Collaborative online news production: A critical analysis of current Web-based news initiatives and a proposal for the positioning of a new practice and technology for collaborative journalism in a free speech open online space.

“Unless opinions favorable to democracy and to aristocracy, to property, and to equality, to co-operation and to competition, to luxury and to abstinence, to sociality and individuality, to liberty and discipline, and all the other standing antagonisms of practical life, are expressed with equal freedom and enforced and defended with equal talent and energy, there is no chance of both elements obtaining their due: one scale is sure to go up, and the other down. […] Not the violent conflict between parts of the truth, but the quiet suppression of half of it, is the formidable evil.”

John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, Chapter II: Of the liberty of thought and discussion (1859)

INTRO: WHY GO COLLABORATIVE?

“Find a partner!, “Keep up with other reporters’ work!” – This is Brant Houston, long-time investigative reporter and Knight Chair for Investigative and Enterprise Reporting at the University of Illinois, writing on the merits of collaboration in newsreporting in his book Computer-Assisted Reporting: A practical Guide, published in … 1996.

Although the book provides a now somewhat outdated overview of the high-tech tools and online resources that can facilitate newsgathering, it is worth considering Houston’s pioneering proposal for a “buddy system” for journalists.

In a chapter on how best to use databases, Houston argues that even the best tools and material resources are no substitute for expertise and support from colleagues in the field: “It is good to get a database about your own beat or specialty. The database can highlight problems or provide tips about the subject, but it can also present only a small portion of it,” he writes. His formula is simple: “If you aren’t working on a story with which you are familiar, then team up with a reporter who knows it.” Houston did just that: “When I worked on a judicial story, I worked with the court reporter. On other subjects, I worked with the environmental reporter, the medical reporter, the city hall reporters or the political reporters. They pointed out problems in
the databases, while at the same time using the patterns and clues the databases revealed.”

Talking to fellow reporters about their work and sharing tools and resources with them is also important, Houston says, because it can crucially inform our own coverage. To find out if one’s story is a good one, one should first of all check if the previous stories on the subject have been done correctly and thoroughly.

“A reporter in one community can do a reasonably good overview of who deals guns in that community. Possibly there is no shattering news, just an interesting look at the issue. But you may get the same database for your own community and find that many gun dealers are police officers, and that some of them sell guns to convicted felons.” Without access to your colleague’s database across the state or the country, you would never have been able to report those facts, Houston says. He therefore advises journalists to “try to keep up with what other journalists are doing. When you read or hear about a journalist who has used a database or on-line resource that you may be interested in, review the stories to determine how the source might be applicable in your own situation. You also can call (or E-mail) the journalist for tips on the database.”

He then goes on to make a case for “partnering” with a colleague also covering— or at least knowledgeable about your beat: “If at all possible, find a partner to learn with. Considering the new way of thinking and looking at information, it helps to have someone to talk to and discuss solutions to problems. The “buddy system” helps keep you focused and also helps prevent errors. Having a friendly colleague look over your shoulder when you are doing your first queries or calculations will save you a lot of time and trouble. You will also learn faster by helping someone else. With a buddy system, stories are much more thorough and accurate.”

Houston also suggests expanding the cooperation beyond the newsroom and the closed circles of professional journalists to include the help from outside experts in relevant spheres. For example, to get the best out of technology-supported reporting resources, “You should also get to know people who work in the computer field but are not journalists themselves. They often have a quick answer for a problem that has baffled you.” Call it social networking for journalists 1990s-style.

What Houston’s early proposal for cooperative reporting shows is that it may well have perfect applications in today’s physical and digital newsrooms. In light of the observations he made back then, it seems that given the current economic crisis affecting the news industry across the print, online and broadcast sectors, the collaborative model for producing, distributing, consuming and—desirably, interacting with news and other media content is the most sensible and promising course of action.

The move towards news-sharing and other open source publishing practices that our mixed media culture has created— or towards “produsage,” as media scholar Axel Bruns calls this form of collaborative content creation work— is not only increasingly felt today, it will most likely also lead to the future of news and journalism. And collaboration is an intrinsic part of it.
PROBLEMS

Yet, the reality is that 12 years after Houston’s ideas for cross-community reporting cooperation among reporters and editors, there is still no truly functional and well-developed news-gathering, reporting and distribution system aimed at those who produce that very specific content. This is true even at the level of simple news-sharing, as Bruns explains in his book Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production, “Most important at present is the question of how it might be possible to move from rudimentary systems to a fully developed newssharing environment. Available tools for the semantic tagging and syndication of Web content remain significantly limited and as a result underutilized; clearly there is a need for a “killer application” to stimulate desire for an drive the introduction of the Semantic Web or a similar framework.”

In fact, there is not even an operative framework for those news producers to openly discuss their work and for consulting with each other on stories across institutions and geographical borders – whether for professional journalists among themselves or with amateurs/citizen journalists and/or with their interactive audience. The scenario which Houston described, of a reporter teaming up with the legal, health or environmental correspondent to improve his/her coverage sounds like a costly and increasingly unlikely proposition for today’s emaciated newsrooms, with their understaffed and overworked pools of reporters – sheer luxury for the new economic model now required of news organizations to survive.

The financial riddle of how to create a sustainable business model for news operations in the coming years is beyond the scope of this study – suffice it to say that it is but one of the many problems and questions tormenting media leaders and observers today. The plethora of new web-based media production initiatives that have sprung up as a result of the economic conditions, many of them amounting to rescue plans for out-of-jobs journalists, has complicated the landscape. These new non-profit independent models have generated a vast array of wildly varying standards of content quality, ethical responsibilities and levels of editing and monitoring of contributors’ input. The variety in formulas is also astonishing, with some news operations being run being professionals only, citizen journalists, amateurs and average citizens running the show in others, while a third and perhaps most common breed is the hybrid form seamlessly blending pro/am input. New practices such as news aggregating and sharing, automated news exchange, link journalism and blogging as a form of reporting seek to serve an increasingly fragmented audience, and question in the process the very definitions of news and journalism.

It is beyond doubt that these new media content publishing models, many of them enhanced by user-generated contributions, are creating unprecedented opportunities for a new and multiperspectival take on the news. But for the purpose of our study, we can identify three aspects of professional journalism that have been adversely affected by these new reporting practices and which could benefit from a well-planned system of collaboration:

1] Press freedoms and US citizen’s right to free expression are being curtailed in an increasingly mono-vocal dialogue as state and corporate interests dictate the discourse, and the merging spree of cash-strapped media companies further restricts the diversity of speech. Control and surveillance of many forms of tele- and electronic
communications have also increased, especially after the events of Sept. 11, and have been formalized through legislation. As University of Chicago Law Professor Cass. R. Sunstein explained in his book Republic.com 2.0, “Simply because government creates and enforces property rights in cyberspace, the Internet, no less than ordinary physical spaces, remains pervaded by government regulation.”

In an interview for this research paper, journalist and director of the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in journalism [PEJ] Tom Rosenstiel warned of the dangers to a free and representative press’ independence that the new non-profit pro-, am- and hybrid collaborative news sites present:

“In advertising-based media, the key is having so many different advertisers that no one of them can influence editorial very much. The non-profit model wipes out that protection. So you need other ways to protecting news. But the ethical value that the news people must be independent, not agenda driven, remains,” he said.

Furthermore, issues of the increasingly concentrated ownership of mass media are determining “who and what is represented and how,” threatening “the independence and diversity of information” and “is highly undemocratic,” as Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share of the University of California explained in their essay “Toward Critical Media Literacy: Core concepts, debates, organizations, and policy”.

- 2] The quality of news coverage has plummeted, with original, fact-checked reports being replaced by their much cheaper shadow versions of linked and aggregated news that have passed through a dozen hands before being delivered. Light fare, celebrity and general entertainment content is making the front page of even the most respected major news outlet in the country, while the news of importance for the audience to make informed decisions on public affairs get the backseat with little or poor coverage.

In a paper entitled “Leading the Way to Better News: The Role of Leadership in a World Where Most of the ‘Powers That Be’ Became the ‘Powers That Were,’” for the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public policy, University of Southern California Geoffrey Cowan noted a major concern:

“Those concerned with the need to have a truly informed electorate are particularly worried about the signs of a precipitous decline in the number of professional “boots on the ground” reporters, the professionals who engage in enterprise or investigative reporting in Baghdad or city hall.”

“Without giving it a second thought, Americans take that kind of coverage for granted. But cutbacks have led newspapers to eliminate foreign bureaus at a rapid rate. The Boston Globe, for example, which once had a distinguished group of international correspondents, no longer has any bureaus outside of the United States,” he wrote.

He further observed that, “As some reports indicate, we are witnessing an almost daily decline in the number of professional journalists. The size of the Los Angeles Times newsroom, for example, has shrunk from about 1,200 to about 850 in the past seven years.”
What these observations make clear is that the quality of the news we consume is eroding, and the collaborative model may add more resources and depth to its production.

- Similarly, investigative reporting, a time-consuming and expensive enterprise for today’s news organizations and fast-paced media culture is also disappearing. The hard questions are being avoided or being asked by the same AP voice and repeated unquestioningly throughout the media stratosphere.

The 2008 biennial news consumption survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & The Press points to a few other worrying trends and developments. Despite growing use of the Net as a source of news, it still concerns only a fragment of American society. Interaction with the said news content is even more minimal still. And overall, news consumption among young people has actually decreased. The following findings cited here below from the study are telling:

. Since the early 1990s, the proportion of Americans saying they read a newspaper on a typical day has declined by about 40%; the proportion that regularly watches nightly network news has fallen by half.

. Roughly a quarter of Net-Newsers (26%) and somewhat fewer Integrators (19%) say they regularly read blogs on politics or current events. Overall, only 10% of the public regularly reads political and news blogs.

. Since 2006, daily online news use has increased by about a third, from 18% to 25%. However, as the online news audience grows, the educational divide in online news use - evident since the internet's early days in the mid-1990s - also is increasing. Currently, 44% of college graduates say they get news online every day, compared with just 11% of those with a high school education or less.

. Despite sweeping changes in the news landscape, Traditionalists remain the largest segment of the overall news audience. Compared with the Integrators and Net-Newssers, Traditionalists are downscale economically - 43% are not employed and 60% have no more than a high school education.

. In spite of the increasing variety of ways to get the news, the proportion of young people getting no news on a typical day has increased substantially over the past decade. About a third of those younger than 25 (34%) say they get no news on a typical day, up from 25% in 1998.

. A slim majority of Americans (51%) now say they check in on the news from time to time during the day, rather than get the news at regular times. This marks the first time since the question was first asked in 2002 that most Americans consider themselves "news grazers."

. Social networking sites are very popular with young people, but they have not become a major source of news. Just 10% of those with social networking profiles say they regularly get news from these sites.

. Believability ratings for national news organizations remain very low. If anything, believability ratings for major online news outlets - including news aggregators such
as Google News and AOL News - are lower than for major print, cable and broadcast outlets.

What these findings suggest is that the introduction of a new cultural practice for newsreporting and consumption that is essentially based on open collaboration inevitably raises the question of how to engage potential participants, if these are only minimally present on- or using the collaborative platform. This question of engagement is one of the biggest challenges for any disruptive practice or technology.

In another study the Pew Research Center’s PEJ, noted that although online use and the practice of getting one’s news from the Internet is on the increase, there is still minimal interaction with content: few people post comments and respond to published stories, blog posts and other opportunities for participation.

Similarly, the now familiar-sounding activity of ‘citizen journalism’ is still in its infancy, as it attracts only a fraction of very active news readers and media producers, according to PEJ.

Also, blogs, forums and other forms of digital spaces are quite heavily moderated, according to the PEJ study, with some sites moderators not allowing comments and closing down threads in discussion forums. “In some cases, the new news media platforms are as much moderated and controlled than the traditional media outlets,” the study concluded.

Last but not least, perhaps the most puzzling question of all when considering the new and not so new collaborative online news operations on the US Market and what an ideal collaborative practice might look like, is how to reconcile the varying degrees of ethical and cultural standards that these new enterprises have given rise to. Who will decide them? And isn’t there a danger of losing them altogether? Rosenstiel of the PEJ thinks they are here to stay, but that the quality of the news platform itself will be determining:

“The standards and ethics of journalism won’t change. They can be found in Aristotle and Thucidiides, in history and documentary filmmaking, in television, radio or print. How you live up to them will differ depending on the model,” he said.

Since the model itself is so determining, I propose to look at a selected list of existing online media operations, pro-, am-, and hybrid ones, most of them independent, as a way of sampling the best features and avoiding the pitfalls in conceptualizing what an ideal collaborative practice and platform for journalists might be.

But before doing so, it is important to stress the three essential areas and the values related to them that any approach to journalistic collaboration should be based on:

**GOALS or THE ESSENTIALS OF TRUE COLLABORATION:**

In line with the stated purpose of this paper [and of my research goals for CMS and C4FCM] – the conceptualization of an “ideal” collaborative journalistic practice and technology which I call “Open Park” - I would like to strongly recommend that the three following principles be applied to it:
. **Free speech**: respect of freedom of expression online and offline, which involves protecting digital rights, minimizing arbitrary forms of editing, monitoring and moderating from editors and sites managers, and maximizing the practice of open publishing or “open news”. This implies that all published content will be open source. The expression of minority or unpopular opinions and offensive speech will also be respected. These principles are inspired by the theories developed by American Attorney and author Mike Godwin, which he expanded in his book *Cyber Rights – Defending Free Speech in the Digital Age*. One of Godwin’s main arguments is that we should ensure that the protections afforded by the First Amendment to the traditional media are applied equally to the Net. This is a cause most clearly supported by Harvard PhD candidate Alexandra Samuel, who in her article “Hacktivism and the Future of Democratic Discourse” rightly argues that “The Internet may make protecting free speech more difficult and more complicated.”

In conceptualizing a new social/cultural practice of journalism, Sunstein’s words in Republic.com 2.0 are particularly resonant: “But the free-speech principle has an independent life outside of the courtroom. […] Outside of the law, and inside the offices of lobbyists, newspapers, radio stations, and recording studios, as well as even in ordinary households, the First Amendment has a large cultural presence.” [his italics].

. **Quality news**, which essentially means original reporting. This will require strict adherence to a well-established journalistic code of ethics, such as those of Bill Kovach and Tom Rosentiel’s *The Elements of Journalism* or of The Society of Professional Journalists. It also necessitates reviving the use of witness, first-person accounts, the practice of speaking directly with sources and quoting directly. This is even more urgent in the content of extensive copying, aggregating and reprocessing of news content that blogs, forums and other forms of online spaces have made possible, transforming the original news report into a processed, ‘reheated’ story.

. **Investigative journalism**, which implies refocusing on “the news that matter” and covering public affairs and public policy and asking the hard questions. This is essential for the practice and development of civic media.

These are guiding principles [or values or cultural journalistic practices] that should be applied to all types of collaborative news media production. As we will see in the list of new media enterprises that follows, these values are often sorely absent from even the most professional of these models.

**CURRENT MODELS – DO’S & DON’TS**

The following list offers a selection of existing collaborative news models with a brief commentary on the features that may be relevant or useful for our own ideal model, or that present technical aspects or decisions that proved unproductive, or simply do not respect in some way our value-based foundation.
The list contains important, an in some cases crucial, examples of web-based collaborative news production models. It encompasses the early, pioneering models in the genre, some recently launched projects and some to be launched in the near future. Characteristically, nearly all of them are hybrid forms of the traditional newsroom, combining both professional journalists and various degrees of amateur journalism, from the experienced freelance writers to the ‘citizen journalist’ and the concerned or simply interested member of a community/society.

. Usenet
http://www.dmoz.org/Computers/Usenet/

The first decentralized system enabling Internet users to post and read messages on a wide variety of topics to be widely adopted for discussion purposes and still extremely popular. We must know about this founding father of the virtual discussion forum if we are to build our own model for discussing beats and angles to cover stories with our fellow journalists and contributors.

. The WELL
http://www.well.com/

In the same way as Usenet, the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, known as The WELL, is one of the oldest virtual communities still in successful operation, with currently 4,000 members, and a “birthplace” of the Internet discussion forum. The WELL has especial significance for our own OP proposal, as it was a magnet for journalists in its first decade, around 1985-1995. In fact, the online system achieved its high visibility in the media in those years by providing free accounts to interesting journalists and other carefully selected members of the media, such as the founders of the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Although cynics may have a point in criticizing such a practice, it does contain an element of desirability for OP: somehow the WELL found a way of attracting and engaging people who would be sure to keep the debates interesting and the place busy.

Another way it achieved this is by hosting one or two interest groups on its servers. For example, it was the main meeting place online for fans of the Grateful Dead, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This, in my opinion, is an extremely appealing formula for our own model. As media critic Jay Rosen was cited as saying in Wired journalist Jeff Howe’s book Crowdsourcing, “You have to engage them [the contributors] right away.” And Howe drives this point home: “All volunteer projects – be it citizen journalism, an open source programming project, or simply an AIDS walk – must inspire passion.”

From this, I conclude that hosting interest groups or fan communities of some sort – groups of already engaged, passionate people – may well hold the key to the big engagement issue.

In terms of moderation of speech, although the community forums are supervised by “conference hosts” who enforce rules of civility, controversial and irreverent views are welcome – also a desirable trait for OP.

Anonymity, however, is not possible on the WELL, and given that it is one of the ways free speech can be protected, I would reserve at least one space in our proposed model for anonymous speech.

Thanks to close interaction with the moderators, a real sense of community and collaboration is being fostered on the WELL – something we cannot overpass.
Not strictly speaking a journalism-related site, but as the previous selected entries, a pioneer and success story in the sphere of engaging the public to participate in its online civic discussion forums. As Peter M. Shane describes in his article “The Electronic Federalist: The Internet and the Eclectic Institutionalization of Democratic Legitimacy,” this non-profit Web-based initiative founded in 1998 hosts discussion forums on state and municipal issues and provides access to a wide range of public policy information, thus bringing citizens a set of useful functionalities for obtaining public information and discussing topics both among themselves and with public officials. The project is “a pioneering and arguably the most mature effort in this regard,” Shane wrote.

Also not literally related to journalism, but the two-year old Washington DC-based initiative has turned the nascent practice of crowdsourcing into an art form, as it engages “citizens, bloggers and journalists to be their own congressional watchdogs” and work collaboratively in making Congress and the federal government more transparent, as explained on its website. This is an inspiring and encouraging case study in crowdsourcing, especially given the less wise and fortunate case of “Assignment Zero” that follows. Crowdsourcing as used here could have perfect applications for investigative collaborative journalism.

As we are on the topic of crowdsourcing, Wired journalist Jeff Howe’s ill-fated experiment in the new collaborative practice, for which he actually coined the term, is worth considering for a moment. Reading his account of the “experimental journalism project” in his book of the same name, I could not help being immediately struck by the unlikely nature of the subject matter: “The aim was to have a crowd of volunteers write the definitive report on how crowds of volunteers are upending established businesses, from software to encyclopedias and beyond. We could use the crowd, in other words, to cover crowdsourcing. […] The result, we wrote when launching the project, would be ‘the most comprehensive knowledge base to date on the scope, limits, and best practices of crowdsourcing,’” he wrote.

Unless one is a passionate fan of crowdsourcing, or already somehow involved in its uses – unlikely events given the practice is brand new and mostly unknown to the general public at the time – it is hard to imagine how such a specialized subject matter could truly and consistently engage the project’s participants. Its ‘niche’ aspect sharply contrasts with the much more familiar and encompassing field of ‘news’ in the journalistic sense – a sphere large enough for just anybody to find something of interest to him/herself. This is where I envision the new OP philosophy and technology to be firmly ensconced: in the broader sphere of ‘news’ so as to engage both professional journalists and the public.

As Howe himself admits in his book, he and his partners had fundamentally misunderstood “the crowd’s interests…”
Thankfully, PBS’s own applications of crowdsourcing techniques, or as C4FCM Director Ellen Hume defines as “resource journalism” in an essay in *Democracy and New Media*, for its own special projects in the fall 1998 elections, seem to have been a much more positive enterprise and to highlight the real potential of such participatory models for the distribution and immediate use of information in a selected group of people.

. AlterNet
http://www.alternet.org/

Also among the first on the scene of online journalism, Alternet.org describes itself as a “news magazine and an online community,” and a “unique model of journalism,” which it obviously isn’t given the plethora of such models in today’s media landscape. It is here included though because it is one of the most visible and influential hybrid model on the Web, combining content from professional and less professional journalists. Less professional – meaning that AlterNet’s editors will accept contributions from not “just anybody” or even citizen journalists, but from experienced writers, albeit on a freelance basis. The higher standards applied to the contributions policy ensures a certain level of professionalism to this input from the community.

The site features 12 Special Coverage Areas, each with its own hub site, editor, and weekly newsletter, some with interesting or unusual themes such as “water,” “Rights & Liberties,” and “Reproductive Justice and Gender.” Such a system may well be a source of inspiration for my proposal of a system on OP for journalists covering the same beat to collaborate with each other.

Alternet however does not pass the grade for our own model because it turns out to be one more “mixed” news content in a sea of similarly low-standard reporting news sites. Thus, the project mixes its own original reporting with aggregated content, “forwarded stories and emailed links,” to quote its site. It defines itself an “amplifier for other progressive media: we create original reportage while amplifying the best content from over 200 independent media sources and individual voices, including over 40 of the most compelling and insightful blogs.”

Axel Bruns in *Gatewatching* perfectly describes the process: what he calls “gatewatchers” “observe the publication of news and information in other sources (that is, the passing of information through other gates) and publicize its existence through their own site. [his italics].

As one may guess, such a formula often ends up leaving little room for original as well as fair, balanced, objective reporting, as the strong presence of blogs and ‘individual voices’ would suggest. Similarly, the actual “original reportage” from AlterNet’s own staff writers turns out to be little more than their own opinions – pieces that pass for “news stories” complete with headlines similar to those found in the news sections of newspapers, but are in fact commentary pieces, with no interviews with sources and direct quotes, let alone representations of both sides of the story. The pieces from outside freelance contributors often are just that too. In that respect, AlterNet turns out to be a perfect representative of what hundreds of “news” sites are offering their audience – a poor, low-quality and misleading news content – misleading, because many of these Web-based news initiatives will not acknowledge this, although some do.

Clearly, the need for actual, basic, original reporting for online publication is more urgent than ever.
. Slashdot
http://slashdot.org/
In the same vein as AlterNet.org, Slashdot blends news and commentary, producing some of its own original features and mostly posting links to stories around the Net that “geeks will find interesting,” to quote the site. However, in a true “open news” spirit, Slashdot does so openly, without purporting to publish something else, as AlterNet and other new Web-based operations do. But the real reason for including Slashdot in this list is because it is one of the most successful collaborative enterprises on the Net, with users in the role of editors and one of the most often cited as a role model in the genre. The recommendation-based system of “amplifying” or “publicizing” the news at the input level is a very subjective exercise that could very well be interpreted as a form of censorship, and which in addition does not favor original content, and as said, I do not fully embrace such a practice for application to my own model.
The project does offer one very cool feature though, which perfectly espouses OP’s free speech philosophy: Slashdot’s points system, which allows users and contributors to adjust the level of free speech they want to see in the comments and pages they access. Thus, as Slashdot’s creators explained in an interview, each reader is able to read Slashdot at a level that they find appropriate. The impatient can read nothing at all but the original stories. Some will want to read the highest rated comments, some will want to eliminate anonymous posts, and others will want to read every last drip of data, from the first post to the spam. Nothing is deleted: if you want to read the raw, uncut Slashdot, simply set your threshold to -1 and go crazy!”
This tool gets checked for our own journalistic practice. Not that I personally would want to cut anything from my own free speech-minded experience, but for those who do, such flexibility offers a nice compromise.

. The Boston Globe/Boston.com’s hyperlocal news sites
http://www.boston.com/yourtown/newton/
If we are to propose a new journalistic practice and launch a collaborative tool in the local community, to start with, we should know what the local competition is doing. Boston.com, which acts as The Boston Globe’s electronic version, has embraced new media interactive tools and services, but offers nothing that we should be envious of. It has now re-doubled its efforts to “go local” and increased localized reporting for specific communities with the launch recently of “hyperlocal” coverage [see links] of certain Boston area communities, prompting some critics and observers to ask if it is not going a little too local, and perhaps omitting in the process the bigger picture and people around us. Something to keep in mind when thinking about what to cover and collaborate on in our chosen community.

. CNN’s iReport
CNN’s iReport had to be mentioned for its very successful “the people as reporters” experiment. The practice has caught on and inspired a large segment enough of people in the nation and beyond to take part. Where it fails, however, is in creating a real, ongoing debate around the issues it covers. Even though bringing out the news to the world to get it to react, and hopefully act to the news is the whole point of any journalistic exercise, as any selected page of posted videos and news entries showed earlier this month, on any given day there is barely any response to the news entries,
with one or two comments being the maximum registered. Only the Mumbai attacks generated more responses, but do we need to rely on news events of that scale to succeed in engaging our audience and potential collaborators and contributors? CNN’s iReport needs to find a way of truly engaging its intended target audience.

New York Times’ e-version
http://nytimes.com/
http://timespeople.nytimes.com/home/about/

Similarly, the New York Times’s electronic version offers such opportunities to its audience to engage in the news coverage process, at least at the more elementary level of contributing comments and responses to the debate surrounding the NYT’s coverage. The problem is, that debate is happening very hesitantly, and more on the level of one post per person, each person posting as if to him/herself, with no real discussion emerging around the posts. The “Ideas” section is a perfect example of this. It prompts its readers to participate by defining itself in the following terms: “Ideas is a conversation, so please post your comments and e-mail us for suggestions.”

I cannot comment on the second suggestion, but as regards the first – people simply don’t, or do so very little, infrequently and irregularly. As with CNN’s iReport and many other such online interactive news projects, the responses from the community are just not coming in. On any given day, news entries or entries register only one or two comments, with all the others on any given page with its comments section left empty. Here again, the debate on the news of the day and important issues is not taking place.

The NYT’s electronic version is also aggregating news, following a now common practice among media outlets, although its choice of news sources proves to be a heady mix, with The Economist, Slate, The Guardian, the “Prospect” magazine and another few e-magazines of little known origins to me, all thrown in the same “News” section.

BBC
http://www.bbc.co.uk/

Interestingly, the BBC, which one may define as a “government project funded with taxpayers’ money,” has been a pioneering force in the field of new media which is an interesting phenomenon as the new alternative Web-based initiatives are now taking some tips from it and following in its steps. One may have expected the opposite to happen. But the BBC has been at the forefront of new interactive technologies for its website and TV operations. The specific reason for including it into my “wish list” for the new OP practice and platform is its very sophisticated level of moderation. It is one of the most pro-free speech I have encountered so far and one of the most detailed in its functionalities – proof that the company cares about the way it regulates its viewers’ freedom of expression, it doesn’t just regulate or ban arbitrarily, but rather, puts a lot of thought into how this should or should not be done. Its online operations allow for two levels of moderation, which are explained on its page “Have Your Say moderation explained. There, a full page is devoted to explaining to the participants in one of its discussion forums how speech and comments are being regulated, what is allowed and isn’t. The two levels of moderation are “fully moderated” and “reactively
moderated,” which are applied differently on the basis of the user, the comment in question, and the moderator’s own decision.
A higher level of sophistication in one’s site’s moderation/monitoring system is definitely a great way of protecting and fostering free speech. It makes my list.

. Minnpost
http://www.minnpost.com/
This is without a doubt one of the most disappointing experiments that I have witnessed, from the first announcement of its launch in the fall of last year to its present-day operations. The online site covering news in the state of Minnesota has been launched by what seems to be refugees from the layoff sprees in the regions’ two main dailies, St. Paul’s Star Tribune and Minneapolis’s Pioneer Press. As explained in my presentation, it fails short of its initial noble goals of providing high-quality, original content to its readers, with promises of on-location foreign reports obviously unmet by its Connecticut-based “India” correspondent and Minneapolis City Hall assigned reporter writing on events in Russia. The quality of the reporting hits a new low, with simple sourcing and attributions to other news media’s reports peppering its stories, without verification, which can lead to some odd results, as when it cited a pro-Kremlin state news agency as a reliable source in one of its stories last month. More worryingly, its comments section, whose stated aim is to welcome the community of readers to have their voices heard and participate features one lone female commentator in a sea of male ones, on several pages checked late last month, who happened to be [coincidentally?] married to a relative of one of the project’s co-founder. So much for giving a voice to the community and people representation. Minnpost.com is good to keep in mind so as not to repeat those mistakes in our own model.

. GlobalPost
http://www.globalnewsenterprises.com/
The excitement if the discovery lies in the future for this brand new collaborative project: its launch has been announced for January 12, 2009. Like a few other initiatives before it, it is trying to apply the collaborative model to the gap in foreign coverage in the US media. It has certainly identified a missing link, a gap to be filled in the media landscape. The big question though will be whether there is an actual need from the US audience for such coverage. Foreign news is not on the mind of your average citizen in any given day, unless something major is happening and he/she has relatives or interests in the given country. So how to engage the audience and possible contributors will be the crucial question here. The project was started by former Boston Globe long-time correspondent Charles Sennott. It will be interesting to see how it develops.

. PBS/WLIW21 New York's Worldfocus
http://worldfocus.org/
To have an idea of how GlobalPost will fare among the sharks-competitors in this fast-changing Internet news scene, one may want to look at PBS’s Worldfocus, or more accurately its New York’s affiliate WLIW21’s, brand new TV show. Launched this fall, it has also zeroed in on the foreign news void and made it its specialty. For this, its founders rely on what they call “a new kind of collaborative partnership” with
journalists and experts-commentators in selected countries. The said partnership is taking place on a “voluntary” basis [unpaid], with the local/foreign partner-journalist/expert receiving “the exposure and experience in contributing to a major US media operation” in exchange for his/her own efforts, as one staff member explained to me. Another person on the staff team who is researcher for the Russia-CIS region, Christine Kiernan, reports satisfaction with the experiment so far, and her comments on how the new reporting system works is encouraging for such innovative initiatives: “So far I think the feedback about the collaborative method we are using here has been positive. We have been really pleased with phone interviews we have conducted with print journalists in the field, from the Christian Science Monitor, the New York Times, the Global Post, the Guardian. We have drawn on their comments from India after the bombings, Pakistan after the hotel in Islamabad was blown up, from a reporter following US military troops in Afghanistan, Thailand during the protests, etc. That's one method of collaboration that's been really fruitful,” she said.

“We are also getting footage from various local networks -- we just signed an agreement with Globo TV (Brazil) recently. We rely heavily on packages from ITN (UK), Deutchewelle and ABC Australia. Perhaps too heavily. It would be nice to have a few more partners out there, for instance, Russia Today - which initially expressed interest in collaborating with us but no deal has been signed yet. One of my colleagues is reaching out to an African network; we expect to start getting footage from them next week. So it's great to be able to use packages/footage from these other places but I do think we need to target more of them and other areas of the world,” she added.

All this sounds encouraging for the future of collaborative news-reporting projects, be they locally or internationally scaled. Let us just hope that in the competitive rush to find partners, as it may gain momentum over the next few years, with such business formulas becoming more popular, that these projects’leaders and managers do their homework in preparing and planning for them. In this case, PBS would be well advised to do some research on Russia Today, a new 24-hour English-language state TV channel, Russia’s answer to CNN, and a 100% pro-Kremlin mouthpiece.

voiceofsandiego.org
http://voiceofsandiego.org/

One of the many, many such new Web-based alternative independent news sites on which it is good to keep an eye on just to know what the trends are. But apart from that, I found in this collaborative news project that claims it delivers “quality” news the same quality issues as found in many similar projects – lots of aggregated news items, no direct, in-person interviews but instead direct copying and pasting quotes and facts from other news organizations, just as Minnpost.com does. Worse [or again, coincidentally?], it purports to be covering the news and issues that affect the communities of San Diego. The small core of staff reporters and editors happens to be, with just one exception, all white. Somehow this doesn’t show too well on this team’s ability to cover knowledgeably the problems and lives of San Diego’s “diverse” communities – but I may be wrong.

This personnel formula – of a small team of staff reporters and editors using a larger pool of freelance writers and outside contributors of varying levels of ability, is an increasingly popular practice – which the current budget restrictions may explain. On the other hand, it is also an old formula, since the trend of using freelancers started in
the newsrooms of the mainstream print and broadcast media at least five or more years ago. Little innovation here on this front.

. ProPublica
http://www.propublica.org/
This is perhaps one of the least hybrid collaborative model, and one of the most professional one also, as it relies almost exclusively on highly professional and experienced journalists – not unlike GlobalPost, which includes long-time CNN correspondent Jane Arraf – that says it all on the wildly different levels of expertise that these new online news models encompass. ProPublica’s non-profit independent online newsroom is interesting for its mode of distribution of the original news content it produces: through initial exclusive publication in traditional print and broadcast organizations. One question arises though, regarding this partnership with other news outlets for distribution purposes: will ProPublica’s stories and other news content go through a second round of editing before being published in the other news organizations? This is important as it may entail more editing, cutting, and eventually more control over the original content. As an editor at The Moscow Times for several years, I know that the MT edits all stories it takes from the wires, sometimes significantly cutting them down to make them fit to space, rewriting headlines, etc. Will ProPublica’s expensive original content be affected in this way?

. Pajamas Media
http://pajamasmedia.com/
One more example of personal opinions and commentary/analyses that pass as “news” and facts, albeit by a rather prominent and successful player in the online news media market. Definitely a “don’t” for OP.

. MediaChannel.org
http://mediachannel.org/
The pet project of well-known journalist and commentator Danny Schechter. The project, although it looks professional, is sadly proudly making the same claims of quality news reporting and being a platform for all-encompassing participatory collaboration – yet seems to fail to deliver. The site seems more designed for the purpose of giving Schechter an outlet to voice his opinions. His own comments on this new form of collaborative journalistic enterprise are interesting though, especially for the light they throw – or warnings they voice regarding the difficulties that may appear in collaborations.

“Mediachannel was founded on hopes of fostering collaboration among the many groups and individuals involved in media—advocacy, criticism, literacy, etc. worldwide. We are a not-for-profit network with hundreds of affiliates. What we found is that once we were successful, then the organizations then wanted to emulate/imitate/copy/compete with us. Many are just not into collaboration beyond— ‘here's our latest report or release, please post it’. This type of parochialism undermined the practical collaborations we sought to launch although we did do many partnerships on various projects,” he said in an email interview.

“We have been going for nine years - in Internet years, that’s a long time. We think we are getting better in aggregating content, original reporting and presentation. We
are right on top of the news and have a small team of dedicated and talented people. What we lack is the funding to enable us to better market our work. As we broaden our base and improve our quality, funders seem to have less interest,” he added. What I find interesting in these comments is the perceived tone of sadness, the tinge of disillusionment, or perhaps dwindling hopes about opportunities that have yet to happen – unless it is my own imagination. What they do certainly highlight is the underlying difficulties that such partnerships entail and the realities of the market in which they are formed. A lesson worth remembering for our own OP model, even if it happens on paper only.

. Indymedia/IMC [Independent Media Center]
It is hard for any free speech passionate advocate not to fall for this collaborative news model, which offers its users the maximum freedom in publishing their own content – which in editorial terms means the most minimally edited and controlled. In fact, here contributors publish directly, without interference from any third party. It is pure, undiluted news coverage and free speech.

It is open source, open news at its best: this global participatory network of non-pro journalists are encouraged to “become the media”. It stands clearly outside of the mainstream media or more mainstream approaches of Globalpost and proPublica which rely on professionals. It offers a higher level of inclusion than most similar newsreporting models, many of which accept contributions from seasoned writers only. And – the best of the best and increasingly a rarity – it publishes original, first-person, eyewitness accounts.

The level of editorial freedom and inclusion of potential contributors from the community are extremely appealing to me and get an instant check on my list of desirable features. A major question though is how to retain a high level of ethical standards and editorial quality in reporting and writing with such an amount of laissez-faire. Ideologically it is very appealing, but on paper how does it work, how does it look? There is no easy answer, in fact no one interviewed for this paper seems to have it. Suffice it to say that Indymedia is somewhere at the top of mist of desirable models.

. ReportingOn
http://www.reportingon.com/
This very new project had to be included in our list, first or all because of its newness. It was launched just this fall, and therefore will be an interesting subject of study in the months to come. Secondly, its initial stated purpose of creating a platform for “journalists to collaborate with each other on news stories and beats” seems quite similar to what I am trying to conceive for Open park, both in terms of a new journalistic practice of non-competition and actual collaborating newsgathering and reporting tool. However, upon checking the perhaps revised version of ReportingOn’s mission on its website, it is clear that the project is casting its net much more widely than it initially did, perhaps too widely. The site encourages journalists working on a particular story to post requests for information, background details, contacts and sources or even partnerships on its website, and is addressed at “anyone who publishes news, information or commentary at a relatively stable spot in print and/or online.” This seems to go much further than the initial target group of professional journalists. Who is going to come forward and say they work for a non-stable news
outlet? And “anyone who publishes information online” amounts to quite a large pool of people. Perhaps expectedly then, the site last month featured a woman requesting information about canaries and other pet birds, with no mention of what she needed the information for, no mention of any article she was working on, or even of herself being a writer in the first place. The site features quite a few of these strange posts. For many of them, it is not clear who the request is coming from – who are these people, what newspaper or news organization they work for – as this information is not a requisite. The project’s founder, Ryan Sholin,’s decision to go global with his idea [by translating the site into various languages] in what I think is a too immediate time frame, with little success to speak of before jumping into the big ocean, only adds to the confusion and wildly eclectic mix of participants. We now have, for example a lone Brazilian reporter asking for help in covering some local disease or locally administered medicines to treat it. Expectedly, his post went without a response. This has a negative effect of the stated professional focus of the project. We may want to keep in mind ReportingOn’s initial idea, which I think is essentially good, but this collaborative journalism project seems to want to do too much too early. Better be a big fish in a small pond first, which is why I think the Open Park project, should it ever be applied, should focus on the local scene - the Boston area. Another critical area where the project fails is simply in engaging reporters, editors and journalists – worldwide, since it is the area it has selected – to respond to the posted requests for information and cooperation. As of December 2008, this is not happening. One or two responses are posted per request, maximum, most requests go unanswered, unnoticed it seems. For now, it is just reporters posting requests on a mostly unresponsive, static website. The crucial question of how to engage and encourage participation seems to be as much a riddle for ReportingOn as for many of these online participatory reporting initiatives here cited.

. Prince.org
http://prince.org/
http://prince.org/msg/105
No relation to journalism, but this fan-based website hosts a very active political discussion forum, with actual conversations on politics, social, economic and cultural news and issues and fast-paced responses all coming from the very diverse community that such a fan site would create. In terms of ways to engage their users, they may have put their finger on a winning formula.

MORE PROBLEMS

But true engagement, as Pr. Mitch Resnick judiciously pointed out in an MIT communications forum he led earlier this year, is more than just involvement (increased use), it is about using media to effect change. The engagement question, certainly remains one of the main issues to resolve in our effort to get people to embrace a new form of journalism – the collaborative habit. And there are many others, especially on how to best craft a new social or cultural collaborative practice in newsreporting, that is journalistically ethical, free and open to all to ensure proper democratic representation, and practical and fun enough for people to use, be they professional or amateurs.
What the list of selected models here above shows is that some essential elements are still missing:
. a way to truly engage the participating journalists and their contributing or reading audience into an open debate about the issues that come up in the course of their work or that they cover.
. a way for the participating journalists to truly work collaboratively on stories and share their technical and intellectual resources – perhaps not unlike the way Brant Houston suggests. The actual division of tasks on a particular story or series of investigative stories for example hasn’t been encountered anywhere in the course of my research.
. a financially feasible way of increasing original, quality reporting and investigative news content.
. a way of maintaining ethical and quality standards while providing a minimally monitored space for free, open, uncensored debate and work.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, almost all of these collaborative models for news production in this quite representative list of what there is on the current market show great interactive features and look engaging in their design and conceptual ideas. However, they most often fail in truly engaging their intended audience, receiving only minimal interaction and responses from readers. Most comments sections show only one, two or no comments following a published story or request for feedback.
Similarly, ReportingOn, one of the newest collaborative journalism projects, succeeds in inviting journalists to post requests for help with their stories and assignments or sharing of resources, but fail to get the intended audience to respond in a timely and useful way.

In general, on all of these web-based news models, interaction takes place in the old, usual format of the project’s staff posting content, then waiting for a response for the audience. One of my conclusions is that this format does not work – at least not well and efficiently enough.
So far there is no true two-way collaboration or sharing of resources among journalists or a project’s participants, just as there is no active discussions on news websites around a specific story – the most active form of discussion being simply comments posted one after another, with no discussion taking place between two posters.

Another ‘old’ formula that these ‘new’ online news projects exhibit takes place on an organizational level: they are run by a small core of staff managers, editors and reporters, and rely mostly on freelancers for the content production/reporting and writing. This, however, has been the model for most traditional mainstream print media for at least the past five years, as newspapers across the country sought to cut costs on staff resources. This, many of the new Web-based initiatives simply replicate the old models and fails to innovate.

All in all, what this research paper shows is that the creation and introduction of a new cultural practice for journalism – the collaborative production and distribution of news - raises a series of crucial questions, many of which the experts in the media
field and those interviewed for this study find difficult to answer. The truth is, few know what shape the future of news will take.

**WHAT THE PROS SAY:**

“I am old enough now, and been wrong enough, not to predict the future. I suspect different models may survive, depending on the market and the subject matter. That is true in most things. We still, for instance, have private ownership of newspapers, public, and even some non-profit,” Rosenstiel said.

Former Washington Post New England Correspondent and Boston University journalism Professor Chris Daly is equally cautious:

“Speaking for myself, I share the traditional wisdom from Hollywood: “Nobody knows nothing,” he said in a recent interview.

“That said, I would venture to say this much: I think that most of the successful journalism in the future will be done on-line, probably by “digital natives.” That is, I think the most promising models are those that were born on-line and have no legacy of manufacturing and distributing printed products. The results and the quality will vary (as they always do in times of transition).

I think very few “legacy media” will make the transition. A few, with a high degree of brand appreciation, like the Times may survive. Otherwise, I think the future belongs to people like Joshua Micah Marshall at Talking Points Memo. He not only won a Polk Award, he is actually making money -- enough money to hire trained journalists.

As for citizen journalism, I have my doubts. I think it's a great idea, but I just don't know how great the results can ever get to be. To me, it seems like a vastly improved version of a very old idea -- the eyewitness. But even eyewitnesses need to be interviewed and interpreted by journalists.

A possibly more promising variant, to my mind, is crowd-sourcing. I think groups like the Sunlight Foundation have something potentially quite powerful. That model, as I understand it, involves someone who really knows a subject figuring out where a story might lie, then using volunteer labor to grind out the reporting,” he said.

**MY SOLUTION FOR ONLINE COLLABORATIVE NEWS PRODUCTION:**

Concretely speaking, it comes in the shape of my proposed project:

**Open Park** - an open-source collaborative reporting online platform for journalists to work together on news and investigative stories and based on a new ethical and cultural practice for professional journalism. Its creation and success thus depend on the conceptualization of a new journalistic practice and a sustainable business model.

In addition to these two founding elements, we need:
. a new way to truly engage in a sustainable manner one’s intended audience.
. create a really democratic, deliberative dialogue around issues that matter to the public, using investigative journalism as the main medium.
. a truly collaborative cultural practice for journalists to work on stories and share their resources across newsrooms and news organizations in the country. Similarly, more dialogue is needed between editors and the public.
. more original, quality content via the reporting of facts and not entertainment-based news or opinions.
. a truly free online space, where free speech is respected and encouraged, as well as individual freedoms, including that of expressing unpopular views or opinions that may seem offensive to some.
. clear guidelines for editorial policy so that editors can do their job or improving reporters’ work without using excessive monitoring methods and/or limiting free speech.

4 concrete steps that can lead to the above goals:

. increase freedom of speech on the Net by reducing editing/monitoring of web-based news production models. Let the users be their own editors and strive to be all inclusive when considering your audience and participants.

. host one or more interest groups or fan communities on your website. This may attract more people to the website and bring to it a new angle, and eventually enrich it.

. welcome talkative, diverse people with controversial views, who can be counted on to keep the debate lively and interesting.

. Stay away from all attempts to create a tool or practice that is “brand new” – the more disruptive the proposed practice or technology, the harder it will be to get it adopted and embraced by its intended audience. Rather, sample selectively those best practices found in the list of models here reviewed and combine them with our own innovative ideas. Then apply this new resulting formula to OP.

3 tentative proposals for concrete functions:

. an online discussion forum devoted to debating this very question of a new cultural practice for journalism and were it fits into the future of news.

. a online forum/space on OP’s initial website that lets users posts stories and assignments requests for local journalism students in the Boston area to choose from and work on as part of their school assignments

. an online forum/space on OP’s initial website that lets users test the idea of sharing reporting tasks for a particular story and divide assignments among themselves, with one person interviewing, one fact-checking, etc. Teaming up with one expert [an economist, health care provider, etc.] to work on a story is another possibility for experimentation in collaborative reporting.
Bibliography:

. Cyber Rights – Defending Free Speech in the Digital Age, by Mike Godwin
. Gatewatching – Collaborative Online News Production, by Axel Bruns
. Democracy Online – The Prospects for Political Renewal Through the Internet, edited by Peter M. Shane
. Crowdsourcing – Why the Power of the Crowd is Driving the Future of Business, by Jeff Howe
. Democracy and New Media, edited by Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn
. Republic.com 2.0, by Cass R. Sunstein
. The Journalist’s Moral Compass – Basic Principles, edited by Steven R. Knowlton and Patrick R. Parsons
. Youth and Civic Engagement, MIT Communications Forum
. Toward critical Media Literacy: Core concepts, debates, organizations, and policy by Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share