

Measuring the Impact of Citizen Journalism: A Study of Community Newsrooms in North Champaign and East St. Louis, Illinois

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Abstract: In this paper, we present a methodology for investigating the impact of community media newsrooms at public computing centers in East St. Louis and North Champaign, Illinois, USA. The study is part of a participatory action research project informed by community organizations in both locations and supported by students, faculty, and staff at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) and the Department of Journalism in the College of Media at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). The project also supported two courses: an ongoing service-learning course and a newly developed Community Informatics studio course, designed to introduce students to and have them apply theoretical and methodological concepts from journalism, community informatics, and community media studies. The purpose of the course is to help students develop the tools, skills, and knowledge they need to address a community's information needs and to support existing assets. The ultimate goal of this project is focused on designing effective strategies with people in low-income communities to foster a more vibrant news and information ecosystem. The course builds upon previous collaborative projects, in both cities, as a way to sustain the university's engagement with the two communities. While much has been written about public, civic, and citizen journalism, much less has been written about the methodologies used to measure the impact of participatory news initiatives in the U.S. This paper seeks to address this gap and to contribute to the field of community informatics by providing a framework that researchers can use to evaluate community news and information projects.

Abstract: Methodology, community media, service learning, citizen journalism, participatory action research

Introduction

In this paper, we present a methodology for investigating the impact of community media newsrooms at public computing centers in East St. Louis and North Champaign, Illinois, USA. The study is part of a participatory action research project informed by community organizations in both locations, and is supported by students, faculty, and staff at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) and the Department of Journalism in the College of Media at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). The project also supported two courses: an ongoing service-learning course and a newly developed Community Informatics studio course, an intensive eight-week summer session course designed to introduce students to and have them apply theoretical and methodological concepts from journalism, community informatics, and community media studies. The purpose of the course is to help students develop the tools, skills, and knowledge they need to address a community's information needs and to support existing assets. The ultimate goal of this project is focused on designing effective strategies with people in low-income communities to foster a more vibrant news and information ecosystem. The course builds upon previous collaborative projects, in both cities, as a way to sustain the university's engagement with the two communities. While much has been written

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about public, civic, and citizen journalism, much less has been written about the methodologies used to measure the impact of participatory news initiatives in the U.S. This paper seeks to address this gap and to contribute to the field of community informatics by providing a framework that researchers can use to evaluate community news and information projects.

We begin our study by reviewing the existing literature on frameworks that have been used to assess citizen journalism initiatives in the U.S. and around the world. We then introduce the summer course at UIUC and discuss how our research design fits within the existing literature on the topic. We conclude by discussing the project deliverables and expected outcomes as well as expectations of sustained impact. Ultimately, we argue that students, faculty, and local community members can benefit from participating in meaningful community engagement initiatives focused on supporting more “informed communities” (Aspen 2009) in the digital age.

The Emergence of Participatory Journalism in the Digital Age

Before we begin our review of citizen journalism evaluation methodologies, we introduce some of the key participatory journalism movements—both print and online—that have emerged during the past thirty years. We start with “public journalism,” which began as a movement led by commercial journalists during the 1980s. These individuals argued that the state of public life was in decline (Merritt 1995; Black 1997; Corrigan 1999). The movement blossomed in response to growing public distrust of government and a sharp decrease in civic participation. Journalists and academics witnessed the following: “...newspapers’ loss of readers, the decline in voting, the national loss of a sense of place, declining civic membership, the rising disgust with politics, the decay of public discourse” (Merritt & Rosen 1995). These commentators argued that public journalism could help revitalize public life as well as the field of journalism itself. Davis “Buzz” Merritt and Jay Rosen, as practitioner and scholar respectively, were among the leading advocates of the public journalism movement. They were, what Corrigan (1999) described as, “evangelists in the newsroom.” Merritt, Rosen, and others argued that journalists had a responsibility to engage the public more directly in local, state, and national affairs. As Corrigan (1999) has written, “Journalists must begin to provide hope about public life as well as offer solutions to public problems. The new approach to journalism puts the public first—public conversation, public problem solving, and using journalism to engage people in public life” (p. 6). So-called evangelists like Rosen suggested that journalists should stop focusing on objectivity as their main concern. Journalists, Rosen argued, had a responsibility to help Americans overcome their malaise by engaging them in public affairs (Rosen 1999). Merritt joined Rosen in arguing that journalism “should—and can be—a primary force in the revitalization of public life” (1995 p. 5).

Merritt put these ideas into action while editor at the *Wichita Eagle* in Kansas. In an attempt to overcome the horse-race quality of election coverage, Merritt’s paper took a more issue-oriented approach that moved public concerns to page one. The *Wichita Eagle* is often referred to as one of the early successes of the public journalism movement (Corrigan 1999, p. 92). During this time, Merritt and others advocated for journalists to get out of the office and into the community. As a result, journalists began leading discussions with community members to learn more about the issues that mattered to them. Some of their efforts were not unlike the tradition of “community media similarly dedicated to communicative democracy” (Howley 2005, p. 199) that began with George Stoney’s efforts to establish public access cable television in the 1960s and 1970s (Boyle 1999). Interestingly, many Public, Educational, and Governmental (PEG) access television stations have launched their own citizen journalism programs in recent years, using web-based media tools to compliment their cable television channels.¹

The public journalism movement is important for researchers interested in evaluating the impact of citizen journalism projects. We propose that public journalism laid the foundation for the following events unfolding today: (1) journalists as active participants in civic life; (2) the rise

of citizen journalism and its focus on geographic communities; and (3) new forms of civic engagement using digital media tools. These phenomena provide a set of criteria that researchers can use to evaluate the effectiveness of community-driven newsrooms.

Public journalism remains highly relevant as both commercial and non-profit newsrooms continue to seek strategies for community engagement.ⁱⁱ These early experiments have helped journalists gain the skills they need to more effectively listen to, and engage with, residents in local communities. They've also provided a roadmap for organizations and researchers interested in working with residents to produce their own stories and assess their impact. And, as we discuss below, this experience has informed our approach to co-designing and building sustainable community newsrooms in low-income communities in Illinois.

The Rise of Citizen Journalism

The emergence of citizen journalism has been well documented by media scholars and commentators (Benkler 2006; Jenkins 2006; Gillmor 2006). While the term “citizen journalism” came into widespread use during the mid-2000s, the practice has been traced to the political communication of Tom Paine and the early republic in North America (Gillmor 2006). What began as an effort to engage a broader public in revolutionary ideals became hugely profitable. As Starr (2004) writes, “*Common Sense* would go through twenty-five editions, selling an estimated 150,000 copies and reaching an audience several times that large in a single year” (p. 67). More recently, citizen journalism has been defined as participatory media produced by the “people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen 2006). Here, individuals and groups take center stage in both reporting and determining the news agenda. Often characterized by the emergence of low-cost equipment and ease of access to online media distribution, these technological developments helped revolutionize how ordinary citizens engage with news and information. The mid-2000s witnessed a fundamental shift in the relationship between media institutions and audiences, as citizen journalism became a global phenomenon (Allan & Thorsen 2008). At the same time, the technology that made it possible for consumers to become producers created a major upheaval in the U.S. mainstream news industry.

Today, commercial journalism has reached a tipping point towards economic collapse due to a financial crisis that has developed over many years (Downie & Schudson 2009; McChesney & Nichols 2009; Pickard, Stearns, & Aaron 2009). The number of newsroom reporters at the local, state, national, and international levels has significantly declined, as newspapers companies continue to shed jobs or close their doors altogether.ⁱⁱⁱ Journalists of color have been impacted most severely, as employment of Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American journalists has recessed to 1998 census numbers.^{iv} These losses mean fewer professionals are available to cover the news that residents—particularly in low-income communities and in communities of color—need to make informed decisions about critical issues surrounding education, employment, health care, environmental issues, and local politics. The situation in the U.S. is so dire that the Federal Communications Commission and Federal Trade Commission each have held separate hearings to examine the potential for government intervention in the failing news business.^v In response, pundits, politicians, and journalists alike have all leveled strong criticism against government support for journalism.^{vi} While newsrooms continue to lose staff large corporations are simultaneously looking for new ways to generate profits by expanding their reach into local communities to exploit cheap or free labor through online participatory platforms.^{vii}

Innovations in computers and broadband Internet platforms, however, have made it easier for people to produce and distribute community-focused news and information. Digital tools, such as Ping.fm and Onlywire.com, automate publishing to multiple social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. This growing use of personalized online communication is challenging dominant media institutions in a long-standing fight over eyeballs and ears, i.e. advertising dollars. Commercial website owners have responded by incentivizing amateur media

production. Participatory media sites, such as YouTube and CNN's iReport, bring new audiences to amateurs, while presenting challenges to local non-commercial initiatives focused on engaging residents in civic life. For these and other reasons, researchers need a fresh approach to accurately analyze and explain the impact of participatory news and information projects in virtual and physical spaces.

Evaluating citizen journalism

As many citizen journalism experiments have emerged and disappeared in recent years, academics, practitioners, and foundations have all shown increased interest in understanding what's working, what's not, and why. There are only a handful of studies, however, that focus specifically on methodologies for evaluating citizen journalism. Some have analyzed the content of citizen journalism (Lacy et al. 2010), others have looked at how political bloggers inspire civic engagement (Bahnisch 2008; Hamdy 2009), and yet other articles have assessed the impact of citizen journalism on mainstream news production (Fanselow 2008; Lewis et al, 2010; Xin 2011). For example, Xin (2011) examines the impact of citizen journalism (CJ) on the production of mainstream journalism in China by asking the following question: "What impact does CJ have on traditional media and on the level of public participation in debates on social injustices in China?" In an analysis of four cases, the author found that citizen journalism can serve as an important vehicle to help citizens not only receive information, which they might not otherwise have access to through China's state run media system, but also to engage in offline activism. However, citizen journalism like mainstream journalism in China still faces significant challenges from "a combination of forces, including tightened ideological control, severe market competition and the rise of extreme forms of Chinese nationalism" (p. 335). To understand the impact of citizen journalism, Xin employed the following measures:

1. Citizen journalism reports in mainstream news as a source of investigative journalism
2. The amount of attention that citizen journalists receive from Chinese decision-makers
3. Examples of where citizen journalism fails to inform the public about critical public health and food safety issues
4. Examples of nationalism propagated through the use of citizen journalism tools and its impact on offline activism

Along with the publications mentioned above, U.S. foundations and research centers have played a significant role in supporting citizen journalism projects and developing metrics to evaluate the impact of these initiatives. Through this process, many innovative models are emerging in local communities, while building on established community media practices. For example, as advances in personal computing and broadband technology have lowered barriers to entry for media producers online, many public access television stations have embraced these developments by launching their own participatory journalism projects.^{viii} In the process, many cable access television stations have become community media centers. One of the key funders at the center of this innovation is J-Lab, the Institute for Interactive Journalism at American University. J-Lab has awarded \$185.7 million in grants "to nonprofit news and information projects since 2005."^{ix} As their website explains:

J-Lab is a journalism catalyst. As the news and journalism space is re-imagined, J-Lab helps increase the rate and spectrum of change. We fund new approaches to journalism, research what works and share practical insights gained from years of working with news creators and news gatherers. (2011)

Reports available on the J-Lab website detail the many projects they have funded. In their (2010) report, "New Voices: What Works: Lessons from Funding Five Years of Community News Startups," J-Lab describes the measures they used to evaluate the impact and sustainability of

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community newsrooms. The report's findings are included in Table 1. J-Lab concludes that community engagement is key to the success and sustainability of community newsrooms. Because these projects require significant interaction between the host organization and citizen journalists, they recommend that future proposals should identify local partners (e.g., community organizations, local business, schools, etc.) that will help to provide long-term support.

Table 1. "10 Takeaways" from J-Lab "What Works" Report	
1. <i>Engagement is Key:</i> Robust and frequent content begets more content and whets the interest of potential contributors. The sites that have engaged their communities in multiple ways show the most promise.	6. <i>Sweat equity counts for a lot:</i> Projects built on the grit and passion of a particular founder or corps of founders have created the most robust models for short- and long-term sustainability.
2. <i>Technology can be a blessing and a curse:</i> Community news sites would not exist without the tech tools for building easy websites and creating digital content. However, efforts to build custom websites led to frequent and lengthy delays and repeated advice to start simply.	7. <i>The academic calendar is not good enough:</i> University-led projects built with student journalists need to operate year-round to avoid losing momentum and community trust. They hold great promise but must surmount great hurdles.
3. <i>Citizen Journalism is a high-churn, high-touch enterprise:</i> Citizen journalism math is working out this way: Fewer than one in 10 of those you train will stick around to be regular contributors. Even then, they may be "regular" for only a short period of time. Projects that expected to generate content by training a corps of citizen journalists had to develop alternative plans for stories or they struggled with little compelling content.	8. <i>Community news sites are not a business yet:</i> While many all-volunteer sites are showing great promise for sustainability, other site founders want to develop their sites as a sustainable business that can pay staff or contributors.
4. <i>Legacy news outlets are not yet in the game:</i> Projects that counted on partnerships with legacy news outlets ultimately found it best to go it alone as newsroom cutbacks left editors with no time to partner. Once launched, though, the New Voices projects found that partners came knocking.	9. <i>Youth media should be supplemental:</i> Projects that sought to train middle or high school students to report on news in their community produced infrequent content and fell prey to high trainer turnover and a need for great supervision. They should be secondary or tertiary, not primary, generators of content.
5. <i>Social media is game changing:</i> Facebook, Twitter and other social media tools are ushering in a New Age for Community News, creating robust recruiting, marketing, distribution, collaboration, reporting and funding opportunities.	10. <i>Community radio needs help:</i> While showing promise as community news outlets, community radio as well as cable access television stations need additional support and stable project leadership to deliver daily newscasts. (J-Lab, 2010)
Source: J-Lab (2010). "New Voices: What Works: Lessons from Funding Five Years of Community News Startups." http://www.j-lab.org/publications/new-voices-what-works	

J-Lab (2010) used the eight questions below as measures to evaluate the success and impact of their New Voices projects. Beyond examining each project's financial success, J-Lab sought to understand how community media newsrooms can best serve community information needs.

1. *Did the New Voices projects give a community regular coverage that either never existed*

- before or was, at best, episodic?*
2. *Did the site help solve community problems or elevate community issues?*
 3. *Did the site trigger other news coverage of community issues?*
 4. *Have the New Voices sites fostered community media skills?*
 5. *Did New Voices projects become the go-to places for crisis information that town officials could not provide?*
 6. *Did the site receive independent accolades or validation?*
 7. *Did the New Voices sites impart political knowledge and empower voters in new ways?*
 8. *Does a site need to make money to be sustainable? (p. 10-11)*

The report highlights several sustainable models of community newsrooms. It also mentions examples of community media projects, such as community radio and public access cable television, that have not enjoyed as much success, at least by J-Lab's standards. However, the report does highlight one exceptional citizen journalism project led by Cambridge Community Television (a former employer of this paper's lead author):

The successful exception is Cambridge Community Television's NeighborMedia, which has 10 citizen journalists covering issues in Cambridge, Mass., including three who have been involved since 2007. The correspondents have produced 536 stories and blog posts to date. (J-Lab, 2010)

Of course, researchers face significant challenges in measuring the success and impact of citizen journalism. For example, it often takes years before a community notices the impact of a project, and each case is often unique to the specific needs and existing assets located in a community. However, the J-Lab report is significant in that it provides key findings and recommendations from the forty-six grantees that launched forty-eight projects over five years. The questions from the report serve as a useful guideline to evaluate the success or inadequacy of citizen journalism projects. As such, they have been included as part of our evaluation design, described below.

Equipping Citizen Journalists: Establishing Community Newsrooms in North Champaign and East St. Louis, Illinois

Overview

In this section, we describe our project and proposed methodology. The "Equipping Citizen Journalists" project (2010-2011) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign sought to leverage past public engagement efforts through collaboration among the Community Informatics Initiative^x, CU-CitizenAccess^{xi}, and their community partners in North Champaign and East St. Louis. The initiative set out to equip four public computing centers to serve as community newsrooms. The sites included Salem Baptist Church and the Dobbins Downs neighborhood in North Champaign and the Mary E. Brown Center and the Park District Community Center in East St. Louis. The project also supported two courses: an ongoing service-learning course (LIS 451) and a newly developed Community Informatics studio course (LIS 490 ST; cross-listed with the Department of Journalism). The latter was co-taught by Martin Wolske (Senior Research Scientist, GSLIS), Brant Houston (Knight Chair in Investigative and Enterprise Reporting, College of Media), and Pam Dempsey (CU-CitizenAccess.org) to adapt citizen journalism programming created through past public engagement projects to the current needs of low-income residents in both locations. Collection of data throughout the project was meant to provide comparisons about the impact and sustainability of programming between Champaign and East St. Louis.

Evaluating community information needs

The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy (Aspen Institute, 2009) emphasized the need for healthy, informed communities. To enable an information ecosystem to meet people's personal and civic information needs, the Commission urges local communities to pursue three objectives: (1) expand availability of information to everyone; (2) strengthen capacity of individuals to engage with information; and (3) promote individual engagement with information in the public life of our community. In preparing the Community Informatics studio course (LIS 490 ST), the instructors identified six key recommendations from the report (see Table 2) that would be useful to students in evaluating the impact of their citizen journalism projects with community partners over the eight-week summer session.

Table 2. Theoretical Framework for the Community Media Newsroom	
Recommendation 3	Increase the role of higher education, community and nonprofit institutions as hubs of journalistic activity and other information sharing for local communities.
Recommendation 10	Support the activities of information providers to reach local audiences with quality content through all appropriate media, such as mobile phones, radio, public access cable, and new platforms.
Recommendation 11	Expand local media initiatives to reflect the full reality of the communities they represent.
Recommendation 12	Engage young people in developing the digital information and communication capacities of local communities.
Recommendation 14	Emphasize community information flow in the design and enhancement of a local community's public spaces.
Recommendation 15	Ensure that every local community has at least one high-quality online hub.
Source: Aspen Institute. (2009). "Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age". Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute.	

The instructors discussed how they might integrate the recommendations from the Knight Commission report with the findings from J-Lab's (2010) New Voices report, which were highly relevant to the goals of course. J-Lab's community news startups have addressed critical issues that have either gone under-reported or un-reported in the established local media. For example, "The Appalachian Independent, which reports news for the little-covered rural community around Frostburg, Md., has written about difficult racial issues never before reported," and "Madison Commons broke a significant story on brown water in one of the neighborhoods that the local paper developed into a major report on deteriorating pipes" (J-Lab 2010). The fifty J-Lab funded community news startups added critical coverage of local events. The report's measures of success have been included in the logic model below.

The New Voices report is joined by the 2009 Horizon Report (New Media Consortium & Educause Learning Initiative), which points out that mass amateurization, such as citizen journalism, is becoming possible because of the rapid pace of innovation in mobile and cloud computing, geographic-aware applications, and the personal web. This mass movement is redefining how we teach, learn, research, and produce journalism. However, as the report points

out, “those who use technology in ways that expand their global connections are more likely to advance,” while others who do not will find themselves “on the sidelines” (p. 5). While this may be true, others (e.g., see Eubanks 2010) argue:

Although access is an important part of the high-tech equity puzzle, it is not adequate for developing strategies to combat inequalities of the information age that are not material or distributional, such as cultural recognition, institutional discrimination, health and safety issues, environmental injustice, nonparticipatory or ambiguous decision-making structures, and rights to privacy and technological due process. (p. 26)

The Equipping Citizen Journalists project joins these and other efforts to address the disparity in the “effective use” (Gurstein 2003) of technology for information gathering and reporting news in North Champaign and East St. Louis. The project leaders at the University of Illinois hoped to extend collaboration between the two communities to enhance cross-pollination of ideas and generalization of principles. The results in turn will be used to seed a larger grant proposal to expand the project.

Primary audience

The primary audience for the project comprises the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) Community Informatics Initiative (CII), and the Department of Journalism (College of Media); ongoing and recent public engagement projects including the Youth Community Informatics (YCI) project, the CU-CitizenAccess (CitizenAccess.org) project of the Department of Journalism at UIUC, and Nuevos Horizontes Radio Program; long-term community partners, including administrators and lead staff at the Mary E. Brown Center and the East St. Louis Park District in East St. Louis, and Salem Baptist Church and the Dobbins Downs neighborhood in Champaign; prospective youth and adult citizen journalists from within the two communities; non-profit and municipal leaders who will gain new sources for information about their communities; residents throughout each community who will gain new outlets and new information sources to further personal and civic information needs; and also established news media, seeding additional news stories on issues of interest to the community.

During the spring 2011 semester, students enrolled in LIS 451 continued the work begun in the previous summer and fall semesters to build and expand public computing centers at proposed sites. Design of the technology implementation within these collaborative spaces took into account their use as community newsrooms, in addition to other creative programs. Funds from an Office of Public Engagement (UIUC) grant helped to tailor these spaces specifically for journalistic and community media purposes.

Programming

Teams of professors and students (hourly assistants and students in LIS 490 ST) from GSLIS and the Department of Journalism sought to conduct a series of conversations and workshops with residents at each community newsroom, with the goal of identifying key issues and needs in the communities. Students, instructors, and staff at the University of Illinois worked with their community partners in North Champaign and East St. Louis to identify local youth and adult volunteers to participate in the project. In the first phase of the workshops, the teams planned to train participants on how to gather information and news using cameras, audio recorders, mobile phones, and computers. The second part of the workshop focused on teaching residents how to create and share credible information through text, audio, and video on websites, social networks, and mobile phones. An important element of presentation included the development of online maps, including a community wireless plan for the East St. Louis Park District, to track community information and visualize local issues.

University personnel, community partners, and citizen journalists from both communities met during the summer to exchange ideas, provide mutual support, and evaluate overall progress. A doctoral student at GSLIS has worked under the guidance of University faculty to gather additional data on impact and sustainability, and has continued to coordinate with the various communities to further enhance and sustain the project over time.

Deliverables, products and/or expected outcomes

The evaluation of this project was still underway at the time this paper was submitted for publication. However, this next section will provide a list of outputs that the UIUC team hoped the four community newsrooms would produce by the end of the summer studio course, including: community webpages, Facebook pages, blogs, and Twitter feeds that would present news stories and information pertinent to each community. The <http://www.cu-citizenaccess.org> and <http://www.metroeastdigital.org> websites would serve as core hosting services for the stories, supplemented with various social media services. The online news and information for each community would be in video, audio, and text. The different web pages would have automatic links so that each neighborhood, whether in East St. Louis or Champaign, can see the common issues, learn techniques, and gain knowledge from each other during the project.

In order to measure the impact of citizen journalism in East St. Louis and North Champaign, the project will be evaluated on several criteria. Table 3 presents our logic model based on the recommendations (Activities) from the Knight Commission report, engagement (Outputs) between UIUC and partner organizations, and measures (Outcomes) from the J-Lab report. The Inputs (not listed in the table) include the community partners in North Champaign and East St. Louis, the students, faculty, staff at UIUC and the funding from the Office of Public Engagement (UIUC).

Table 3. Program Logic Model for Evaluating the Impact of Citizen Journalism		
ACTIVITIES°	OUTPUTS°°	OUTCOMES°°°
<p>Recommendation 3: Increase the role of higher education, community and nonprofit institutions as hubs of journalistic activity and other information sharing for local communities.</p> <p>(On the ground: Elevate current computer-equipped spaces to become hubs for citizen journalism and information sharing.)</p>	<p>Quantity and quality of content placed online; quantity and quality of news stories by community members and journalism students; amount of engagement between faculty and students with marginalized and underserved neighborhoods.</p>	<p>The community is able to solve problems and/or elevate community issues.</p>
<p>Recommendation 10: Support the activities of information providers to reach local audiences with quality content through all appropriate media, such as mobile phones, radio, public access cable, and new platforms.</p> <p>(On the ground: Become a place where information providers can come to develop content and learn about new ways to distribute that content using new media. This may have parallels to the marketing</p>	<p>Quantity and quality of content placed online; the amount of online traffic from the community; number of technical skills learned and applied from the project; level of use of mobile phones for information gathering and news alerts.</p>	<p>The community gains digital/media literacy and community media production skills.</p>

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<p>departments of local TV, radio and newspapers that help businesses create customized presentations regarding their business that are then distributed via their specific media.)</p>		
<p>Recommendation 11: Expand local media initiatives to reflect the full reality of the communities they represent.</p> <p>(On the ground: Work with community partners to develop local media initiatives.)</p>	<p>The amount of online traffic from the community; number and types of responses to the needs and issues of the selected neighborhoods by the communities at large.</p>	<p>The community acquires regular coverage that either never existed before or was, at best, episodic.</p>
<p>Recommendation 12: Engage young people in developing the digital information and communication capacities of local communities.</p> <p>(On the ground: Reach out to young people through the two pilot sites in East St. Louis, and encourage the local sites to reach out to young people, as well. While the community media newsrooms would be open to all, their program would especially emphasize young adult work.)</p>	<p>The amount of involvement and online collaboration between the two neighborhoods.</p>	<p>The community acquires regular coverage that either never existed before or was, at best, episodic.</p>
<p>Recommendation 14: Emphasize community information flow in the design and enhancement of a local community's public spaces.</p> <p>(On the ground: Emphasize information flows in the design of the community media newsroom.)</p>	<p>The amount of involvement and online collaboration between the two neighborhoods.</p>	<p>The community is able to solve problems and/or elevate community issues.</p>
<p>Recommendation 15: Ensure that every local community has at least one high-quality online hub.</p> <p>(On the ground: Continue to use CU-CitizenAccess to serve this function for social and economic issues in Champaign county. Encourage community members to use the site to share local information. Foster MetroEastDigital.org as an online hub. Use these sites to explore how to improve quality by enlisting greater citizen participation because of the place-based community media newsrooms.)</p>	<p>Quantity and quality of content placed online; quantity and quality of news stories by community members and journalism students; engagement between faculty/students with marginalized and underserved neighborhoods.</p>	<p>The community gains political knowledge and empowers voters in new ways.</p>
<p>Sources: °Aspen Institute. (2009). “Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age”. Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute & J-Lab (2010); °°LIS 490 ST Community Informatics Studio at the University of Illinois; and °°°°“New Voices: What Works: Lessons from Funding Five Years of Community News Startups.” http://www.j-lab.org/publications/new-voices-what-works</p>		

The logic model includes the following outputs: the quantity and quality of content placed online; the amount of online traffic from the community; number of technical skills learned and applied from the project; quantity and quality of news stories by community members and journalism students; level of use of mobile phones for information gathering and news alerts; the number and types of responses to the needs and issues of the selected neighborhoods by the communities at large; the amount of involvement and online collaboration between the two neighborhoods; and engagement between faculty/students and marginalized/underserved neighborhoods.

The UIUC team will present an evaluation report to the community partners for discussion based on the proposed methodology and analysis of data described in this paper. The students also evaluated their own work with their community partners at the end of the summer course. They have presented their assessments on the MetroEastDigital.org project website^{xii}. UIUC faculty and community organizations will consider these data to evaluate whether they are achieving the project outcomes. Adjustments will be made, as necessary, to future participatory action research projects.

Conclusion

In this paper, we proposed a methodology to study the impact of citizen journalism in two communities in Illinois through a University-community partnership. Recent studies and reports—produced by foundations in particular—have provided this project with valuable frameworks to assess the outcomes of our community newsrooms. The goal of the project is to ensure that residents in the selected communities will have a strengthened skill set to produce credible information and news about their communities, by learning and applying existing and new technologies. We hope this will lead to the identification of issues, heightened awareness of the issues and problems to be addressed, and the pursuit of solutions to those problems. The project will be part of ongoing GSLIS and Department of Journalism classes and the CU-CitizenAccess.org effort. Thus, the impact will be sustained and increased semester to semester.

Future studies will attempt to measure the success of our program with methodology proposed in this paper. The research will gather data through interviews with students, faculty, and staff at the University of Illinois and key community partners involved in the project to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the research and program designs. The researchers will review documentation from each student group to assess the opportunities and challenges in designing, implementing, and evaluating each project. We hope this study will yield important findings for community informatics researchers and community members to use in measuring success in citizen journalism, community media, and other participatory news projects.

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Notes

ⁱ For example, see Colin Rhinesmith, “How Public Access TV Evolved into Community Media Centers”. Published at PBS.org on November 20, 2010. Retrieved October 18, 2011 from <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2010/11/how-public-access-tv-evolved-into-community-media-centers324.html>

ⁱⁱ The Engagement Metric. Event at The Reynolds Journalism Institute, May 4 & 5, 2011. Conference website last retrieved on March 7, 2011 at <http://www.rjionline.org/events/stories/engagement-metric/bios.php>

ⁱⁱⁱ “Roughly 13,500 jobs for full-time, newsroom professionals disappeared during that period, the total falling from 55,000 to 41,500, a count which includes some 284 new jobs at some online-only newspapers now included in the industry’s tallies. That means that newsrooms have shrunk by 25% in three years, and just under 27% since the beginning of the decade.” From the Project for Excellence in Journalism and Rick Edmonds for the 2010 State of The News Media report on Newspapers. Retrieved September 9, 2010 from http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2010/newspapers_summary_essay.php

^{iv} *Ibid*, American Society of Newspaper Editors.

^v See Jeremy W. Peters. “Government Takes On Journalism’s Next Chapter”. Published June 13, 2010 in *The New York Times*. Retrieved September 9, 2010 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/14/business/media/14ftc.html>

^{vi} “FCT protects journalism’s past” May 29, 2010 by Jeff Jarvis on Buzz Machine. Retrieved September 9, 2010 from <http://www.buzzmachine.com/2010/05/29/ftc-protects-journalisms-past/>

^{vii} See “AOL’s Patch Launches 100th Site; Plans Expansion to More Than 500 Communities This Year.” Aol.com. Retrieved on December 31, 2011 from <http://corp.aol.com/2010/08/17/aol-s-patch-launches-100th-site-plans-expansion-to-more-than-50/>

^{viii} *Ibid*, Colin Rhinesmith, “How Public Access TV Evolved into Community Media Centers”.

^{ix} See J-Lab, Grant Funding Database available at <http://www.j-lab.org/tools/grant-funding-database/>

^x See <http://www.cii.illinois.edu/>

^{xi} See <http://cu-citizenaccess.org/>

^{xii} See <http://www.prairienet.org/op/journalism/>