

THE FORUM, DEERFIELD, NH:

Seeking Sustainability in Hyperlocal Journalism

By Khadija Amjad

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SUMMARY

The Forum (www.forumhome.org) is a community 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 Forum focuses on local news and activities. The site includes reader-contributed news, fiction, poetry, photographs, cartoons, and opinion pieces; anyone can contribute within relaxed editorial guidelines.

The Forum is a successful example of a hyperlocal, citizen-driven community news site that is filling a niche. It provides a population that had no news media at all with relevant and timely information and a space for community interaction that was previously lacking. With part-time paid editors organizing the contributions of entirely volunteer authors, the content of the audience-driven Forum reflects the communities it serves. The publication was wise to recognize that publishing a few times a year on paper was key to serving the community as a whole. With such a small base, the Forum is still fragile; contributors are eager to improve their work and find ways to reach a broader audience, probably through from partnerships with neighboring professional media.

HISTORY

The Forum was founded in August 2005 in rural Deerfield, New Hampshire, by former teacher Maureen Mann and several other residents whom she met through political activity. The group shared an interest in creating a nonpartisan, unbiased, and timely source of local news.¹ The local news void became apparent in February 2004 when the local school newsletter, which doubled as the community bulletin, published the procedure for running in municipal elections a full month after the deadline to register had passed. Meanwhile, of the 22 local offices open, there were eight for which no one was running at all.² These circumstances motivated Mann and her colleagues to create a news source for their community of 4,000 residents. They launched the site under the auspices of the Friends of Deerfield Library with an initial grant from the Knight Foundation via the University of Maryland's J-Lab initiative. Shortly afterwards, the Forum acquired 501(c)3 status, making it a certified nonprofit organization.³

“Essentially, we exist because nothing else existed,” says Mann, who taught English, social studies, and psychology for 30 years.⁴ The Forum was set up to serve Deerfield, but the site’s scope quickly expanded 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 representatives to the New Hampshire legislature.

BUSINESS MODEL

The Forum operates 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, New Hampshire, allowed the organization to apply for and receive its 501(c)3 nonprofit designation in August 2005, which enabled it to accept tax-deductible donations.

When the Forum launched, a local businessman helped develop a plan to recruit sponsors and advertisers. Classified ads could be purchased online for \$10 for the first 25 words. The group held its first fundraiser in early 2006 and popular local group the Coffeehouse Band played a benefit concert for the site.⁵ With readership growing steadily since then, the Forum had established a budget of roughly \$20,000 a year by the end of 2007.⁶

Early feedback from readers suggested to the editors that some of the site’s contents should be made available to community members without access to the Internet.⁷ Accordingly, 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. Each print edition costs approximately \$2000 (advertising 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. After the print edition is distributed, the site tends to enjoy a huge spike in readership, as it does after major local events such as the annual Deerfield town fair.

The number of visitors to the site has grown steadily since the site launched in 2005, averaging more than 6000 hits and about 50,000 page views per month by early 2008,⁹ Nevertheless, finding advertisers for the website has been difficult, with most businesses still preferring to advertise in the print edition. The site has tried various marketing strategies

to increase site awareness and attract advertising revenue; In fall 2007, Forum volunteers sent out a postcard mailing to all addresses in the four towns, which increased traffic to the website, but failed to lure new advertisers. “That certainly qualifies as a failure!” reports site volunteer Chris Carr.¹⁰

EDITORIAL MODEL

The Forum’s homepage is simple and easy to navigate, divided into three vertical columns against a plain white background. The left column contains site navigation and page links, the right column consists of advertising, and the center column, accounting for roughly half the space, contains story content. Each of the four towns the site covers has its own page filled with news, police logs, construction announcements and other local stories. Most stories consist of no more than a few paragraphs and are written in a straightforward, hard news style. Some, such as an August 4 story about tornado damage in Deerfield, have an almost pedagogical tone:¹¹

Gawkers make clean-up work even more difficult, and those who have sought to break into damaged homes or harvest fallen trees will be prosecuted if caught. Meanwhile, please remember that local and state police, emergency response personnel, and particularly public works employees are exhausted. They have been flat out for more than a week and don’t need us to give them any guff about getting into restricted areas.

On a typical day, the front page carries news items as diverse as the latest voting trends of local congressmen; a tribute to a retiring local school board member; an invitation to an Open House at a local greenhouse in celebration of spring; a book signing by a water conservation activist; and Passport Day at the local Post Office. On some days the site publishes a number of stories while other days—or even weeks—see very few updates. On a summer day in 2008, the top three stories on the front page were written by Maureen Mann herself.

The “Voices” page gives readers the opportunity to express themselves in poetry, fiction, or personal essays. Several disaster and renewal-themed haiku appeared after a tornado ripped through the region (“after violence/smashed homes, uprooted huge trees/crickets still chirping”).¹² Likewise,

the religion page “welcomes content from people of all beliefs” and features sermons by local pastors, and occasionally, respectful debate. In response to a post linking the U.S. Declaration of Independence with Christian principles, one reader wrote, “Ahem. Not to be picky, but I feel I must point out that the Founding Fathers, contrary to legend and propaganda, were NOT all Christians.”¹³

In addition to leaving comments on stories, readers can engage in the site by submitting their own events listings, participating in online polls (on August 4, 2008: “In light of recent weather, what do you think is the truth of global warming/climate change?”) and posting in the free classifieds section, which does not appear to be very active.

In the beginning Forum staff consisted of about 15 core volunteers who set themselves up as a cooperative, paying \$25 to join and agreeing to volunteer 100 hours of work a year.¹⁴ By early 2008, as the range of topics covered expanded, the Forum had 210 individual contributors—a threefold increase from the previous year.¹⁵ The Forum does not have any full-time staff, but two editors are paid a stipend and an advertising manager works on commission. Some writers contribute an article once a month or less; others may submit as many as three per week. “Everyone who contributes is considered a volunteer,” says Carr.¹⁶

Most of the communication between writers and editors is conducted through email; despite the small size of the community, many of the Forum contributors have never met.¹⁷ There is a core group of people who contribute on a regular basis; most of them work at other full-time jobs and none of them trained as journalists.¹⁸

Rather than limiting itself to traditional definitions of “news,” the Forum publishes news articles, fiction, nonfiction and photographs from a variety of viewpoints, as long as the posting guidelines (available on the website), are followed. The guidelines (see Appendix I) distinguish between items submitted as letters to the editor, articles (“factual reports”), literary contributions (“fiction, short stories, poetry”), community calendar items and photographs. Authors are required to submit their names and contact details with each submission and the site reserves the editorial right to make changes before publication “as deemed necessary.”¹⁹ Submissions are verified with the author before publication. Contributors need not be local residents. The need for brevity and current, local topics is stressed, and there are clear guidelines against any profanity or personal attacks. All comments are moderated.

The site does not have any affiliations with other local or national media and reader-contributors generate all content. Although 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 of increasing citizen participation.²⁰

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 nose[y] [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.²¹

The range of sources from which the site derives its content has also served to boost its image as a credible publication. "We receive meeting minutes, public notices, and announcements from the local libraries, says Forum volunteer Chris Carr. The site also receives police logs from the Northwood and Deerfield police departments.²² To formalize the Forum's governance and focus on longer-term plans, a Board of Governors was set up in 2005 with the aim of making the site sustainable once the founding group becomes 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.²³

The Forum has also established credibility by 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."²⁴

TECHNOLOGY

The Forum uses Bulletin (www.bulletlink.com) as its content management system. Bulletin 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷

The site provides detailed guidelines for those interested in making a submission or commenting. Staff say the site has never been hacked, but 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. The Forum site is essentially low on 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, indicating that some of the audience wants amulet-media product while others prefer a non-web-based source of information.²⁸ It would be interesting to investigate whether these preferences are based on the availability of broadband or other circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Citizen media sites have measured their progress 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.²⁹ Other measures include the choices made by local citizens and the impact on local media. By both these measures, the Forum has had an 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 local information to the town's residents.³⁰

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 paper covering the state capital, Concord, and towns in central New Hampshire) and *Foster's Daily Democrat* (which covers Dover, New Hampshire, and the seacoast 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.³¹

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.³²

Three years after it launched, the Forum has become an important element in the social fabric of the communities that 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 in the spring of that year.³³ 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.³⁴ She based her successful bid on a platform of leadership and immersing herself in the community, and was sworn into office on January 30, 2008.³⁵

Hyperlocal citizen news sites like the Forum that have a limited pool of contributors are particularly dependent on the loyalty and enthusiasm of their unpaid authors. The Forum is working hard to ensure that the energy is maintained as Mann steps back from the project, but there are limitations to what can be done with the resources available within the community. It remains to be seen whether the Forum will continue to thrive as a proud small-town publication or whether it will seek to expand its horizons and connect its work to other media efforts.

Khadija Amjad graduated from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in 2007.

APPENDIX I: Submission Guidelines at the Forum

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 U.S. 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.

Disclaimer: The newspaper disclaims all legal and financial responsibility for errors or omissions in content.

Copyright notice: No portion of this newspaper may be reproduced without the express consent of the publishers. Please state whether your submission has been published before and any terms under which the submission was published.

ENDNOTES

¹ Maureen Mann, *email interview with the author*.

² <http://www.j-lab.org/cms2panel1.shtml>

³ http://www.j-newvoices.org/site/story_grantees05/philbrick_james_forum/#augustprogress

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Chris Carr, *Forum volunteer, personal communication*.

⁷ http://www.j-newvoices.org/site/story_grantees05/philbrick_james_forum/#augustprogress

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ <http://forumbome.org/default.asp?sourceid=&smenu=111&twindow=Default&mad=No&sdetail=6086&npage=1&skkeyword=&sidate=&ccat=&ccatm=&restate=&restatus=&reoption=&retype=&repmin=&repmax=&rebed=&rebath=&subname=&ppform=&sc=1>

[276&bn=forumbome&he=.org](http://forumbome.org)

¹² <http://forumbome.org/default.asp?sourceid=&smenu=77&twindow=Default&mad=No&sdetail=6058&npage=1&skkeyword=&sidate=&ccat=&ccatm=&restate=&restatus=&reoption=&retype=&repmin=&repmax=&rebed=&rebath=&subname=&ppform=&sc=1>

¹³ <http://forumbome.org/default.asp?sourceid=&smenu=185&twindow=Default&mad=No&sdetail=5865&npage=1&skkeyword=&sidate=&ccat=&ccatm=&restate=&restatus=&reoption=&retype=&repmin=&repmax=&rebed=&rebath=&subname=&ppform=&sc=1>

¹⁴ http://www.j-newvoices.org/site/story_grantees05/philbrick_james_forum/#augustprogress

¹⁵ Chris Carr, *personal communication*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Chris Carr, *personal communication*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ <http://www.forumbome.org/default.asp?sourceid=&smenu=122&twindow=Default&mad=Yes&sdetail=&npage=&skkeyword=&sidate=&ccat=&ccatm=&restate=&restatus=&reoption=&retype=&repmin=&repmax=&rebed=&rebath=&subname=&ppform=&sc=127>

²⁰ Maureen Mann, *email interview with the author*.

²¹ http://www.mediagiraffe.org/profiles/print_profile.php?id=377

²² Chris Carr, *personal correspondence*.

²³ http://www.j-newvoices.org/site/story_grantees05/philbrick_james_forum/#augustprogress

²⁴ Chris Carr, *personal correspondence*.

²⁵ <http://www.bulletlink.com/default.asp?sourceid=&smenu=49&twindow=Default&mad=No&sdetail=&npage=&skkeyword=&sidate=&ccat=&ccatm=&restate=&restatus=&reoption=&retype=&repmin=&repmax=&rebed=&rebath=&subname=&ppform=&sc=101>

²⁶ Chris Carr, *personal correspondence*.

²⁷ http://www.j-newvoices.org/site/story_grantees05/philbrick_james_forum/#augustprogress

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ http://www.j-lab.org/citizen_media.pdf

³⁰ Chris Carr, *personal correspondence*.

³¹ http://www.j-newvoices.org/site/story_grantees05/philbrick_james_forum/#augustprogress

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ <http://www.cmonitor.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080119/OPINION/801190365/1029/OPINION03>

³⁵ <http://www.forumbome.org/clients/forumbome/08wall.pdf>