Success and Sustainability in Hyperlocal Journalism: The Forum, Deerfield, NH.

By Khadija Amjad

Executive Summary

The Forum (www.forumhome.org) is a citizen news website that serves the towns of Deerfield, Nottingham, Candia and Northwood in rural New Hampshire. Founded in 2005 as a cooperative with seed funding from a foundation grant and the local library, business advice from a local businessman and pro bono legal aid, the site focuses mainly on local news and activities. It includes reader-contributed news, fiction, poetry, photographs, cartoons and opinion pieces, with anyone allowed to contribute as long as submissions are in accordance with editorial guidelines. The Forum is in many ways a typical example of a local citizen-driven journalism website taking the phenomenon farther than a local blog, giving a voice to the community that is unique in the area. This case study examines the news value such a site brings to a small town and the decisions and editorial, business and technological structures that have brought it to its present state.

Introduction

The Forum was founded in August 2005 in rural Deerfield, New Hampshire, by former teacher Maureen Mann and several other residents she had met through political activity. They all shared a common interest in creating a non-partisan and unbiased source of local news. The local news void was made especially noticeable when, in February 2004, the local school newsletter, which doubled as the community bulletin, announced the schedule for candidates running in the municipal elections a month after the deadline to file. At the time, of the 22 local offices there were eight for which no one was running at all. Mann and her colleagues were moved to action by the lack of a news source for their community of 4,000 residents, and started the site under the auspices of the Friends of Deerfield Library with an initial grant from the

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1 Maureen Mann, in Email interview with the author.
Knight Foundation via the University of Maryland’s J-Lab initiative. Shortly afterwards, the Forum acquired its own 501(c)3 status.\(^3\)

Mann, who taught English, social studies and psychology for 30 years, says, “Essentially, we exist because nothing else existed.”\(^4\) The Forum was initially set up to serve Deerfield, but quickly grew to include the surrounding towns of Candia, Nottingham and Northwood. Together, the four towns have a combined population of about 16,000 residents and share common representatives to the New Hampshire legislature.

**Business Model**

The Forum has always been operated as a not-for-profit enterprise, with the goal of selling enough local advertising and sponsorships to cover costs. Initial *pro bono* legal aid from the Franklin Pierce Law Center in Concord, NH, allowed the organization to apply for and receive its 501(c)3 non-profit designation in August 2005, which meant that it could accept tax-deductible donations.

When it first launched in 2005, the Forum received help from a local businessman in developing a plan to recruit sponsors and advertisers. Classified ads could be purchased online for $10 for the first 25 words. Plans were made for the group’s first fundraiser in early 2006 and a popular local group, the Coffeehouse Band, offered to do a benefit concert for the Forum.\(^5\) With readership growing steadily since then, the site had a budget of around $20,000 a year by the end of 2007.\(^6\)

Early feedback from readers criticizing an online-only local newspaper made it clear to the editors that some materials would have to be made available to those without access to the internet.\(^7\) The Forum ‘reverse-publishes’ in a 24-page tabloid format paper three times a year with February and October election editions and a summer events edition. The print edition is drawn from the materials published online and each edition costs about $2000 (advertising alone covered about two-thirds of the cost by early 2007).\(^8\) The paper is free and is mailed to homes and businesses. By early 2008, print circulation had reached 7380 copies.

The number of visitors to the site has grown steadily since the site launched in 2005, averaging over 6000 hits per month with about 50,000 page views by early 2008.\(^11\) However, finding advertisers for the website has been more difficult to date, with most advertisers still preferring to advertise in the print edition following which the site witnesses a huge spike in readership, as it does after major local events such as the annual Deerfield town fair. The site has tried various marketing strategies to attract advertising revenue, not all of which have been successful, “We sent out a postcard mailing last fall to all addresses in the four towns. The postcard was intended to increase awareness of the Forum and bring in advertising revenue. We

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\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) “2005 Grantees – The Forum”.

\(^6\) Chris Carr, Forum volunteer in Email interview with the author.


\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^11\) Ibid.
did see an increase in visits to the website. However, we did not get any new advertisers. That certainly qualifies as a failure!” reports site volunteer Chris Carr.\textsuperscript{12}

Editorial Model

When it first launched, the staff at the Forum was a group of about 15 core volunteers that set themselves up as a cooperative, paying $25 to join and agreeing to volunteer 100 hours of work a year.\textsuperscript{13} Following a period of consistent growth in terms of the range of topics covered and writers engaged, the Forum had 210 individual contributors by early 2008 - a three-fold increase from the previous year.\textsuperscript{14} The Forum does not have any full-time staff, but two site editors who are paid a stipend and an advertising manager works on commission. There are some writers who contribute an article once a month or less; others may submit as many as three per week. In the cooperative-type set up the Forum presently has, it can also prove to be difficult to define precisely who a volunteer is, “Everyone who contributes is considered a volunteer,” says Carr.\textsuperscript{15}

Most of the communication among writers and editors is handled through email and many of the Forum contributors have never met.\textsuperscript{16} There is a core group of people who contribute on a regular basis with most of them working other full-time jobs and none of them trained as journalists.\textsuperscript{17}

On a typical day, the front page carries items such as news on the latest voting trends of local legislators on issues such as immigration, parental rights and education, a tribute to a retiring local School Board member, an invitation to a Greenhouse Open House in celebration of spring, a talk and book-signing by a water-conservation activist, and Passport Day at the local Post Office.

Rather than limiting itself to traditional definitions of ‘news,’ the Forum publishes articles, fiction, non-fiction and photographs sent in from a variety of viewpoints as long as the editorial posting guidelines available on the website are followed. The guidelines (See Appendix I) make a distinction between items submitted as letters to the editor, articles (“factual reports”), literary contributions (“fiction, short stories, poetry”), community calendar items and photographs and require authors to submit their names and contact details with each submission, reserving the editorial right to make changes before publication as deemed necessary.\textsuperscript{19} Submissions are verified with the author before publication on a space-available basis, also subject to editorial decision, although posters need not be local residents. The need for brevity

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} “2005 Grantees – The Forum” (14 February 2008).
\textsuperscript{14} Chris Carr, Forum volunteer in Email interview with the author.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Chris Carr, Forum volunteer in Email interview with the author.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
and current, local topics is stressed, and there are clear guidelines against any profanity or personal attacks. All comments are moderated.

Although training is offered to contributors who wish to post their own material, few people have shown an interest in taking it so far. The site does not have any affiliations with other local or national media and reader-contributors generate all content. While there is no formal rating system for contributions, articles need to be relevant to the local area and its residents to be accepted for publication in accordance with the site’s primary goal to increase citizen participation.

The Forum had to make an effort to establish credibility at the start, “And so we went to the towns and got police blotters, we got information on the fire department, where was the fire, and then what we did on the theory that everybody is very nosy [sic] about everybody else . . . . we profiled not just important people in the community necessarily, but the postmaster…a woman in her 90s,” says editor Maureen Mann.

The range of sources from which the site derives its content has also served to boost its image as a credible source of news; “We have been very fortunate to have contributions from a wide variety of sources. We are seen as a credible news source and people are willing to provide us with information. We receive meeting minutes, public notices and announcements from the local libraries. We recently began receiving police logs from the Northwood and Deerfield police departments,” says Forum volunteer Chris Carr. To formalize the Forum’s governance and begin to focus on longer-term plans, a Board of Governors was set up in 2005 with the aim to make the site sustainable even if the founding group is less involved. The Forum has also acquired errors and omissions and directors’ liability insurance. As of early 2008, the Forum was hoping to find funding to cover two paid positions—a manager and an office support person.

The Forum also had opportunities to establish credibility by being timely and reporting stories before anyone else in the area. “We post local election results before any of the regional media,” says Carr, “We are very satisfied with our ability to cover local news stories to a greater extent than the regional media. We are able to provide full coverage of many stories that regional media may only cover on a cursory basis. We cover many stories that they would not cover at all.”

Technical Issues

The Forum uses Bulletlink (www.bulletlink.com) as its content management system. Bulletlink is a commercial web hosting and services company founded in Murphy, Texas in 1999 that now lists newspaper websites as 90% of its worldwide portfolio with the remaining 10% covering other businesses such as associations, churches, attorneys, realtors and radio stations.

Ibid.

Maureen Mann in Email interview with the author.


Chris Carr, Forum volunteer in Email interview with the author.


Chris Carr, Forum volunteer in Email interview with the author.

Although it was seen to have some operational limitations at the Forum, it has been low cost and easy for people to learn and use. Following an initial problem when the system let people post an opinion without an accompanying name or email address, in violation of the Forum’s policies, there have not been any major technical problems.

As all content is moderated by the editors, posting articles, photographs and comments on the site does not require registration, but there are detailed guidelines available on the site for those interested in making a submission or commenting. While the site has never been hacked, it does receive spam emails and occasional spam comments. Neither has posed a major obstacle to the smooth running of the site, which is down for short periods of time for routine maintenance only. While the Forum site is essentially low-graphics and does not yet feature many technical elements found on other sites, such as the capacity for users to post videos, the two most popular services are the photo galleries and the weekly email news subscription service, indicating that some of the audience wants a more multi-media product while others prefer a non-web-based source of information. It would be interesting to investigate whether these preferences are based on the availability of broadband or other characteristics of readers.

Defining Success

Citizen media sites have defined success in ways as varied as the sites themselves. Definitions of success have ranged from “a million monthly readers” to “the founders getting syndicated columns or mainstream media writing gigs,” says J-lab’s Jan Schaffer. Other measures include the choices made by local citizens and the impact on local media. By both these measures, the Forum has been shown to have a positive impact: for example, voters in the town of Northwood decided not to fund a planned town newsletter because the Forum, among other sources, adequately provided the town’s information to residents. The Union Leader, published daily from Manchester, New Hampshire, began publishing ‘Route 101 East’, a bi-weekly section covering Candia and Deerfield, and The Concord Monitor (a daily covering the state capital Concord and towns in central New Hampshire) and Foster’s (a daily covering Dover, New Hampshire and the coast and lakes regions) have both increased their coverage of the area. Some of their items are “enhanced” versions of articles published in the Forum according to Mann. Importantly, and in keeping with the original mission of the founders, during the spring 2006 local elections, all but 2 of the 22 offices had a candidate running for them as compared to 8 the previous year, and turnout rose to 33% of eligible voters from 20% the previous year.

Two and a half years since it launched, the Forum now stands to act as an important binding element in the social fabric of the communities it serves. When a storm hit Deerfield in April 2007, the Forum provided a critical information hub for residents when the town’s official website was down. The Board of Selectmen from the Town of Deerfield acknowledged this role

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27 Chris Carr, Forum volunteer in Email interview with the author.
29 Ibid.
31 Chris Carr, Forum volunteer in Email interview with the author.
33 Ibid.
in the spring of that year.\textsuperscript{34} Spurred by the success of the effort at the Forum, Maureen Mann ran for New Hampshire’s District 1 house seat in a special election to replace retiring dean of the New Hampshire House, Robert Johnson.\textsuperscript{35} She based her successful bid on a platform of leadership and immersing herself in the community, and was sworn into office on 30 January 2008.\textsuperscript{36}

\begin{quote}
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\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
Appendix I


Guidelines for submission:
We reserve the right to edit submissions to the newspaper. Persons must include their name, street address, and telephone number or email address with all submissions. We will verify submissions with the author before publication. Submissions are printed on a space-available basis. Decisions as to publication of submissions are the sole decision of the editors. Views expressed in submissions to the newspaper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the newspaper.

Letters to the editor:
Your opinions are welcome. Authors must include name, street address, and telephone number or email address with every letter. Email letters are preferred. Letters sent via US mail should be sent to the address above. We will not publish the email address, phone number, or street addresses of an author of letters to the editor. Letters should be less than 350 words. Personal attacks, defamation of character and/or libelous or slanderous material will not be printed. We may limit the number of letters published on a single topic. Views expressed in letters are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the newspaper.

Suggestions:
- No personal attacks or profanity.
- Keep it short and specific.
- Local or current issues preferred.

Opinions:
You may submit an opinion piece to be considered for publication. Opinion pieces are typically greater than 350 words in length and should expand on a particular topic of concern to the community. Authors must include name, street address, and telephone number or email address with every opinion piece. Personal attacks, defamation of character and/or libelous or slanderous material will not be printed. All opinion editorials are published at the discretion of The Forum editors.

Community Calendar:
For calendar items, please include the event, date, time, location, price (if any), and contact person. Persons submitting events must include name, street address, and telephone number with a submission.

Photographs:
We will consider photographs for publication. We will not substantially alter photographs except as necessary for publication. Digital photographs are preferred. Please contact editor for submission of non-digital photographs. Persons submitting photographs must include name, street address, and telephone number or email address with a submission.
Articles:
Full-length articles will be considered for publication. Articles are factual reports and do not express or convey the opinion of the author. The information contained should be researched and accurate. Documentation of sources may be requested. Articles must be proofread for grammatical and spelling errors. Persons submitting articles must include name, street address, and telephone number or email address with a submission.

Literary Contributions:
Fiction, short stories, poetry and like items will be considered for publication. Persons submitting content of a literary nature must include name, street address, and telephone number or email address with a submission. Submissions must be proofread for grammatical and spelling errors. Please state whether your submission has been published before and any terms under which the submission was published.

Corrections:
The newspaper regrets any errors it makes and will publish corrections promptly after notification.

Privacy:
We do not and will not release your personal information to a third party without your consent. However, we may share general information about how people use the website and newspaper without identifying specific persons.

Protection of minors:
We will limit the use of names and addresses where we deem it appropriate, especially as it applies to minors.

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