



“Crowdsourcing” at the Fort Myers, FL, News-Press

Part A: “Crowdsourcing”: Promise or Hazard?

Part B: “Help Us Investigate”

Teaching Note: Parts 1 and 2

Case Summary

Journalism’s relationship with the public has traditionally been one of supply and consumption: journalists gather information, which they supply to citizens who consume it. But that model has begun to shift in recent years due to a variety of factors—not least the rise of the Internet and the possibilities that new technology has provided for non-reporters to participate in gathering and presenting news.

This two-part case study focuses on the Fort Myers (FL) *News-Press* and its experiment in 2006 with “crowdsourcing”—a practice in which consumers are asked to provide information and expertise. Already used by the private sector, the approach had the potential to fundamentally change *News-Press*’ traditional relationship with its audience by effectively transforming readers from information receivers into fellow reporters and co-creators of the journalistic product.

The case traces the evolution of crowdsourcing at the metro-daily paper from conception to actualization. Part A: ““Crowdsourcing”: Promise or Hazard?” concentrates on the first part of this process, as news executives and editors weighed the potential merits and demerits of crowdsourcing for the paper, contemplated the various news stories to which it might be applied, and debated whether or not to adopt the method. It also provides a brief history of the Gannett-owned *News-Press*, and an overview of crowdsourcing as a principle predicated on the thesis that group intelligence—the “wisdom of crowds”—is often greater than the sum of its individual parts. Students gain insight from this first part of the case into the relationship between a publication’s editors and its corporate owners, as well as the struggles and debates that can surround the introduction of change in the newsroom.

Part B, "Help Us Investigate," concentrates on what happens once the paper decided to try crowdsourcing for a story about a contentious utility expansion project in the community of Cape Coral. It relates how the leak of a City Council audit following *News-Press*' appeal for information challenged journalists to decide what to do with the document and how to progress with crowdsourcing. It also charts the overwhelming and immediate response of Cape Coral residents to the paper's call for input, and some of the logistical, motivational and theoretical issues that it raised, including how much to vet information before making it public, and convincing reporters of crowdsourcing's usefulness. Students gain insight in this second part of the case into the consequences and implications of this new approach for the newspaper, its readers, and the relationship that journalists have with the public. Class members confront various issues involved with experimentation, the role and importance of planning in innovation, and the risks and benefits of introducing change in the newsroom.

Teaching Objectives

This case helps students examine journalism's relationship to its audience, and the changing role that ordinary citizens can and should play in carrying out functions traditionally performed by journalists. It is also a vehicle for insights into the challenges of introducing change into the newsroom, and the considerations and strategies for doing so. Students gain understanding of crowdsourcing as a method of research, and begin to recognize the often complex dynamic that exists between the corporate and editorial sides of media outlets.

News-Press' deliberations about crowdsourcing take place within the context of rapid technological change. Easy-to-use and accessible ways to film, edit and publish have made it possible for ordinary people to perform many tasks that were once the exclusive preserve of mainstream media. Students should consider crowdsourcing in terms of the democratization of information giving and receiving, but also examine the implications that this Internet-enabled information revolution has for journalistic authority and claims to expertise. Is public participation in gathering and disseminating the news desirable? If so, how much? Can anyone "do" journalism? If not, what tasks should be performed exclusively by journalists?

A related area of discussion centers on journalism as a profession. What makes it one? How is it similar or different from other professions, such as medicine and law? Students should think about the practical, theoretical and professional claims that journalists make for doing what they do, and consider the degree to which these assertions are either valid or flawed.

Changes in editorial practice and content do not take place within a vacuum: financial considerations are inextricably intertwined with decisions to innovate or introduce changes. Journalists have traditionally decried any breaching of the increasingly thin wall that exists between the editorial and the business sides of news organizations. But how worried should reporters and editors really be? Is it always dangerous for editorial and business aspects of journalism to mix, or are concerns overblown?

The issue of credibility is central to the question of crowdsourcing, particularly at a time when opinion polls and studies demonstrate that Americans' faith in print media is falling. Discuss

whether hosting a forum to collect the observations and experiences of readers would serve to undermine or to bolster the reputation of the *News-Press*.

What role do journalists play? What are their responsibilities towards the public? Should they filter information and investigate its veracity before making it widely available, or should they serve more as a pipeline that channels information directly to the audience so that it can make up its own mind? Crowdsourcing in journalism raises these and similar questions by positioning the public as collaborative partner in the reporting process, rather than as a receiver of information.

Use Parts A and B of the case study in a course about editorial decision-making, the business of journalism, journalism innovation, or local/regional media. This teaching note provides separate class plans for both Part A and B, although instructors can combine elements from each at their own discretion.

Class Plan

Part A. "Crowdsourcing": Promise or Hazard?

Pre-class. Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

1) To what extent, if at all, is it journalism's duty (or to its advantage) to involve the public in producing content?

We found it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The posts also highlight talking points ahead of the class, and identify specific students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions. The online blog posts are a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 8090 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) Crowdsourcing has worked well in the private sector, but is it a good idea for journalism?

i) List on the board the theoretical/ideological pluses and minuses e.g. should citizens contribute to making and transmitting the news?

ii) List on the board the practical pluses and minuses e.g. do editors and reporters have to respond to all emails and calls, can they trust readers to offer credible information?

b) *News-Press'* debate over crowdsourcing is part of Gannett's wider effort to "become more customer-centered and innovative." Catering to customer demand is crucial in the

commercial sector, but is it a good idea for media outlets to focus on the audience? What are the pros and cons for journalism of this customer-centric approach? List on board.

- c) Gannett executives and *News-Press'* McCurry-Ross favor crowdsourcing as a solution to what they see as the threatened position of watchdog journalism. Do you agree that crowdsourcing is well suited to this problem? How else might *News-Press* strengthen its watchdog function?
- d) Is crowdsourcing a form of citizen journalism? Explain your answer.
- e) McCurry-Ross envisages crowdsourcing as a way for the *News-Press* to announce to its audience: "We're going to share with you what we find out when we find it out, not down the road." Should media act as a pipeline for information that flows directly to the audience, or as a filter that strains information before passing it to the public?
- f) At least four other stories, aside from the Cape Coral utility expansion project, emerge as possible topics for crowdsourcing: nursing homes, human trafficking, taxes and insurance.

Did the *News-Press* editors choose the right story?

- g) The *News-Press* has several concerns about crowdsourcing as a research method: balance, competition, what to publish, motivation of contributors, distraction, appearances, reporting challenges, and acknowledging reader input. Consider each issue in turn, and rank them in descending order of severity for the paper.
- i) At a time when public faith in the credibility of the press is shaky, would using readers' observations and experiences undermine or bolster *News-Press's* reputation?
- j) It is not unprecedented for journalists to ask the public for information. For example, reporters have often solicited tips from readers/audience members, or asked readers with expertise on a particular subject to contact them for an article or book. To what extent, if at all, is crowdsourcing qualitatively different from these requests?

Part B. "Help Us Investigate"

In-class questions. The instructors could pose any of the following questions in order to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

- a) Cape Coral Bureau Chief Tom Hayden approaches readers with the appeal: "Tell us what you want to look into," before then stating, "Be our eyes and ears on the street." Do these two statements align, or are they at odds with one another?
- b) How, if at all, might *News-Press* have better prepared its journalists for crowdsourcing?

How, if at all, might it have better prepared the public?

- c) How could *News-Press* have improved its approach to and management of the material it received following its public appeal for information?
- d) In what respects did *News-Press*'s crowdsourcing succeed? In what respects did it fail? List on the board.
- e) Who—the journalists, the paper, the public—benefited most and who the least from the initiative?
- f) Did crowdsourcing help or hinder staff? Is it a viable solution for addressing the challenges posed by shrinking newsrooms and resources?
- g) To what extent does the end justify the means vis-à-vis crowdsourcing? i.e. to what extent are the flaws and drawbacks of the approach worth the end result of possibly uncovering new audience-derived important information?
- h) What would success have looked like for the paper in its crowdsourcing experiment?
- i) To what extent were the problems that *News-Press* encountered due to the general practice and philosophy of crowdsourcing, and to what extent were they specific problems of implementation?

Suggested Readings:

Daren C. Brabham, "Crowdsourcing as a Model for Problem Solving: An Introduction and Cases," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 2008; 14; 75

SYNOPSIS: This article is a more scholarly supplement/alternative to *Wired*'s "The Rise of Crowdsourcing" (see below), providing students with a general introduction to crowdsourcing, how it works and its potential. The author insists that crowdsourcing is "not just another buzzword," but rather a "legitimate, complex problem-solving model."

Renita Coleman, "Picturing Civic Journalism: How photographers and graphic designers visually communicate The Principles of Civic Journalism," *Journalism* 2007; 8; 25

SYNOPSIS: This article provides students with an unusual prism for thinking about civic journalism: visual presentation—an angle which the author claims has been overshadowed by "talk of reconnecting citizens with public life through new listening techniques, reporting practices, and story content." Coleman attempts to rectify this perceived shortcoming by examining how civic

journalism has changed the work of 18 photographers and designers, and some of the practical problems it raises.

Tanni Haas and Linda Steiner, "Public Journalism: a reply to critics," *Journalism*, 2006; 7; 238

SYNOPSIS: This article "analyzes and responds to the most significant criticisms of public journalism made by scholars" and argues that the long-term success of citizen participation in journalism depends on "explicit commitment by journalists, its institutionalization within newsrooms and journalism classes, and continued theory-development, research and assessment." The piece provides background to the debate surrounding public journalism and is particularly useful in its clear yet scholarly presentation of the arguments made against the practice.

Jeff Howe, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," *Wired*, June 2006

SYNOPSIS: Declaring "outsourcing" to India and China "so 2003," this article provides a broad overview of outsourcing. It also provides context for understanding the practice in journalism by examining its rise in industries "as disparate as pharmaceuticals and television," which are finding ways to "tap the latent talent of the crowd." As the article states: "The labor isn't always free, but it costs a lot less than paying traditional employees. It's not outsourcing; it's crowdsourcing."

<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html>

Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, New York: Basic Books, 1982.

SYNOPSIS: The involvement of non-journalists in reporting and researching raises questions regarding the professional expertise and uniqueness of journalists: Can anyone do what they do? How do they claim legitimacy and maintain their special status? Such questions have long surrounded journalism, in contrast to medicine (along with law), which is traditionally considered to be among the oldest and most established of the professions. In this Pulitzer Prize-winning book, Starr traces the evolution of medical practice and culture in the United States from colonial to modern times. The introductory chapter "The Social Origins of Professional Sovereignty," offers conceptual tools for thinking about professions. It offers insights into how professions claim and defend their legitimacy, autonomy, cultural authority and occupational control, and provides a specific example against which to compare journalism.

Betty Wells, "Using Expertise From Outside the Newsroom," in 21st Century Muckrackers, *Nieman Reports*, Spring 2008 Issue, Vol. 62, No. 1*

SYNOPSIS: In this article Betty Wells—who appears in the case study as News-Press' Metro Editor—analyzes the use of crowdsourcing, or what she calls "Team Watchdog," at the paper. Wells gives students additional background and a generally optimistic view of crowdsourcing at the News-Press, where she declares "over time, skepticism in the newsroom eroded" and the "infusion of energy" and "expertise" of team members "can offer our reporters—and ultimately our readers—valuable insights."

<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/08-1NRspring/p65-wells.html>

Wells' article appears in the "Newsroom Investigative Reporting" section of the *Nieman Reports'* "21st Century Muckrackers." Other articles in the magazine usefully elaborate on investigative journalism, which lies at the heart of *News-Press'* own crowdsourcing efforts. Articles of potential interest within the same section include: "Redefining a Newspaper's Watchdog Approach," and "What Are Newspaper Journalists Investigating?" Other valuable sections include: "Global Watchdogs" and "The Digital Transformation."

Emily Yahr, "Crowded House," *American Journalism Review*, October/November 2007

SYNOPSIS: This article offers a clear and accessible overview of the phenomenon of news outlets which turn to crowdsourcing to get readers more involved in the newsgathering process.

<http://www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=4406>