

What is Citizen Journalism?

by Glenn C. Koenig, June 2023

Let's start with journalism. Journalism is the telling of stories. Telling stories is one of the oldest human activities, predating written language.

Essentially, someone collects information of likely interest to others, transcribes and edits it in some way, then disseminates it. Typically journalism refers to information that is time sensitive, or at least relates to current life somehow.

Citizen Journalism simply means that ordinary people, who possess or have learned reasonable skills in journalism, proceed to practice it, with or without an organization or financial compensation.

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As I see it, the world is moving away from highly structured organizations designed to control and disseminate information, the so-called "news media" ... toward a decentralized, networked, shared flow of information, provided by a wide variety of people cooperating in the effort.

Indeed this has already evolved to some extent with the internet that we have today, where literally millions of individuals are creating web pages, podcasts, video segments or programs, or other documents or artworks, so to speak, and share them with anyone who wishes to partake.

Many of the principles of traditional journalism apply, but can now be adapted to the technology currently available, and tailored to a public with current cultural priorities.

Citizen Journalism Factors

by Glenn C. Koenig
June 2023

Basics:

- Curiosity & Passion
- Persistence
- Patience
- Thoroughness

- Care for the people who are involved in the story
- Care for the story itself
- Care for the people (the audience) who will read/hear/view the story

Information / Story Skills:

- Anticipate what audience would want to know
- Pose clear questions while gathering information
- take notes good enough for later
- take photos if anything about the story can be told visually
- fact cross checking / multiple sources

Media Skills:

- can conduct an interview in person or on phone
- can write a story in news format
- can write a separate opinion piece
- can take photographs
- can record audio and/or video

What Does It Take?

by Glenn C. Koenig, June 2023

I see three basic principles:

- Curiosity
- Perseverance & Patience
- Care - for your audience

Curiosity seems to work best when we have a strong desire to gather information and knowledge - to find answers to questions that motivate us. If there is no excitement, no inspiration, no engagement with the story at hand, then perhaps find something else to report on that fires you up.

Gathering information often takes some dedication and patience. If the story was easy for anyone to access and retell, then the “news” would spread widely and the journalist would not be needed. But that is seldom the case. Getting a full and accurate account usually takes some work and some waiting, perhaps, when a source of information is not readily at hand.

Ah, and then there’s the audience! What can we determine about who will want our “news?” How much time and capacity will they have to avail themselves of what we’ve produced, be it written, illustrated, or recorded (as sound or video or both)? After all, the most important things in this world are motivated by love, although we might not think of it that way. We are in the business of giving, ultimately. We want others to be as interested and engaged with a story as we are. If others share our interest, that builds a social network; it builds community.

This brings us back to curiosity. What are people likely to be curious about? How does our curiosity align with theirs? Can we do the research, regarding a story or topic, then provide something that will come across to them as a gift of some value? Something they will appreciate. Something that will add to their quality of life, perhaps?

What About Bias?

by Glenn C. Koenig, June 2023, revised March 2024

Is all journalism biased? Or is there such a thing as complete objectivity? Can an individual story be told without bias? What about an entire body of stories, perhaps in a single newspaper, or news broadcast, or by any other news organization?

Discussions on this question have a long history! In general, the consensus is that pure objectivity is doesn't exist. After all, we're all human, not robots (and even robots have their biases, as we're starting to see!)

Here are a few thoughts I have.

1. What to Cover

There is too much going on in the world to report on it all. The *New York Times* slogan "All the News that's fit to Print" is a bit pretentious, although it makes for a catchy phrase. They could print a paper the thickness of an old fashioned telephone directory and still not cover everything going on.

So anyone who practices journalism must choose which things constitute news and which just don't qualify. What you or I had for breakfast this morning is typically not news because it's too routine.

2. Time and Resource Limits

We only have the time and resources to work on just a few stories. Even if we invent some AI bot to generate news rapidly and in extremely high volume, there is also the limiting capacity of the audience (the readers, listeners, viewers, etc.) to avail themselves of the pool of news stories available. Which leads to ...

3. The Audience

The choice of what's news also depends largely the interests of those who want the news. After all, why tell stories that no one will want to read or watch? Each person only has 24 hours in a day to sleep, eat, work, care for children, do chores, or relax. At the "receiving end" of news streams, we must decide what we want to engage in, and what to ignore.

4. The Support "Loop"

Ultimately, the decisions of "news consumers" as to which news feeds to avail themselves also determines what resources are available to journalists. That's because we all, ultimately, provide the financial support for journalism. News that's supported by advertising depends on who we buy products and services from services, which, in turn, pays for the space.

With non-profit news organizations, the support also comes from those who donate directly. Support may also come from government grants or private foundations, although, even there, we readers have some influence on both of these sources, although not as directly.

5. Human Nature

Human beings tend to be fascinated with "sensational" stories. An accident on a highway will cause congestion in traffic *traveling in the other direction* because most of us want to slow down and "see what's going on" as we pass by. The more disturbing, tragic, or surprising a story is, the harder it is to resist having a look, like a moth drawn to a flame.

This perhaps represents a struggle between our forebrains and our more primitive emotional back-brain motivations. We evolved to be fascinated with highly emotional events because, as the theory goes, it helped us to adapt to avoid the risks that might lead to tragic events in the future.

So, to summarize, there is inherent bias in how we select which stories to tell; our inherent limits, both for journalist and reader, of time and economic support; and of various aspects of our basic human nature.