

# communiqué

**tech talk** by angelo fernando

## Citizen-powered journalism fills a void

With blogs, camera phones and more, ordinary people are sharing the events in their world in near real time

To give you some sense of scale, NowPublic's footprint dwarfs that of AP, which has bureaus in just 97 countries.

**T**he prerequisite for Journalism 1.0 was a deep sense of curiosity and some comfort with risk. Journalism 2.0 still needs those two ingredients, plus some comfort with technology.

With an accelerated news cycle and so many disasters and global events to cover, a new type of open-source reporting, citizen journalism, has stepped in to fill the breach. Before you think citizen journalism involves a maverick muckraker with a laptop, consider the traditional media's response. Many "CitJos," as they are called, work alongside old hands in the newsrooms. In fact, many of the stories you read, listen to or watch in the mainstream media could be coming from them.

In Myanmar in September, when the military killed several protesters, citizen reporters leapt into action to fill the traditional role of local and international media, which were heavily censored by the ruling junta. When Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai was killed in the line of duty, the first images of the event seeped out through an invisible news



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**Throw out your old-movie-inspired notions of the traditional newsroom. Technology has ushered in the age of citizen journalists.**

“bureau”—a combination of blogs, Flickr photos, videos on YouTube and even e-mail. Blogs such as the Burma Underground were filled with reports filed by CitJos.

When did this shift take place? Citizens have been participating in their news for decades, but their input was limited to letters and call-ins. There were technical limitations with regard to the timeliness of citizen input too. Camera phones and blogs became commercially

viable only after 2002; blogs arguably started gaining critical mass around the same time. Two years prior, a real push toward citizen journalism came from the east, when South Korean entrepreneur Oh Yeon-ho started *OhmyNews*, with 727 citizen reporters. It wasn't on many people's radar until it became a major force in South Korea's presidential elections in 2002. *OhmyNews* is now one of the world's largest citizen journalism enterprises, with 1,900 citizen

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journalists, not counting 65 full-time staff reporters.

### Adapting to the model

Technology has been a big driver of the adoption of citizen journalism, equipping it well for speed, collaboration and delivery. Without needing to invest in expensive GPS phones or briefcase satellites, CitJos are filing stories via text messages, grainy pictures on camera phones, cyber cafés and, when necessary, proxy servers to cover their tracks.

So it is not surprising that mainstream journalism has bolted citizen-powered journalism onto its business practice. Reuters, for instance, has partnered with Global Voices to integrate feeds into its country pages and special reports. The Associated Press wire service just partnered with the Vancouver, British Columbia-based NowPublic citizen journalist site (tag line: “Crowd powered media”), which has thousands of contributors in 140 countries. To give you some sense of scale, NowPublic’s footprint dwarfs that of AP, which has bureaus in just 97 countries. Soon after the Minneapolis, Minnesota, bridge collapse in August, AP began using images obtained through Flickr and Facebook. “Grab your camera and start weaving your tale,” urges CNN on a portion of its site dedicated to getting readers to be its eyes and ears. “We’re

not looking for press releases; we want to see your full-fledged storytelling.”

### Different folks, different strokes

Lest this all seems like working off the same “freelance” template, consider this: The Poynter Institute has attempted to identify 11 stages for news sites to engage citizen journalists, ranging from pure open-source, unedited formats, to those that are moderated and edited, to those that combine amateur and professional journalists. Those stages are:

1. Opening a news web site to public comment.
2. The citizen add-on reporter—allowing citizens to comment on specific articles.
3. Open-source reporting—a professional journalist collaborates with citizens as sources. Citizens sometimes contribute some of the reporting for the journalist’s story.
4. The citizen bloghouse—inviting citizens to blog regularly on the site.
5. Newsroom “transparency” blogs—for citizens to post complaints or praise about the news organization’s work.
6. Stand-alone citizen journalism sites (edited)—establishing a news-oriented web site that is made up entirely or nearly entirely of contributions from the community.
7. Stand-alone citizen journalism sites (unedited).

8. Adding a print version—producing a print version of a stand-alone citizen journalist site.

9. The hybrid—professional and citizen journalism.

10. Integrating professional and citizen journalism under one roof—content by citizen journalists is presented alongside content by professional journalists.

11. Wiki journalism—where citizens are editors.

It appears that the hybrid model sits well with newspapers that continue to add bloggers to their cadre of reporters, turn old-school journalists into MoJos—mobile journalists—and actively solicit reader submissions. *The News & Observer*, a North Carolina newspaper, is doing it. In radio, the Brian Lehrer Show on New York City’s WNYC did a story in October on price gouging, putting out a call to people to “report” back on the price of three simple items at the grocery store: milk, beer and lettuce. Responses came in from 357 listeners. Back in Myanmar, the story continues to be covered by ordinary people filing reports that are picked up by major networks.

Call it what you will, this new form of hybrid, grassroots, open-source, participatory reporting has left its mark on the business of news. Newsvine has called it the new “ecosystem” of journalism. And it’s here to stay. ●

### find out more

#### Burma Underground

<http://ethnicvoices.civiblog.org/blog>

#### OhmyNews

<http://english.ohmynews.com>

#### NowPublic

[www.nowpublic.com](http://www.nowpublic.com)

#### The Poynter Institute

[www.poynter.org/content/content\\_view.asp?id=83126](http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=83126)

### blogging on their own

CyberJournalist.net tracks j-blogs (journalist blogs) published independently by journalists who are working as freelancers and staff writers for established newspapers. As of this writing, j-blogs numbered 127.

### download a free e-book on grassroots journalism

Read all 12 chapters of *We the Media* by Dan Gillmor at <http://wethemedia.oreilly.com>.