some days it looks leftist, others, religious, still others, very concerned. It focuses on international events some days and is extremely local on others."

Its interests vary. Just like people, no?

Leslie Walker's e-mail address is walkerl@washpost.com.

© 2004 The Washington Post Company

Advertising Links by Google

What's this?

journalist

Great deals on Journalist Free Registration Offer - affil
www.ebay.com

Journalist

Find Cameras and Photography Shop here to save time & money!
www.PriceTool.com

We need writers

Publish. be read. and get paid. Start writing instantly!
www.bloggingnetwork.com/