

*The BBC dubbed 2005 as the year of the digital citizen, “consumers turning into citizens” with “a meaningful role to play”. As news media become more collaborative and there is greater choice in what, where and when people choose to watch and listen, the precise nature of that role is somewhat difficult to determine.<sup>1</sup>*

### **The Year Of The Digital Citizen? Let's wait for the Web poll!**

*Nigel Barnett*

In last year's articles on the image, the contributions of 'amateur' content to news media were discussed at length. Throughout 2005 interest in citizen reporting has accelerated raising in turn all the complicated issues associated with news gathering and journalism, such as bias, integrity, attribution, fairness, ownership, rights and obligations to name but a few. With regard to citizen journalism the BBC has been one of the pioneers in encouraging feedback and contributions from its viewers, watchers and readers. In addition it has perhaps less to fear from the augmented participation that the new technologies offer, than the more traditional commercial news media that do not have the comfort of licence fee financing and have to pay their way.

In practical and visible terms citizen reporting has meant the development of websites intermediaries specialising in transforming digital snaps made on cameras and camera phones into financial rewards for the lucky (or unlucky) photographer. Sites like *Scoopt.com* in the UK and *Spymedia.com* in the US, do just that. Events like the London bombings in July and the New Orleans floods generated a plethora of images, videos and eyewitness accounts and most news media organisations have systems in place to manage and sometimes reward reader contributions. There is a big step however between contributing content or commenting on articles on the one hand and authoring and editing news content on the other.

Blogs lead the way in reader comments of course and have become mainstream news conduits themselves. No more so than in politics, technology and journalism itself. The transformation of blogs into aggregators of news and comment has not been slow although websites specializing in such collaborative ventures employ various editorial policies in deciding what exactly news is. Of course organising one's own news page(s) has been possible for a long time using *Google News* and *MSN Newsbot* but these are, by and large, machine read/gathered pages without any 'social' feedback or non journalistic contributions. Citizen Journalism means that the readers become part of the news gathering, agenda setting and content providing 'whole', at national, regional or very local levels. In other words this means creating organisations with more 'bottom up' participation than 'top down' leadership. Citizen Journalist sites might include the active participation of an editorial board and professional journalists like the very successful *Ohmynews.com* in South Korea or they could be stand alone, warts and all, efforts like *NowPublic* which, according to its website, “combines the power of news readers, bloggers, photographers, and writers to create fast, open-source news coverage”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For the full article by Jo Twist see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4566712.stm>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://english.ohmynews.com/english/> and <http://www.nowpublic.com/>

# L'année des TIC 2005 :

Télécom - Electronique - Informatique - Médias - Internet

Many sites such as at *Digg.com* and *Bumphenews.com* allow the readers themselves to decide the importance of a news story. Some commentators have given the name *News 2*, to the news aggregating sites that take on board the tenets of the *Web 2* philosophy, that is to say amongst other things, interactivity, participation and a richer user experience.<sup>3</sup> The many variations in the way these sites are composed can be seen at *Tinfinger.com* which, as well as providing an up to date list of sites, has an excellent matrix comparing the different offers with regard to the use of user generated content, blog content and mainstream news participation.<sup>4</sup>

Although for the moment there is no clear sector leader or self-evident game plan, there does seem to be opportunities for sites that specialize in local news and/or issues. People *do* want to be informed and *are* likely to participate in stories that have a distinct bearing on their own lives. The BBC proposes a novel way of promoting causes and attracting like-minded individuals through its Action Network, where user-generated articles can be published and commented on. At a different level *Chatter Garden* offers the possibility for Hong Kong residents to exchange views on regional politics and public affairs.<sup>5</sup>

New sites such as *Newsvine.com* are coming on-stream in 2006 with more sophisticated offerings but for the moment it remains to be seen exactly how citizen journalism will play a significant role in the way we sift and sort our news input. Nor is it too clear for Dan Gillmor, Alpha-blogger, ex-journalist and founder of *Bayosphere*, a citizen journalist site serving the San Francisco Bay area in the United States! If anybody should know how to make such an enterprise work it would be him; and yet he recently called it a day and has left *Bayosphere* to found the *Center for Citizen Media*, citing the difficulties of finding an effective business model that will empower citizen journalism while at the same time build community involvement and maintain journalistic standards<sup>6</sup>. As news goes, this is not a scoop!

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview of Web 2 see <http://www.oreillynet.com/lpt/a/6228> and for a French translation of the same article see <http://web2rules.blogspot.com/2006/01/what-is-web-20-par-tim-oreilly-version.html>

<sup>4</sup> See <http://tinfinger.blogspot.com/2006/01/feature-lists-for-news-20.html#c113806082473898592>. A different perspective is offered by Steve Outing on PoynterOnline 'The 11 layers of Citizen Journalism'.

<sup>5</sup> For more details see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork/> and <http://www.chattergarden.com>

<sup>6</sup> For the website see <http://bayosphere.com/>. For more details on Gillmor see <http://www.citmedia.org/>