

A Small Town with Big Ideas on Citizen Journalism

By Mackenzie Zimmer

On any given day at the Goodbye Blue Monday coffee shop in downtown Northfield, you will see several people scanning their computers instead of perusing a newspaper, as they nurse their morning coffees.

The reason is that Northfield has two citizen journalism blogs, LocallyGrownNorthfield.org and Northfield.org, that are highly popular morning reads in town. With a total population of only 17,150, Northfield has two citizen journalism web sites covering local news, events and activities -- Locally Grown, which attracts nearly 7,000 visitors a month, and Northfield.org, with a monthly readership of about 9,400.

Unlike their newspaper counterpart, the Northfield News, these websites provide citizens with more than just breaking news and a calendar of events. They also serve as important social and community hubs by providing a forum for civic discussion and a database of comments on articles from readers. They even showcase other local citizen blogs.

As a result of these web sites, Northfield citizens are finding a new voice online, and are able to participate in their community like never before.

“Imagine you walk out your door every morning, and there are 1,000 people out there who get to hear what you have to say,” says Griff Wigley, one of three founders of the Locally Grown Northfield site. “This provides a platform for anybody.”

Civic Good

Weblogs, or blogs for short, have become popular along with the rise of the Internet in the last decade, reflecting a new phenomenon—citizen journalism. As media corporations focus more and more on national or global news and less on local news, and newspapers everywhere face a shrinking number of readers and advertisers, citizens are becoming more actively involved in producing journalism on the Internet.

Most major cities now have numerous newsy, citizen-based blogs. In Washington, DC, for example, the DCist.com website publishes information and even photographs provided by ordinary citizens.

Northfield.org began started in 1991, in a “living room discussion salon,” says Griff Wigley, a co-founder of Northfield.org as well as LocallyGrownNorthfield.org. Even before the Internet exploded on the scene, Wigley and a couple of others asked themselves—“The Internet’s coming. How are we going to harness it for civic good?”

Northfield Citizens Online (NCO), Northfield.org’s parent organization, was founded “to try and weave the threads of the community together,” Wigley said.

Inside Scoop

The website offers a wide range of information and resources connecting the community. One unique feature is the “Blogosphere,” where the site provides links to blogs by Northfield citizens. These blogs can vary from sports-oriented, covering the latest Carleton and St. Olaf football games, to business and politics-oriented.

Today, Northfield.org has nine members on its Board of Directors, who mainly “manage content flow” on the website and write their own pieces. Members on the board reflect the diversity of the town, representing everything from college students, non-profit organizations, and businesses to senior citizens and the Latino community.

“We try to keep as broad a representation as possible,” says Doug Bratland, a Carleton College web developer who is currently on the NCO board and has been involved with the website for almost three years. He says that Northfield.org was one of the reasons that he decided to move to Northfield.

“When I was looking into places to move, I came across Northfield.org’s discussion forum,” Bratland said. “Back then, [citizens] were debating the creation of Target. I really got the inside scoop and learned about the community through their own words. I was surprised at how active everyone was—they all had something to say.”

Unique Niche

Locally Grown Northfield was started in 2006. Originally a radio show that ran on Carleton College's radio station covering local events, Locally Grown has expanded to include a website. Wigley left Northfield.org to focus on Locally Grown, citing what he felt was Northfield's need for a "more opinionated" civic blog on the Net.

Locally Grown is run by three co-hosts who do all of the blogging—Ross Currier, Tracy Davis, and Wigley. Currier is the executive director of the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation (NDDC), and Davis the owner of Northfield Carpets International. Both are members of the Northfield Planning Commission.

Locally Grown is more like a personal blog than Northfield.org. The pieces echo the blogger's own opinion on the subject. "The opinions we express are specific to each of us—expect to see us disagreeing with one another," says the website's "About" page.

Wigley has been known to publish fake news stories from time to time. "You might be able to tell when we're spoofing," he says. "You might not."

While Locally Grown and Northfield.org serve as informative community spaces, members of both blogs agree that each blog fills a unique niche.

Community Filter

"We don't generate a lot of our stories," says Bratland, noting that Northfield.org serves more as a hub that "aggregates community stories and connects groups of people. We'll maybe put up around three stories a day, but we generally tend to do more event postings, community listings, photo galleries. We're more like a filter for the community information."

"We tend to do opinionated pieces," Wigley said. "Northfield.org serves as an important and unique community calendar and blog aggregate, whereas [Locally Grown] has most of the discussion right now."

Recently, a short article describing the drag show Carleton held during Awareness Week sparked some interesting comments on Northfield.org, with an anonymous poster calling Carleton a "finishing school for the privileged that struggles to be relevant."

Another user, frustrated at the comments, replied, “Step out from behind your anonymity, and really stand up for your beliefs. Make your case. State your name. It's the right way to discuss political issues in a democracy, is it not?”

Probably the most important aspect of the blogs is that they create a “culture where people feel comfortable to talk, a forum for effective communication where people can engage in things beyond personal life,” Wigley says.

Civility Rules

Northfield.org does not require any identifying information when commenting on articles, and often times the posts are anonymous. Bratland says the anonymity provides a space for people who might not otherwise comment, for fear of retaliation.

By contrast, Locally Grown has three standing requirements for anyone wishing to comment. First, people must identify themselves with first and last names. Second, those who wish to disagree with another person must address them by their first name. Third, sarcasm is banned because according to Wigley, it’s “poison.”

“Those rules communicate a lot in terms of civility,” says Wigley, whose earlier experience monitoring chat boards showed him there could either be disrespectful, futile communication or positive, productive communication. This identification adds responsibility, and “helps discussions carry over into the real world,” he said.

The websites also provide a public forum for issues far beyond local ones. Recent postings concerning the state of the economy have been the most popular, drawing hundreds of comments from users. A Locally Grown post titled “Our Nation’s Financial Crisis” cited recent articles by the New York Times and Wall Street Journal, encouraging readers to “try and make sense of it, especially how it might impact things locally.”

“Larry Henry”

The post received 571 replies, and a quick look through the pages and pages of comments, many of which are paragraphs long, shows citizens engaging in multiple debates, citing articles, and sharing information on the current economic woes. Even within the informal online atmosphere, it is clear that the information and discussion is expected by all to occur on an accurate, meaningful level.

Citizens often self-regulate the discussion at Locally Grown.

For example, when a user mentioned an article by the author “Larry Henry” that discussed the financial crisis but failed to note where it could be found on the Internet or elsewhere, another user quickly responded, asking him to “provide references.”

“Larry Henry could either be a brilliant Harvard economist or a monkey with a keyboard,” the user wrote. “Without some context and measure of reliability, his commentary is pretty much useless.”

Wigley believes that by providing such a common space, “we are helping community respond to and anticipate” current situations.

Sometimes, however, the fact that blogs lack the integrity associated with newspapers and paid reporters can spark doubt in the community when a story is published.

Big Story

One June afternoon in 2007, an article ran in the St. Paul Pioneer Press about methamphetamine use in Minnesota. The article ended with a short paragraph about a newly discovered heroin network among high school students in Northfield. That paragraph caught Wigley’s attention. He immediately called the Northfield police chief and asked him if the article was correct. “He said, “Yeah it’s correct!” Wigley remembers.

Going on the basis of the police chief’s answer, Wigley posted a short item on Locally Grown. “Immediately discussion started—a lot of people were wondering what was going on, what this would be about. The police chief held a highly publicized news conference at the beginning of July—we took photos and recorded audio, which can still be found on our site.”

After that, Wigley says, “Things went wild. A hundred, two hundred fifty people using heroin? People thought the police chief was off his rocker.” Wigley says he received criticism for the blog post, but believes he was right to post it.

“People were saying, you should have done research, you shouldn’t have taken the police chief at his word,” Wigley says. “I was basing it off of the fact that the

police chief had simply said ‘Yes, we do have a problem.’ I’m not a reporter. But this was something.”

Conversational Truth

More than a year later, the issue of heroin use and dealing in Northfield is very real, and the town has recently had to cope with a series of heroin-related arrests.

“Conversation is a way to learning,” Wigley says. “When people start to talk about something, then you can act, read, listen, follow up. Truth emerges from conversation.”

So what is on the horizon for online citizen journalism? A new project, created by a Kennesaw State University professor in Kennesaw, Georgia, and currently being tested in Northfield, might hold some clues.

The program, called Representative Journalism, or RepJ for short, is testing out a “new model of community journalism online,” says Bonnie Obremski, the only journalist currently working for RepJ.

Obremski, who moved to Northfield from Williamstown, Mass., is among the very first “hybrid” online journalists. She is getting paid to work as a reporter covering Northfield events and writing articles, all of which are published online in collaboration with Locally Grown.

Visibility & Transparency

Obremski was hired by Leonard Witt, the creator of RepJ, and her salary is funded by a grant from the Kennesaw State University Family Foundation. Witt is an associate professor and Distinguished Chair in Communication at Kennesaw State University.

Besides Representative Journalism, Witt has also founded Public Journalism Network, which, according to the website, seeks to connect “citizens, journalists, and academics interested in public and citizen journalism” through an online network.

“My goal is to represent the people of a small community in a way that hasn’t happened before,” says Obremski, who is working in Northfield for one year. “This is a whole new level of participation that people have in the news—unlike a

newspaper, they can comment, critique, and suggest ideas. This visibility also increases the transparency of my information.”

The program is not without its challenges. Obremski admits it can be difficult to have funding and oversight from the program coming from Kennesaw, Georgia – a long way from Northfield, Minn.

“It’s different from my last job, where I covered a small town as a newspaper reporter,” Obremski says. “I would come into work each day, talk to my supervisor, get my assignment. I don’t have that kind of atmosphere here. I’m more on my own, I don’t have a go-to set of people.”

Videos, Too

Obremski is still trying to figure out what best to focus on, and what sort of articles will both please the community and provide an example of her work that her supervisor and the people funding the grant will like.

Obremski’s work, which can be found on the home page of Locally Grown, covers many aspects of the Northfield community. She is currently focusing on the impact of the economy on Northfield’s people and businesses, but a look at her videos provide an example of the other ways in which she is getting involved with the community.

A short video posted a few weeks ago, for example, titled “Young and Restless Update,” looks at the skateboarding culture of some of Northfield’s youth.

“Ultimately, we’re trying to create a job that people will want to pay for, that a small community will be able to support,” Obremski said. “This is a model that will work if it is a framework that allows for flexibility, and can be installed in many small towns.”

“Everything is online now,” she added. “In the world of journalism, it’s not enough anymore to write articles. You also need to need to know how to work and create online. Nowadays, people are starting to realize, ‘If I don’t have a website, people don’t come to my story.’”

Wigley has an optimistic view of the future of Northfield’s citizen journalism.

“In five to ten years, I’d love to see more continuous, engaged citizenry in civic issues of the town,” he says. “That can be measured in all sorts of ways—more bloggers, more discussion, more people serving on boards and commissions—and this engaged citizenry will improve the health and vibrancy of the town. It’s our bottom-up theory. These Internet tools are not just about empowering citizens, but helping leaders to be more transparent as well, creating a better climate for leaders and citizens to work together.”

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