If the citizen journalism phenomenon emerging in the early 21st century had a turning point, or simply a moment befitting our postmodern milieu, perhaps it occurred here: at a rather ordinary event in the middle of an otherwise unordinary U.S. presidential campaign. As the Democratic Party nomination battle between Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton slogged through the spring of 2008, headed toward an uncertain endgame in the summer, Obama supporters gathered for a private fundraiser in San Francisco. April 6 was a quiet Sunday, a lull between primaries. This invitation-only evening affair, hosted at a mansion in the Pacific Heights neighborhood, would be Obama’s fourth fundraiser of the day. It was closed to the press. But it wasn’t closed to Mayhill Fowler.

This was hardly unusual. As a blogger for OffTheBus.net, a network of unpaid writers and researchers covering the presidential campaign for the Huffington Post website, Fowler was a regular at Obama fundraisers and had blogged about them before. Indeed, she herself was an Obama supporter, having maxed out at $2,300 in contributions. So the campaign figured it had little to fear from this former homemaker and Obama loyalist—who also happened to be a rising-star citizen journalist. For journalist she had become. This 61-year-old with time and money on her hands had developed quite a following on the Huffington Post with her highly reflective style of reporting, in which candidate quotes often appeared buried in her blog posts, wrapped inside layers of contextual (and personal) narrative. “It violates almost all of the conventions of traditional reporting (though not its ethical code),” Marc Cooper, editorial director for OffTheBus, would later write, “and that’s what makes it all so damn interesting.”

As she went to the fundraiser that night, Fowler wasn’t expecting much. “I thought maybe I’d find something for background, I thought one sentence, maybe a dependent clause,” she told Katharine Q. Seelye of The New York Times. And she almost left early when Obama launched into his stump speech, one she knew well from the campaign trail; she had just finished tailing Obama around Pennsylvania—but in a separate car, not on the campaign bus. Plus, the house was hot and stuffy, packed with semi-wealthy Californians clamoring to capture the event with their cellphone and video cameras. But then, with her digital recorder poised, Fowler heard something that took her aback. In the now-famous remarks, Obama, in describing the economic plight of rural Americans, said, “It’s not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.”

Fowler knew this was newsworthy but spent days stewing over what to do about it,
torn by conflicting loyalties to the campaign and to her readers, and worried that whatever she wrote would be torn out of context. “There are no standards of journalism on the Internet,” she later told Seelye. “I’m always second-guessing myself. Is this the right thing to do? Am I being fair?” Five days later, on a Friday (fewer people would see it that way, she reasoned), after consulting with Huffington Post editors, she published her report, though with the lightning quote couched inside several paragraphs of ruminations.

The post immediately hit the fan, generating 250,000 hits and 5,000 comments within 48 hours. It became global news within hours, and the “bitter” quote and its fallout dominated much of the headlines leading up to the Pennsylvania primary later that month. In a new era of YouTube politics, in which virtually no candidate appearance or utterance goes unrecorded, amplifying the impact and potential of the “gotcha” snippet as well as the full-length speech, Fowler’s work was as apposite as it was influential: another case of the Internet changing politics and its mediation through the press.

“I’m 61,” Fowler told The New York Times. “I can’t believe I would be one of the people who’s changing the world of media.”

And so we come to the central question of this chapter: Is all of this—this citizen journalism, this mixing and melding of amateur and professional in news production, this opportunity for seemingly anyone to inform and influence on a massified scale—really changing media? In our attention-deficit news cycle, “Bittergate” (after all, no half-scandal is complete without the “gate” appendage) caused an instant furor but ultimately lost its flame, rather quickly falling out of the headlines and off the agenda of Sunday morning talk shows, even if its embers burned on for weeks in the hyper-partisan blogosphere. Today, the episode is just one more relic of a supercharged 2008 presidential campaign. And yet, the Fowler case is instructive because it illustrates the essence of citizen journalism: the uncertain, unclear, indeed untidy reconfiguration of roles, causing us to question what exactly is news and what qualifies one to report it. Was Fowler a supporter, a blogger, a journalist … all three, or something else entirely? “We had a fundamental misunderstanding of my priorities,” Fowler said at the time, explaining her relationship with the Obama campaign. “Mine were as a reporter, not as a supporter. They thought I would put the role of supporter first.”

We’re entering new territory here, as New York University professor Jay Rosen likes to remind us. “Citizen journalism isn’t a hypothetical in this campaign,” Rosen wrote. He was at the vanguard in articulating citizen journalism (and the public journalism movement that preceded it), and helped create OffTheBus.net with Arianna Huffington. “It’s not a beach ball for newsroom curmudgeons, either. It’s Mayhill Fowler, who had been in Pennsylvania with Obama, listening to the candidate talk about Pennsylvanians to supporters in San Francisco, and hearing something that didn’t sound right to her.” Rosen and Huffington saw the potential for conflicts with the campaigns as supporters behaved as reporters. “But we also felt that participants in political life had a right to report on what they saw and heard themselves,” Rosen wrote on the Huffington Post, “not as journalists claiming no attachments but as citizens with attachments who were relinquishing none of their rights.”

“Citizen” or “journalist”? Spectator or reporter? New territory indeed. This hybridization of news production threatens to rupture all we’ve come to understand about delineations between journalist and audience, producer and user, professional and non. Where does newswork end and media consumption begin, particularly when technologies such as the Internet increasingly enable and encourage open-source cooperation and information sharing across networks? Where are the defined boundaries as we enter a stage
of continuous creation through collaborative communities, moving as we do from traditional production to what media scholar Axel Bruns calls “produsage”? It is at this juncture of convergence, amid slippery distinctions and blurring roles, where content is mashed and repurposed through participatory media, that we examine the future of citizen journalism: How did we get here, and where are we going toward 2020 and beyond?

That’s a broad question, of course, and one that could lead down many avenues worth exploring. But for the purposes of this chapter we will first focus on understanding the essence of today’s citizen journalism, and then consider three features shaping the future of user-generated news and information:

• **Motivations**—the underlying rationale, on the part of users and producers alike, to embrace citizen journalism;

• **Methods**—the Web 2.0 tools of today and Web 3.0 platforms of tomorrow for facilitating grassroots participation in news creation; and

• **Momentum**—the driving trends of pro-am convergence—across media roles and platforms—that are central to the future of collaborative journalism.

**What is citizen journalism?**

Like other fashionable buzzwords of the digital age, “citizen journalism” is a catch-all term for a number of principles and processes at work. Its parent term is “citizen media,” which is often invoked in discussions of another Internet buzzword—user-generated content—and its manifold manifestations, from blogs to wikis to social networking. All of this has occurred largely within the framework of Web 2.0, representing not so much a technical change in the Internet as a major step forward in software that facilitates collaboration in creating and sharing information (think: photos on Flickr, videos on YouTube, and personal data on Facebook and MySpace). As such, Web 2.0 has spawned a “Generation C” of users, so named because they have new skills and interests in “content” and “creativity,” not to mention their contribution to the “casual collapse” of traditional media as well as their ability to generate “cash” from their activities, as Bruns points out. Bruns, himself no stranger to buzzwords (having coined “produsage” to describe the paradigm shift occurring in the producer-consumer relationship in media and beyond), notes that Web 2.0 marks a movement “from static to dynamic content, from hierarchically managed to collaboratively and continuously developed material, and from user-as-consumer to user-as-contributor.”

This user-led phenomenon is important for understanding the rise of citizen journalism in the early 21st century. As we’ll discuss later, a more open and adaptive Internet architecture has provided the means and tapped the motivations for user-generated news to flourish. And, in the future, as computing increasingly becomes a mobile activity, less connected with the desktop paradigm (physically and metaphorically speaking), with user interfaces better suited for content creation and sharing by anyone, anywhere, anytime—then, as now, technology will play a substantial part in shaping the citizen journalism of tomorrow.

But, first, we must conceptualize this present form of journalism, today. Think of it as **news as process** as opposed to **news as product**—perhaps exemplified in the differences between continuously updating Web pages and the fixed, unchanging edition of a print newspaper. This isn’t to say that all citizen journalism occurs online (though most of it does), but rather that its DNA is better suited to an environment that privileges nonlinear, multi-sourced adaptability over top-down, one-way editorial control.

More importantly, however, citizen journalism is about the people who produce it—
you, me, and potentially any one of the 2 billion people carrying camera-equipped cell phones, to name a few. They (or, we) are The People Formerly Known as the Audience, to use Jay Rosen’s phrase. In a 2006 post of the same name on his PressThink blog, Rosen captured the essence of this shift:

The people formerly known as the audience are those who were on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another—and who today are not in a situation like that at all.

• Once they were your printing presses; now that humble device, the blog, has given the press to us. That’s why blogs have been called little First Amendment machines. They extend freedom of the press to more actors.

• Once it was your radio station, broadcasting on your frequency. Now that brilliant invention, podcasting, gives radio to us. And we have found more uses for it than you did.

• Shooting, editing and distributing video once belonged to you, Big Media. Only you could afford to reach a TV audience built in your own image. Now video is coming into the user’s hands, and audience-building by former members of the audience is alive and well on the Web.

• You were once (exclusively) the editors of the news, choosing what ran on the front page. Now we can edit the news, and our choices send items to our own front pages.

A highly centralized media system had connected people “up” to big social agencies and centers of power but not “across” to each other. Now the horizontal flow, citizen-to-citizen, is as real and consequential as the vertical one.

As Rosen makes clear, however, this doesn’t mean Big Media are going to be replaced by We Media. Theatergoers do not storm the stage to put on their own production; they still consume with pleasure. Thus, this tension between legacy media and citizen media is not an either/or phenomenon but rather a both/and condition of complementary strengths. Big Media and We Media can co-exist (and perhaps even thrive together) because they have different goals and meet different needs. Nonetheless, the audience has served notice, and at least some media executives have gotten the message. Rosen points to this remark from Associated Press CEO Tom Curley, from his remarks to the Online News Association in 2004: “The users are deciding what the point of their engagement will be—what application, what device, what time, what place.” As for what this supercharged audience actually does to create journalism, Mark Glaser, who writes the MediaShift blog, described it best:

The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others. For example, you might write about a city council meeting on your blog or in an online forum. Or you could fact-check a newspaper article from the mainstream media and point out factual errors or bias on your blog. Or you might snap a digital photo of a newsworthy event happening in your town and post it online. Or you might videotape a similar event and post it on a site such as YouTube.
All these might be considered acts of journalism, even if they don’t go beyond simple observation at the scene of an important event. Because of the wide dispersion of so many excellent tools for capturing live events—from tiny digital cameras to videophones—the average citizen can now make news and distribute it globally, an act that was once the province of established journalists and media companies.

Put this way, citizen journalism is a fairly straightforward concept—the average person creating and distributing news via a global medium. But it often gets lost in translation, both in the professional and academic literature, and it can easily become ill-defined in theory and ill-deployed in practice. Part of the problem begins with the name itself. “Citizen journalism” places newsmaking within the boundaries of national identity, which is problematic, and obscures the fact that professional journalists think and act like “citizens.”

That’s why Jeff Jarvis, a media consultant famous for his Buzzmachine blog, prefers the term “networked journalism,” which, he says, “takes into account the collaborative nature of journalism now: professionals and amateurs working together to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, perspectives. It recognizes the complex relationships that will make news. And it focuses on the process more than the product.” Regardless, whether it’s called “networked journalism,” or “grassroots journalism,” or something else entirely, the essence remains the same: Journalism is no longer the provenance of professionals only. The door is open, even if only slightly in some cases, for regular folks to act in creating news content, as opposed to merely reacting to it.

In that vein, perhaps a more appropriate emphasis is participatory journalism, because that word captures the core element of user-generated news—active involvement from many parties, not just a production of a single (news) entity. Seen this way, participatory journalism is an extension of what Yale Law professor Yochai Benkler dubbed “commons-based peer production” in his seminal paper “Coase’s Penguin, or Linux and the Nature of the Firm.” This open-source model of production harnesses and harvests the collective energy and intelligence of large numbers of people, each doing small tasks that contribute to a larger project, and often with little organizational direction and no compensation. It’s in this sense that media scholar Mark Deuze and his colleagues defined participatory journalism as “any kind of newswork at the hands of professionals and amateurs, of journalists and citizens, and of users and producers benchmarked by what Benkler calls commons-based peer production.”

But even that definition might be somewhat misleading. For while some citizen journalism is open-source in nature (more on “crowdsourcing” later), much of it occurs within institutional, corporate frameworks that allow for content creation and submission, but not the user-level editing of, say, a Wikipedia. So, we consider yet another term: multiperspectival journalism. It reflects the varied viewpoints we might expect from such composite participation. This multiperspectival concept was first introduced three decades ago by journalism researcher Herbert Gans. He lamented that mainstream news organizations couldn’t (or wouldn’t) include a fuller array of community views on the news. He suggested that “the news, and the news media, be multiperspectival, presenting and representing as many perspectives as possible—and at the very least, more than today.” He further mused, rather boldly: “It is proper to ask who should be responsible for story selection and production. The news may be too important to leave to the journalists alone” (emphasis
added).

But how that was to be accomplished, how such multiplicity of views could be aggregated and distributed and ultimately discussed in the public sphere, was beyond Gans’ imagination in the late 1970s. A few decades later, all of that would change.

An abbreviated history

While there’s hardly space in this chapter to consider citizen journalism from beginning to end, a little history is in order. Dan Gillmor, a newspaper columnist turned blogger turned new media advocate, has been the leading light in the citizen journalism movement, and his book “We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People” charts the rise of this new form of journalism: from the anonymous pamphleteers during the United States’ founding to the citizen-captured video of Rodney King’s beating by police in 1991, aided along the way by the telegraph, telephone, and personal computing. With the emergence of the Web, so came the possibility for do-it-yourself (DIY) publishing to an increasingly wide, unfiltered audience. The anti-globalization movement in the late 1990s spawned Indymedia to challenge corporate media coverage, just as OhmyNews appeared in 2000 as an alternative to the conservative press in South Korea. This pushback against mainstream media continued and was crystallized with the rise of blogs around the same time. Blogging came into its own on 9/11 and during the war in Iraq, and for many people blogs are still synonymous with citizen journalism—even if a Pew Research survey found that most bloggers don’t think of themselves as journalists nor want to behave like one.

Citizen journalism’s next and most enduring phase would be hyperlocal. As researcher Chris Anderson points out on his blog (indypendent.typepad.com), by 2005, around the time people realized that blogs were largely dependent on the legacy media for content and did little reporting of their own, we saw the emergence of microlocal journalism. Online news sites (or print/online hybrids) would use contributions from local residents to highlight neighborhoods and issues that went underrepresented by the traditional press. Soon the industry was abuzz over the likes of The Northwest Voice in Bakersfield, Calif.; myMissourian.com in Columbia, Mo.; and Bluffton Today in South Carolina. Such outlets depended almost entirely on user-generated content—most of it prosaic (think: photos of pets), yet often popular with locals. Even if such sites tended to open the floodgates to write-ups on school fundraisers and bake sales, as opposed to meatier reporting, their success proved that if an easy-to-use platform were provided, citizen journalists would jump abroad. What’s more, Anderson notes, hyperlocal journalism “also solved a business problem, one that it didn’t necessarily set out to solve”: It proved that user-generated content could make money.

That revelation set in motion the current love-fest for citizen journalism, as news executives who once saw it as a threat now seize it as the future. It’s Old Media meets Web 2.0: Newspapers by the score opening their Web sites to comments and contributions during 2006; USA Today refashioning itself as a social networking destination in 2007; and CNN, as if handing over the keys to its Internet wheel, giving users free rein of its new citizen-journalism site in 2008 (iReport’s slogan: “Unedited. Unfiltered. News.”).

**MOTIVATIONS: Why citizen journalism?**

This leads us to consider the underlying rationale for citizen journalism, and where all of this is positioned within the larger field of media, society, and polity. Broadly speaking, the forces undergirding participatory journalism could be envisioned as a triangulated
interplay of Citizen, Corporate, and Convergence.

The Citizen speaks to the political orientation of the movement: its normative goal of improving democracy by nurturing a more engaged and better-informed citizenry. As early proponents Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis put it in their “We Media” manifesto: “The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.” The Citizen aspect of this equation also calls to mind the philosophical roots of this phenomenon, extending naturally from the public/civic journalism movement of the 1990s. That earlier effort believed in making journalism more responsive to ordinary people, and in turn helping ordinary people become more active in solving community problems and taking part in politics. Participatory journalism tools and trends—from blogs to wikis to crowdsourcing, as well as enhanced opportunities for the audience to upload its own content and fact-check professionally produced material—have much the same aim. Thus, both civic and citizen journalism pivot off an ideal envisioned by the late James Carey; in a democracy, he believed, journalism should be about helping a community have a conversation with itself. In this way, participatory news holds the promise to fulfill the never-quite-realized vision of public journalism’s pioneers. “Unlike in the first phase of public journalism, where news organizations initiated the engagement,” wrote public journalism researcher Joyce Nip, “in this second phase, the public themselves hold the possibility of taking the initiative.”

Certainly, there are other, non-political reasons for wanting to be a citizen journalist. In an insightful First Monday essay called “Constructing a Framework to Enable an Open Source Reinvention of Journalism,” Leonard Witt points to various models for motivating people to contribute. One has been around for decades: Every day, journalists persuade sources to give up their time and information, at no cost. Publicists cooperate because it’s their job, academics do it for career enhancement, social activists do it for the cause, and others go on record for civic duty or for the hedonistic pleasure of seeing their name in print. Witt also notes that in the free- and open-source software literature similar motivation words pop up: reputation, career benefits, fun, community, and recognition. And what of money? It seems reasonable that if audience members were paid a per-click rate for stories posted or videos uploaded, the quantity and quality of citizen offerings would increase. But, as Witt points out, if the open-source software phenomenon has taught us anything, it’s that Yochai Benkler’s “sharing nicely” model really works; under the right conditions, people will share, just as they were taught to do on the playground as kids. It’s in our DNA to contribute.

The Corporate reminds us that participatory journalism is not entirely bottom-up. Much of it occurs within the parameters and on the platforms established by large media companies, who wield ultimate editorial control in varying degrees, as witnessed by the wide array of models for citizen journalism—from the freewheeling Slashdot to the tightly monitored newspaper forums. As Deuze and his colleagues note:

The common use of “citizen journalism” as a blanket term for such news publishing models to some extent obscures the significant differences in approach between the various participatory news websites currently in operation. In spite of the involvement of citizens as contributors, some such sites retain a degree of conventional editorial control over what is eventually published, while others publish all submitted content immediately, or allow registered users to vote on what passes through the publication’s gates; similarly, some sites harness their communities as content contributors mainly at the response and discussion stage, while others rely
Thus, gatekeeping doesn’t disappear with citizen journalism; it just becomes more subtle, depending on who is watching the gates—whether it’s a YouTube, *The New York Times*, or *Bluffton Today*. Moreover, it’s important to know why the Corporate has crashed the citizen journalism party, creating more platforms for participation but also injecting a Big Media element that didn’t exist in the early days of Indymedia. The shift began in 2005. With newspapers hemorrhaging readership like never before, publishers began to imagine (wrongly, however) that user-generated content would solve their woes. (*Hey, free labor*) The industry literature of the time is loaded with 12-step programs for anxious news executives to fire up a citizen media venture. As journalism professor Clyde Bentley and his colleagues at the University of Missouri described the mood, in a case study of their citizen journalism creation, myMissourian.com: “If necessity is the mother of invention, panic may be the mother of journalistic innovation.”

Hence was born the Citizen-Corporate hybrid, a bottom-up, top-down mash-up befitting this era of *Convergence*. MIT professor Henry Jenkins famously defined “convergence culture” as interplay between conflicting and complementary forces: Media companies are becoming savvier in delivering their content more aggressively and more broadly to expand their revenue, even as consumers are learning to bring media content (including news) more fully under their control, to consume it and repurpose it how and when they see fit. Convergence is not merely about technology; it describes a social and cultural shift that’s occurring in part because of new media technologies. The result is a participatory culture where traditional and new media mix and meld in unpredictable ways, through processes that are both corporate-driven and grassroots-enabled. Sometimes those forces work symbiotically; other times they are at war with each other. In convergence culture, participation and collaboration is prized, assumptions about production and consumption are challenged, and the resulting change in the way we engage media and popular culture has implications for work, life, play, politics—and journalism.

As we consider citizen journalism today, and imagine the shape it’s likely to take in the future, convergence is the unifying force, creating a “third space” between top-down and bottom-up news ventures. Consider the convergence model of *Bluffton Today*, a combination of a free newspaper and a community Web site serving an affluent region on South Carolina’s coast. In their case study of Bluffton Today, Deuze and colleagues write:

What makes the paper and site a prime example of a true hybrid between professional and amateur participatory news is its deliberate choice to have (slightly edited) user-generated content as its prime source of news and information. According to Morris [Publishing Group] analyst Steve Yelvington, *Bluffton Today* is an “experiment in citizen journalism, a complete inversion of the typical online newspaper model,” as staffers as well as registered community members get a blog, a photo gallery, read/write access to a shared public community calendar, a community cookbook, and an application that supports podcasting and the uploading of video clips. Regarding the paper, readers’ online comments on stories that appear in the print edition are edited and printed in the hard copy of next day’s newspaper.

One of the unintended consequences of *Bluffton Today*’s beta launch, with its tweaking and tinkering to fit community tastes, was improved transparency and dialogue that
translated into greater trust among the community, executives said. Deuze et al. concluded that “convergence culture seems to instill increased levels of transparency in the media system, where producers and consumers of content can ‘see’ each other at work, as they both play each other’s roles.”

In sum, the tangled interplay of Citizen, Corporate and Convergence have set the stage for participatory journalism to flourish—but those forces, of course, are only part of the story. To fully examine citizen journalism in the present, and make some prediction about its path, we must reflect on the technology that got us here, and envision a few tools that might emerge in the future.

METHODS: Tools of today, tools of tomorrow

Blogs. Wikis. Podcasts. YouTube. That new media have been central to the rise of participatory news, offering easy platforms for creation and publication, goes without saying. Yet, it’s important to remember that these tools—from the free Web 2.0 software to the increasingly cheap hardware afforded by digital cameras and low-cost computers—are “new” only in a relative sense. Each epoch has seen what Roger Fidler calls “mediamorphosis”—an evolution, more than revolution, from one form of communication to another, with varying degrees of disruption and cohabitation by the technologies. In roughly the past 200 years, such disruptive “new media” have ranged from pamphleteering and penny presses to the telegraph and television; in every instance, the technology or techniques that challenged established media were a reflection of their circumstances as much as their revolutionary power. As Nicholas Lemann, dean of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, wrote in a New Yorker critique of Internet journalism: “Societies create structures of authority for producing and distributing knowledge, information, and opinion. These structures are always waxing and waning, depending not only on the invention of new means of communication but also on political, cultural, and economic developments.”

Citizen journalism, then, is as much a product of the technology as it of our times—our emphasis on individual empowerment and public transparency, not to mention our willingness to leave, quite publicly, bread crumbs of our personal life on social networking sites and in Google searches. We’re increasingly out there, exposed online … and finding that we’re OK with that. Participatory culture plays into and reinforces this ethos of openness and publicness. All are invited to take part—on whatever level: posting photos to Flickr, creating fan blogs, or simply commenting on news stories—and equally share the benefits of having information more public and more immediate and more accessible than ever. And, yet, such a culture has developed in tandem with the technology. It’s not just the Internet itself, but the Internet enhancements of the 21st century that have made participatory journalism possible. It’s broadband-speed connections, almost universal now, that make video worth uploading and watching on YouTube. It’s Web 2.0 software and sensibilities that encourage decentralized, networked, bottom-up creation and distribution of content. It’s the low-cost barriers to entry afforded by Google’s free stuff, ubiquitous camera phones, and $150 Flip video recorders. No presses and no editors required. Just plug and play.

Of course, such grandiose descriptions tend to oversimplify the situation; even if potentially millions can contribute online, relatively few of them do in any major way, and perhaps fewer still enjoy their stay in today’s “user-generated purgatory” of never-ending drivel. Nevertheless, Web technologies have unleashed a citizen-participation force unlike
anything seen in the history of media. We can only expect a broadening and deepening base of such communication tools in the future.

**Envisioning Web 3.0**

But, from a technological perspective, will citizen journalism in 2025 look anything like it does in 2008? For that matter, what of the Internet as a whole?

While long-term prognostications are notoriously tricky—after all, the Mosaic Web browser was launched barely 15 years ago, and only, um, a few things have changed since then—this much is clear: The current model for online journalism (both citizen and professional) is a *desktop* model. That is, it is best accomplished from a computer and displayed on conventional Web pages. Indeed, this is true for all of Web 2.0; for all the revolutionary rhetoric it has inspired, the second-generation Internet remains a desktop-oriented platform, whether you’re talking about blogs, RSS feeds, wikis, photo-sharing, or social networking.

The future, by contrast, points to a *mobile* model. While handhelds and smartphones have been around for some time, the release of Apple’s iPhone in 2007 heralded a new era, one in which the consumption and creation of multimedia could take place anywhere, anytime. In this next phase, perhaps a Web 3.0 for media generally, citizen journalism becomes a truly mobile experience, giving new meaning to being “live” and “on the scene.” We’re already familiar with the impact of having camera phones in the hands of millions of people, particularly after the London subway bombings in 2005. But fast-forward to a video future and consider the likes of Qik.com. The fledgling site makes possible the “human satellite truck,” as Jeff Jarvis calls it—the ability to broadcast live on the Web from your video-equipped cellphone. “No big camera. No satellite uplink. No editing into packages. No b-roll. Just the news now.” Such a scenario of live news creation makes YouTube, with its tedious editing and uploading required, seem lumbering by comparison. Reuters has already tried this. After successfully outfitting its mobile journalism (or “mojo”) unit with Nokia multimedia phones and Bluetooth keyboards, it is thinking of doing the same for its fleet of reporters—as well as giving phones to selected “citizen experts.”

Mobile video is just one peek into a future citizen journalism filled with images. As connectivity speeds increase and camera quality and ubiquity grow, the Web will become more visual, and more visceral—more raw footage, less scripted reporting, more as-it-happens awareness shared by producer and audience alike. In such a world, participatory journalism will be less about words and blog posts as it will be about presenting one’s audio-visual reality, in real-time, on the off-chance something of interest will occur. It will be livecasting, and *life*-casting. Indeed, both.

Even as blog posts become shorter and less about words, it’s quite likely that their frequency will increase, created more fluidly from a mobile—rather than desktop—platform. Just witness the buzz over Twitter, which has taken mobile blogging (or, “moblogging”) to new levels with its easy-to-send, easy-to-share tweets: messages of 140 characters designed to fit the dimensions of a cellphone text message. When other means failed, Twitter allowed a TV station to cover the runaway wildfires in San Diego, and later it carried the first reports of a massive earthquake in China. It’s easy to imagine such phone-and-PC linking tools permeating the participatory journalism of the future, just as similar “push” technologies—synchronizing personal data and media files across multiple platforms—go mainstream with the likes of iPhone 2.0.

But if enhanced mobility marks the individual-citizen contribution to come, *crowdsourcing* unlocks the wisdom of the collective, and appears poised to become a key
component of next-generation Citizen Journalism. Think of it as Wikipedia for journalism. Or, as Robert Niles of the Online Journalism Review defines it: “Crowdsourcing, in journalism, is the use of a large group of readers to report a news story. It differs from traditional reporting in that the information collected is gathered not manually, by a reporter or team of reporters, but through some automated agent, such as a website. Stripped to its core, though, it’s still just another way of reporting, one that will stand along the traditional ‘big three’ of interviews, observation and examining documents.” Crowdsourcing fits neatly into a main tenet of citizen journalism: that professional reporters are not the exclusive arbiters of knowledge on a given subject; “the audience knows more collectively than the reporter alone,” Glaser wrote. As a journalism method, crowdsourcing already has been used by some Big Media outlets, most notably when The Dallas Morning News asked readers to help it sort through a mountain of digitized records on the JFK assassination. But crowdsourcing is more naturally deployed by journalism upstarts with small staffs (e.g., Joshua Micah Marshall’s Talking Points Memo) or those with virtually no staff at all (e.g., Jay Rosen’s NewAssignment.net). In his review of crowdsourced journalism, Niles concludes with this prediction about its place in the future of citizen journalism:

Unlike more traditional notions of “citizen journalism,” crowdsourcing does not ask readers to become anything more than what they’ve always been: eyewitnesses to their daily lives. They need not learn advanced reporting skills, journalism ethics or how to be a better writer. It doesn’t ask readers to commit hours of their lives in work for a publisher with little or no financial compensation. Nor does it allow any one reader’s work to stand its own, without the context of many additional points of view. For those reasons, I think, crowdsourcing ultimately will revolutionize journalism as “citizen journalism” efforts that rely on more traditional reporting methods fail.

MOMENTUM: Convergence, concentration, conversation

By 2007, even as talk of citizen journalism had reached a fever pitch, questions were emerging about its long-term sustainability. The Bayosphere.com citizen journalism venture started by Dan Gillmor, the founding father, had already failed. Then the much-acclaimed Backfence.com, often cited in academic and industry articles as the shining example of citizen journalism, called it quits. Then, later that year, Steve Outing, who perhaps knew a successful model better than anyone after writing his seminal “11 Layers of Citizen Journalism” essay for the Poynter Institute, saw his own citizen-based venture flame out. Not enough professional content, he realized too late; plus, “you need to filter out and highlight the best user content, while downplaying the visibility of the mediocre stuff.”

Was citizen journalism already waning, dying of neglect amid media abundance, or merely struggling to “monetize” itself in the short term? Perhaps these thoughts were on the mind of Oh Yeon-ho, founder and CEO of OhmyNews in South Korea. He opened his company’s 2007 International Citizen Reporters’ Forum with a cautionary tone: “[With more access to broadband Internet worldwide,] the question looming large is increasingly less about ‘digital opportunity’ and more about how we can best manage the abundance of content, Web platforms and user participation. While we are seeing an explosion of blogs, an equal number of bloggers are leaving cyberspace at the same time out of frustration at the scarcity of response. After all, how many bloggers do you remember?”
Around the same time, a team of researchers began a study called, “Tracking and Analyzing Community News Models.” They conducted an audit of the 64 citizen journalism sites they found in 15 U.S. metro areas. One surprising, and particularly troubling, finding emerged: Despite the talk of transparency and interactivity, most of the citizen media sites analyzed were more tightly controlled by gatekeepers than professional news sites; only 27% allowed users to upload content to the site. Such insularity might be expected of fledgling Web sites, most staffed by volunteers only, but the findings underscore a larger point about citizen journalism: It’s very much under construction.

That uncertainty makes predicting its future path all the more challenging. Yet, prevailing trends in participatory culture point to an increasingly empowered audience, one able to create, critique, and collaborate content more seamlessly than ever before. Thus, despite the mixed record so far, there’s momentum for citizen journalism. There are driving forces of pro-am convergence, of audience fragmentation and concentration, and of hunger for conversation that are setting the stage for the future of collaborative journalism—online, offline, and perhaps in the mobile spaces in between.

**Convergence**

In the 1990s, media convergence often meant local newspapers partnering with local television stations, amid a wider push throughout media for consolidation and conglomeration. Today, convergence in journalism is an effort to connect the newsroom with the outside world. If the first phase of convergence was about cutting costs and expanding coverage, the second is about mere survival.

But convergence isn’t simply an organizational reshuffling. As we discussed earlier, it’s a culture, an ethic, a revised way of thinking about media production and consumption. And, in journalism generally and participatory journalism in particular, it’s upending not only long-standing structures and norms but also reconfiguring relationships among journalists, sources, and audience in unpredictable ways—creating a mash-up, if you will. A convergence of news platforms, roles, and styles will dominate the citizen journalism of the future.

Let’s begin with the coming convergence of platforms. For the newspaper industry, the convergence of print and online models seems inevitable, with the latter finally eclipsing the former in total advertising revenue (and thus organizational emphasis) sometime around 2020 or beyond, depending on whom you ask. Given that participatory journalism occurs more easily online than in print, this shift is certain to lend more prominence and possibility to user-generated content—enabling, for example, more distributed, wisdom-of-the-crowd kind of reporting. This transition will alter gatekeeping, too. As news organizations cut staff and retrench their resources, we could see a move from user-generated creation to user-generated control. This is already occurring with the likes of CNN’s iReport, which announced itself this way:

What if we turned this site over to you? What if we allowed people to post raw video and tell stories you’d never see on CNN? What if it had politically-incorrect speech? What if it didn’t matter if the stories were balanced? What if, instead of us confirming every nuance, we trusted you to determine what was and what wasn’t accurate?

What if we created a site where the community—not CNN—became the “Most Trusted Name in News”?

And so, we developed iReport.com. Don’t kid yourselves. This content is not pre-vetted or pre-read by CNN. This is your platform. In some journalistic circles,
this is considered disruptive, even controversial! But we know the news universe is changing. We know that even here, at CNN, we can’t be everywhere, all the time following all the stories you care about. So, we give you iReport.com. You will program it, you will police it; you will decide what’s important, what’s interesting, what’s news.

Not coincidentally, CNN keeps its distance from the unwashed masses using its citizen-reporting venture, with nary a link to CNN.com on the iReport home page. This tension in convergence, of providing platforms for user engagement on the one hand while maintaining brand purity on the other, is occurring even within non-mainstream news sites that increasingly must navigate the professional-amateur dichotomy. Take, for instance, the Huffington Post. It has what co-founder Jonah Peretti calls the “mullet strategy.” (Put another way, on Peretti’s BuzzFeed site: “Business up front, party in the back.”) In an interview with the *New Yorker*, Peretti said: “User-generated content is all the rage, but most of it totally sucks.” The mullet strategy encourages readers to “argue and vent on the secondary pages, but professional editors keep the front page looking sharp. The mullet strategy is here to stay, because the best way for Web companies to increase traffic is to let users have control, but the best way to sell advertising is a slick, pretty front page where corporate sponsors can admire their brands.” For the Huffington Post’s editorial process, this means front-page material gets edited while off-the-front blog posts get checked after they’re posted—and then only if there are egregious problems. Thus, as convergence blurs traditional distinctions between professional and amateur, as new platforms emerge and journalistic roles converge, we can envision a hybrid journalism of the future: Some professional oversight for the up-front news; some collective, blogging-style quality control on the back end; and increased transparency and trust built into everything in between. It won’t be perfect, of course, and a lot of good public affairs reporting will be lost in the process. Moreover, many newspapers and other new news ventures will never reach the critical mass to survive online, or in whatever other media format comes next. But, amid the creative destruction of 20th century news models, there’s sufficient opportunity for experimentation with pro-am journalism to warrant some optimism for the future of converged journalism.

Concentration

Even as news media seek to expand their horizontal reach through convergence, linking with media allies and an active audience, their content will become more vertical in scope—not so much hyperlocal as hypernarrow, dedicated to an increasingly niche area of interest. This is the Long Tail brought to new(s) media economics. As fewer and fewer journalism outlets have the resources to cover general news for a general audience—and make any money doing it—audiences for news, like audiences for other media, will move from being broad and shallow to narrow and deep, as noted by University of Texas professor Rusty Todd. This will be true, too, for citizen journalism. The Chi-Town Daily News, a 2006 startup actively recruiting citizen journalists, is hoping to have one reporter for each of the city’s 77 neighborhoods. With 30-some reporters so far, the site covers Chicago generally at this point, but the goal is a more tailored look for each neighborhood individually. Likewise, a concentrated version of hyperniche news is evident in the likes of EveryBlock.com, an Adrian Holovaty creation that allows users to search for news in their very neighborhood.
Perhaps this trend reflects not so much a desire for local-local news as much as intensely personal news—news about the 150 people I know best, or information about whether my train is on time, or word on whether my neighbor’s sold (and at what price). This idea, of the hyper-personal trumping the hyper-local, began coalescing in 2008, as advocates of participatory journalism started debating: Do most people really care about local news? (Or, as Amy Gahran nicely put it in her Poynter blog post on the subject: “What if we are Wii bowling alone—and like it?”) In the discussion that followed, Steve Outing offered this trenchant observation:

‘Dog bites man’ is newsworthy if you know the man, or dog,” so nicely sums up what I’ve been thinking for some time about what many have termed “hyper-local” journalism.

I’ve been saying for some time that sites like the defunct Backfence.com and (still-running) Yourhub.com contain boring content. That is, boring to everyone but a select few who know the kid who hit the game-winning home run, or the woman who won the local Volunteer of the Year award, or the guy who got bit by a dog.

I do care if a guy a couple streets over in my neighborhood crashed his car or got arrested for indecent exposure; perhaps I know him, or pass him when walking the dog. I couldn’t care less about the guy who lives in a neighborhood across town and won an award or got arrested for drunk driving.

Deliver me hyper-personal news, not hyper-local. This really gets back to the old Daily Me concept. But now we have the technology to make that happen, and a growing well of this micro-local news from which to tap (local bloggers, websites of various local organizations, social network pages by local people, etc.—as well as from the newspaper staff’s reporting, of course).

In other words, as Outing and others have explained, “dog bites man” is newsworthy if you know the man … or the dog. The essence is in delivering Daily Me of news and information that speaks to specialized, person-by-person interests. “To critics of hyper-local news or ‘citizen journalism,’” Outing wrote, “I will argue that it can be powerful stuff when and only when it’s targeted well. I can envision a future—and I look forward to it—when services are available to send me news on my smartphone letting me know that the guy down the street got bit by a dog.” Which would be interesting to know—especially if it’s your dog.

Conversation

As the audience fragments into ever-narrow niches, what implications will that have for the quality of conversation that is so prized by citizen journalism ventures? One of the problems of our (post)modern existence is the increasing insularity of our suburban lives, cocooned as they are within a bubble of technology—cell phones as we drive, iPods as we jog, and social networking that keeps us plugged in at home rather than, well, socializing. Who talks to their neighbors anymore? Enter the likes of Front Porch Forum, a site that is both concentrated and conversation-oriented. It offers e-mail forums limited exclusively to physical neighborhoods in Chittenden County, Vermont. As Mark Glaser writes in his profile of the site: “Rather than being free-wheeling, anything-goes forums, FPF has been able to build more civil discussions by having people include their full name, street name and email address with each post. And users rave about how the site helps them connect with neighbors, find a lost pet or a good landlord, and even complain directly to local government officials.”
Such civility is a silver lining for a future of fragmented media, but it raises a question posed by critics of participatory news: “The content of most citizen journalism will be familiar to anybody who has ever read a church or community newsletter—it’s heartwarming and it probably adds to the store of good things in the world, but it does not mount the collective challenge to power which the traditional media are supposedly too timid to take up,” as Nicholas Lemann wrote in the *New Yorker*. Yet, such critiques often miss the point: Participatory news is not the future of professional reporting, nor the destruction of it. It is not a utopian vision of citizen involvement, nor is it a dystopian picture of user-generated-content purgatory. Rather, it is an add-on, a hybrid, a mash-up. It will support, rather than supplant, the future of professional journalism, and could make it stronger yet as journalists teach and train and citizens engage and inform—working together to build trust, transparency, and depth of knowledge about communities and the people in them.

**Confronting ethics in the future**

To close, let’s return to Mayhill Fowler, the 61-year-old citizen reporter for the Huffington Post. Two months after she became famous for reporting on Obama’s “bitter” comment, Fowler was in South Dakota on the final day of the grueling primary season. It was a Bill Clinton rally, and the former president was moving along the rope line, pressing palms with the crowd and fielding well wishes from all sides. Amid the crush and confusion and cell phone cameras, Fowler reached toward the former president. She wanted to ask for an interview with his wife but somehow dropped her business card just as she clasped Clinton’s hand. Hastily, she blurted above the din: “Mister President, what do you think about that hatchet job somebody did on you in *Vanity Fair*…?” Unaware of Fowler’s media status or the digital recorder in her free hand, Clinton unloaded, calling the article’s author “slimy,” “sleazy” and a “scumbag,” as well as turning his anger on other topics for several minutes.

Fowler’s blog post on the exchange, including the damning audio evidence, again set off instant controversy, and played into the media narrative that Bill Clinton had become unhinged in the final hours of his wife’s campaign. But among journalists, a different debate emerged, circulating around a nagging question: Why didn’t Fowler ever identify herself? Moreover, why did she ask the question so provocatively? Those concerns troubled even Jay Rosen, co-founder of OffTheBus.net, and he acknowledged a lack of guidelines for such situations—but, then, who would have imagined a citizen journalist capturing two of the most incendiary quotes of the campaign season?

It’s important not to make too much of the Fowler case—as with Obama, the Clinton quote flared for a few days but quickly fell off the media radar—but it serves to remind us that the ethics of participatory news are a work in progress, like the form of journalism itself. This is new territory. On the one hand, it’s good for democracy if politicians have a harder time concealing their true selves … and yet, on the other hand, candidates’ heightened awareness of always-on recorders and baiting citizen journalists is likely to make their appearances and comments more banal than ever, as one Poynter Institute ethics expert noted. More broadly, at the intersection of ethics and professionalism, journalists (with their norms of objectivity and detachment) and citizens (with their for-all-to-see passions and partisanship) must learn to negotiate for the public’s trust on their own terms, whether in a competing or complementary way. “Neutrality is one way of being trusted, transparency another,” Rosen wrote. “When we admit the validity of both, we expand the social space of the press. That is a good thing. If it has pro and amateur wings maybe the press can fly again.”