

# NEW ENTREPRENEURS: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON NEWS



## **A study conducted by:**

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## **Introduction**

J-Lab's New Media Women Entrepreneurs Initiative undertook this study to understand how women are interacting with news, participating in the news, creating the news and consuming the news. Funded by the McCormick Foundation, the study explored perspectives and behavior with regard to both new and traditional media. Using focus groups and in-depth interviews among women news consumers and news creators, the research lends important insights into the impact the changing media landscape is having on how journalism is being practiced and how it is being consumed.

The study included four focus groups, three among women news **consumers** and one among women news **creators** (primarily traditional news creators, but with some who are creating in new media) and 11 in-depth interviews among new-media news **creators** who are founders and editors of online news sites serving geographic areas. The research was done between April and July of 2009.

## **Executive Summary: Key Themes**

Six themes emerged in our study:

### ***Theme 1. Community journalism is evolving as an exercise in participation, not merely as observation.***

- New media **creators** seek to report on their communities by being actively involved in them. They engage in newsgathering and reporting that is informed by their own knowledge and sense of place. They seek to entice members of their community in robust conversations. They pay close attention to their readers and communities to figure out what is of interest.
- **Consumers**, most of whom are not directly contributing to news sites, use news not just for their own information. They also turn it into an opportunity to share and interact with others. They may comment on a site, but, just as important, they actively disseminate news through their own social networking.

### ***Theme 2. A shift in objectivity, broader definitions of news and the inclusion of different voices characterize the new forms of community journalism.***

- New media news **creators** deliberately employ more involved (participatory), less dispassionate points of view, while maintaining the distinction between news and opinion.
- **Consumers** use new media to ferret out specific perspectives to the news, particularly for international news, community reporting and in-depth coverage of topics that interest them.

**Theme 3. Building community rather than simply covering community is the impetus for launching community news sites.**

- The primary motivation of news **creators** in starting a community news site is to amplify a sense of community and connect its members in meaningful interactions.
- For women news **consumers**, understanding community and satisfying a basic need to be informed and connected are among the primary reasons to seek out news. They do not make much of a distinction between “news” and “information.”

**Theme 4. Community news sites rise to fill gaps in news coverage.**

- For news **creators**, the primary gap is a geographic one. They are seeking to fill a void that exists because traditional media never covered their communities or have abandoned coverage because of economic pressures.
- For **consumers**, local online news sites fill in something that has been missing: Giving them a feeling that they belong to a particular place.

**Theme 5. New media entrepreneurs are motivated by a frustration with old media’s pace of innovation and change.**

- Many women news **creators** got involved with their new media sites as a reaction to what they described as a complacency and a reluctance to embrace new media they felt in traditional news settings. New media creators all reported that old media in their communities responded to their new ventures with marked pettiness.
- **Consumers** also recognized the reluctance to change, citing examples of traditional media who changed their methods only after being challenged by new media competitors.

**Theme 6. Both news creators and consumers express excitement and regret over changes confronting old media.**

- **Creators** and **consumers** alike see opportunity in new media, including speed, access, expanded options for news and information and opportunities for deeper coverage. But they also have some concerns. Among them are narrowed zones of interest (people reading only what they want to), an overload of information and the potential loss of investigative reporting.

These themes show a transition not just in the way that news is delivered but also in the way that news is defined and produced and in how it is used in our society. The word “democracy” was not cited by the participants as a primary role for news, perhaps because it is taken for granted. But the need to be informed and connected was paramount. Women news creators are seeing new ways to fill this need and women news consumers are welcoming the changes.

## The Findings

**Theme 1. Community journalism is evolving as an exercise in participation not merely as observation. Participation can include commenting and discussion, unraveling news tips, nudging the community to address needs or show up at events, exchanging banter and sharing observations.**

- *“When you write a story you are beginning a conversation, but then it is continued in the comment section, often for 20 to 90 comments. I just think it is a fresh forum. It feels new and innovative in a way that the news room that I was working in didn’t feel.”*  
– Local site editor
  
- *“There is a yearly parade. ... A few years ago, before I started [my Web site], it looked like the crowds were getting smaller. I thought: this is ridiculous. The problem is people aren’t getting information about this. There are no signs. There are no banners. There is no Web site for this parade. ... I thought if I have this Web site, I can kind of chauffeur the parade and maybe more people will know about it and turn out. It has become, not just a parade, but there is a concert tonight and a movie series that we are co-sponsoring to be able to get out information in ways that people can use it. In ways that they discuss it.”* – Hyperlocal site founder
  
- *“We are working on making the site more interactive and getting more people to participate ... trying to get more community involvement and participation.”* – New media creator

Online news **creators** are going beyond just reporting about a community. They felt that journalists should play an active part, encouraging the community to participate, but also participating themselves. And while most of them saw themselves as entrepreneurs and had great passion and ownership for what they were doing, they felt that their sites belonged to the community, the sites *were* the community.

Participation does not simply refer to consumers contributing to the process. To make stories more meaningful, local online journalists are taking part in the communities that they cover. These new media **creators** felt that journalists should be active participants in their communities to bring greater meaning to their sites.

**Consumers** also spoke of the importance of news in their lives. Many reported being a news source for others in their professional and personal networks. News was something that connected them to other people.

**Theme 2. A shift in objectivity, broader definitions of news and the inclusion of different voices characterize the new forms of community journalism. New media creators use words like *frankness, honesty and transparency*. They seek out non-traditional voices and allow non-traditional content.**

- *“What is different? The first thing that comes to my mind is the way that we write, the way that we speak to and with our audience. It is very conversational and yet without it being opinionated or insulting. It also, in many cases, lifts the veil a lot. I will so often write a story about something that is breaking or developing by beginning with how we found out about it. It might be: ‘Thanks to Jane for sending us a note to let us know that there are 10 police cars on the corner’ ... Just don’t believe ... that everything has to be so dispassionate third person.” – Local site founder*
- *“There is something about our town that I think the newspaper couldn’t point out – which is that our town is really funny. Most functional places are just comic operas with real estate tax, and that was certainly true of our town. Our local government was hilarious. A lot of times the paper can’t point that out because the paper is an authority figure, and an authority figure who points a finger and laughs is a bully. Whereas, I was just some person on the back porch. I used the sort of funny voice that I wrote in to make sure that [my site] didn’t become mean. I wanted most of the jokes to be on me. I didn’t start [my site] because I was a community booster or because I knew everything about my town, I started it because I was stupid. And I did my entire learning process in public. The point of [my site] was to get people to [participate and] correct me.” – Local site founder*
- *“We try to get more voices represented in our stories and more non-mainstream voices. So, if I am writing a story about rapid transit, I might quote a legislator but also a small business owner on the street and someone who lives in the neighborhood and will be taking the new train or not taking the new train. So we have a commitment to making people’s voices heard and that is probably pretty different. It is not just the official story.” – Local site editor*

By focusing on community, new media **creators** see a different approach to their coverage of news, with a broader definition of news. They felt that news in a traditional sense, with its urgency, does not provide context for consumers. They felt more explanation, linking to other stories, to other sites, to government documents, and to other people all provide information that can make the news more meaningful to consumers. A number of the new media creators used local government meetings as examples of the distinction between their coverage and traditional news media’s coverage. A traditional news story would cover the meeting and indicate who was there and what was discussed. New media creators would also provide the background, past voting histories, minutes of previous meetings, news coverage of those meetings and more perspectives from the community. They would also present the agenda prior to the meeting and encourage people to attend. These new media creators spoke of providing depth and context to the news that they present.

Being a part of the community rather than detached from it also led to more thorough reporting in the opinion of some of the new media **creators**. They believed they had better access to sources and were better versed in the issues. These creators felt that detached reporting and formulaic



story writing led to the same sources who would give an expected response rather than any insight into the situation.

For **consumers**, the distinction between “news” and “information” was blurred. While there was some agreement that “news” was more urgent or timely than “information,” it was difficult for many to articulate a difference. Consumers seek out news and information that is of interest to them and that can help them make decisions in their lives. They do not place any greater value on news or information – it’s the relevance to them that is important.

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### ***New media creators are experimenting with and redefining “objectivity.”***

- *“I think we are a little less afraid to say that something happened and it wasn’t entirely a neutral outcome. . . . If you look at our political coverage, I think it is very different how we cover things as opposed to how the traditional paper does. I do think it’s because they feel restrained by this somewhat antiquated notion of objectivity.” – Local site editor*
- *“In some cases the traditional approach to stories – covering issues in which you are nothing but a silent observer – can be untruthful because I think it is more truthful to say, ‘This is what I saw.’ than ‘This is what happened.’ ... Being able to have that opportunity to stray from the traditional kind of approach was good.” – Regional site editor*
- *“When it came to covering controversial issues or covering a complicated policy or scientific standpoint, sometimes the traditional news approach does not work. It either waters things down or it makes it seem like there is one side over here and there is the other side over there and there is no real middle ground. ... I mean, there were things about traditional media that we wanted to take this opportunity to avoid to better cover the issues that we were covering.” – Regional site editor*
- *“A lot of it isn’t what my traditional colleagues would probably see as news. Things like sharing a little bit of personality. And I think part of it is just that the traditional news outlets have been so stripped of voice and stripped of the interaction and ... the ties with their community that [it] really makes what I am doing, I hope, more valuable for the people I am trying to reach.” – New media creator*

Seeing themselves as the community has an impact on the way that new media **creators** present the news. All the news creators in this research had respect for objectivity in journalism, but several new media creators questioned the extreme to which traditional news may have gone to maintain objectivity. They spoke of a detached objectivity coming from observation – a “top down” approach to journalism.

New media **creators** believe that they can be objective, but still be connected to their community

and to the stories they report. They saw a very strong distinction between news and opinion and took great strides to ensure that they, their contributors and their readers understood the difference, but they did not see their “participatory perspective,” a more informed, connected perspective, as encroaching on objectivity.

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**News consumers and new media creators see less value in framing stories around conflict. To traditional news creators, conflict remains an important definition of “news.”**

- *“News without conflict is a press release.”* – Traditional news creator
- *“It is drama . . . The more drama [journalists] can get out of any story, they feel like they are going to get more viewers.”* – Chicago consumer
- *“I think that [journalists] do that for us because they assume that we are more interested in conflict.”* – Philadelphia consumer

Some **traditional news creators** felt that conflict was an important part of news. Conflict gave news its urgency and importance, but also was a way of suggesting that both sides were covered. **Consumers** did not recognize conflict in news but rather described it as drama. They felt that often journalists heighten the drama in their stories. **New media creators** were less likely to share this viewpoint. They felt that with their depth of coverage and involvement in the community, the conflict was not necessary. The consumer interest came from the involvement rather than being manufactured by the news creator.

**Theme 3. Building community rather than simply covering community is the impetus for launching community news sites. Creating community news sites involves sharing news from the inside-out rather than the outside-in.**

- *“We have just managed to cultivate a community of people who really care about the town and want to debate [the] legal issues before the Town Council. The level of debate has been great and our stories have definitely guided the policy of city hall.”* - Local site founder
- *“One of our goals is not just to have a dialogue about issues but also to pull the community closer together.”* - New media creator
- *“It [our Web site] is a way for people to have a sense of community, make comments on what is going on in the community. I think in one sense we have actually brought not only people within our communities together but created more intercommunity communication.”*  
– Local site editor

- *“What I love most about our site is that it gives you a sense of place and makes you care about the place that you live in and understand people who are different from you, or are sharing this place and whose lives are affecting yours.” – Local site editor*

Community building is the focus for most new media news sites. Creating community was an overriding theme among new media **creators**. Virtually all the women who were editing their news sites used “community” in describing what they did.

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**News consumers, on the other hand, use news to meet a basic need for information and to connect with their personal communities.**

- *“I feel like we need [news] to survive. If I don’t have it, I would probably just go crazy. I like to know stuff.” – Chicago news consumer*
- *“I am not going to say that I know more than others ... what I am going to say is that when I do find out things, I inform others. Like I might call a friend of mine ... and let them know what I just heard and what I just witnessed.” – Chicago news consumer*
- *“You want to know what is going on. For me, it is like an addiction.” – Young Philadelphia news consumer*

For news **consumers** the purpose of news is to create a sense of community and to satisfy a basic human need to be informed. When asked directly about the purpose of journalism and news in our society, the responses were personal in nature. News serves a very personal need to be informed, connect with others, understand and engage with the world and even to be entertained. News **creators** gave similar responses to consumers, but they were more likely to believe that the news media serve as watchdogs, that they keep our institutions honest, and that they help to generate an informed public. Interestingly, “democracy” was not cited as a role for the news, perhaps because it is taken for granted. Many of the concepts were indeed related to democracy, but the word itself was rarely mentioned and not at all by consumers.

**Theme 4. Community news sites fill gaps in news coverage. New media creators launch news ventures to fill a need that they notice.**

- *“What was missing was the sense of sort of a community water cooler. And there were things that we, the people who lived there, were interested in, [that] in another distribution context, just didn’t make sense or wouldn’t make money. So, we were able to do it a lot more efficiently.” – New media creator*
- *“If they were effective, we wouldn’t have a snowball’s chance in heck. ... The funny thing is, we wouldn’t even be here if they hadn’t really abdicated their responsibility to cover the community.” – New media creator*

- *“We said, ‘Let’s start going around and playing mobile news team and see what we can find out’. Once that ... became apparent that that was something people needed, and we started paying more attention to what wasn’t getting covered around here, ... we did this full time. There were more and more things that we started covering. We are covering this because it is news. We are not just a little blog anymore.” – New media creator*
- *“I think a lot of it is knowing what your readers are interested in and cutting to the chase.” – New media creator*

The potential for new media is to fill gaps or needs that traditional media have not met. Both **consumers** and **creators** saw new media as being able to provide news that has not been available through traditional media in the past or that traditional media has moved away from more recently because of the changes in the industry. These gaps were in three areas. The largest and most apparent was a geographic-based gap. Consumers indicated that they wanted local news and news that affected them in their neighborhoods. Creators felt that many local papers and broadcast media have overlooked some smaller communities, especially as resources are reduced. This gap is what drives the creation of hyperlocal news sites.

Another gap was audience based. Certain audiences are not as well served by media as others. They may be audiences that have specific shared needs (e.g. military families) or audiences whose perspective has not been a part of traditional media. For example, two new media creators pointed out that financial news is presented from the perspective of the business community and not from the perspective of labor.

A third gap was in interests. Aside from interest in local communities, new media allows news consumers to access more information about their areas of interest. Many of the consumers in this study indicated that with new forms of online media they were able to research topics of interest to them in much more depth than they would be able to through traditional media.

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**Consumers also see gaps in coverage, and they are learning how to fill them.**

- *“I think today probably one of the best things is the Internet because you can go on and you can go to BBC and check places like that that years ago you did not have the easy access that you have today. You were really kind of limited and encapsulated in what you were receiving [from print media] ... But today, with the Internet, you can go check a newspaper in any major city in the world on a story today to get different opinions on it.” – Chicago news consumer*
- *“I go to BBC for certain controversial issues here because I feel like the media here does not quite find out what the world is saying. It is completely different. It gives you something about America from another standpoint. I like to see what they have to say.” – Philadelphia news consumer*

New media fill other gaps as well. **Consumers** are interested in many different types of news and information. While they particularly want news that affects them – local, usable news about their neighborhood – they also want to know more about the world around them. They reported being interested in news on health, finance, family, entertainment and sports. They wanted the ability to find the information that was of interest to them. More sources gave them the opportunity to find the specific information they cared about.

More available sources provide more relevant information, but also afford different perspectives. **Consumers** wanted those different perspectives. The BBC was mentioned in every focus group as a source that provided a different way of looking at the day’s events. Looking at different sources also serves as a way to judge bias and credibility for news consumers.

**Theme 5. New media entrepreneurs are motivated by a frustration with old media’s pace of innovation and change.**

- *“I had this sense of discontentment with traditional organizations that I have worked for and how slow they are to embrace some of the new opportunities I see out there.”*  
– New media creator
  
- *“I am sure I would have been happy working at one of the papers but I was really looking for something more challenging and more cutting edge and just something that would allow me to help sort of reinvent the way news and information is shared.”* – Regional site editor

While all the news **creators** in this research had a similar view of journalism, the difference between the traditional and the new media creators was their willingness to see new technology as an opportunity rather than a threat. New media creators are more likely to embrace the changes facing journalism and not see them as a threat. They do not see new media as a new field but an evolution of a field that they have great passion and respect for.

This slowness in adapting to new technology and new consumer habits was a frustration to new media **creators** but also a motivating force. A number of creators indicated that traditional newsrooms did not (and still do not) realize the profound changes that are occurring in the industry. The new media creators in particular felt that traditional media’s reaction to the changes was to attack the new media rather than embrace it. The passion and respect for journalism that was seen among all creators (and even consumers) may make some feel threatened by any change to the industry. But the new media creators are more likely to see the change as an evolution that can be accepted without threatening the basic standards of the profession.

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## **New media creators are taken aback by old media's reaction to their news sites.**

- *“Our competition ... has decided to be very, very vicious about this. They ran an editorial a couple of months ago that attacked, without specifically naming us, blogs as popcorn, not filling, irresponsible. ... It is very clear that they don't even believe that we can have benign co-existence. They are just all worried about us.” – New media creator*
- *“There is a real definite antipathy there. One year, we won second place in the float contest in the Fourth of July parade and they wrote about the first place winner and the third place winner. They didn't write about us.” – New media creator*
- *“We have not been received very nicely. The daily paper really did not have anything going online when we came on the scene. Now it is stealing our ideas ... and they have been very hostile to us. For the first couple of years, they would not mention us in the newspaper. As a matter of fact, we tried to take out a 'Help Wanted' ad and the publisher would not publish it.” – Regional site editor*

Many of the new media **creators** indicated that traditional media in their areas did not welcome them. Some reported very negative reactions to their news sites, some very petty behavior, but also some attacks on their business. These new media sites were seen as competitors in a shrinking marketplace. The new media creators, however, did not see themselves as competing with the traditional media and several were willing to partner or collaborate with the local media.

## **Theme 6. Both news creators and consumers express excitement and regret over changes confronting old media.**

- *“It is good to have choices.” – Philadelphia news consumer*
- *“I like the newspaper. I like the way it smells but it takes a lot of time to look through and it costs money.” – Philadelphia news consumer*
- *“It is hard for us to do investigative stuff. [There] just isn't the time. I think it is hard for everybody to do that.” – New media creator*
- *“Sometimes it's overwhelming, you know. Years ago you used to be able to take your time in doing things – just sit and read the newspaper, set aside time to watch the news or something. But now it is like ... you are being constantly bombarded with information and news. And I feel like I have anxiety because of too much information.” – Chicago news consumer*
- *“I think the news shifts so much and [a newspaper] is static, it is just printed and then it is useless. I think the Internet is really useful because you just update constantly.” – Philadelphia news consumer*

**Consumers** are well aware of changes taking place in the way that they get news. While there is some bewilderment as to where it will all lead, most are adapting to it and many are welcoming the changes.

**Consumers** and **creators** see potential benefits in new media including:

- Speed and convenience – not being dependent on timing or physical limitations (e.g. newspapers were seen by consumers as static).
- The ability to have more voices/ perspectives – consumers reported wanting to see many different perspectives to a given story.
- Selectivity and depth – choosing to get more information about what they were most interested in.

But there was also some concern over the changes in the industry and some things that were seen as benefits also had a downside:

- Many consumers (and creators) have warm feelings about the physical newspaper and express pleasure in reading a newspaper.
- They lament the selectivity that can result from online news habits. They feel that if people read just what they are interested in they will not be informed.
- The vast number of voices and perspectives makes it difficult to be able to judge credibility.
- There is a risk of losing investigative reporting.

This last point was particularly a concern among many news **creators**, both traditional and new media creators. They fear that financial constraints on the industry will force news operations to cut back on investigative reporting. Many of the new media creators interviewed in this research felt that operations such as theirs do not have the capability to do investigative reporting even on a local level and that this type of reporting on a national level is critical in fulfilling the “watchdog” purpose of journalism.

## **Conclusion**

The changes facing the news industry are not just in the delivery of news, but in the fundamental way that people use and perceive news. The news itself is changing – how it is defined, how it is presented, who presents it and how it is used. The objectives, and the promise, of news are also changing – news no longer serves to inform, it serves to involve and create connections for individuals. To connect them to other individuals and to their communities and to the world. For the creators of news it is no longer enough just to observe, but to participate and connect with their communities.

## **Methodology**

This study was conducted using a qualitative research methodology. The qualitative approach is better suited to in-depth exploration of perceptions and attitudes. Four focus group discussions and 11 in-depth interviews were conducted as follows:

	<b>Chicago Focus Groups</b>	<b>Philadelphia Focus Groups</b>	<b>In-depth Interviews</b>
<b>News Consumers</b>	April 16, 2009 1 group no segmentation by age	June 15, 2009 2 groups 1 among ages 18-35, 1 among 40+	July 1-16, 2009  - -
<b>News Creators</b>	1 group of traditional and new media creators	- -	11 interviews among new media news creators

All respondents were adult women. Respondents in the news consumers groups were screened to ensure that they were indeed news consumers (i.e. that they used news media on some level) and for their demographics to ensure a mix in the group. The news creators in the Chicago focus group were recruited from a list provided by J-Lab of women who were known to be creators of news in either traditional or new media. All of the women in the news creator group were trained journalists. The respondents for the in-depth interviews were also identified by J-Lab and included women who have started or were editing new media news sites. These women were in cities across the country. The interviews were conducted by telephone.

Each focus group included 10-12 respondents and lasted approximately two hours. All groups were both audio and video recorded. All interviews (the focus groups and in-depth interviews) were conducted by a single researcher to ensure consistency. The topics covered across all the audiences were the same. The information elicited from these three audiences – consumers, traditional news creators and new media creators – provide an opportunity to compare attitudes and to identify trends.

**Statement of Limitations:** It should be noted that focus groups are a *qualitative* research technique used to obtain in-depth analysis of attitudes and opinions on a particular subject. Although the responses given by participants in the groups may be considered actual honest opinions, due to sampling methods used, the limited number of respondents, and the unstructured interviewing technique, this information may not necessarily be representative of all individuals in the target audience. The findings should be viewed primarily as general learning, offering working hypotheses to be validated with quantitative research techniques.



## **The Researchers**

### **Maria Ivancin**

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Maria Ivancin teaches courses in strategic communication, research and management. She is an expert in qualitative research and has conducted focus group studies for corporations, non-profits and government agencies on a variety of communication-related topics. Ivancin brings many years of professional experience to her academic work. She was executive vice president and chief operating officer of an advertising and public relations firm and also worked for Procter & Gamble, where she was responsible for advertising research as well as consumer research for many P&G brands. Most recently, Ivancin has consulted with clients through her own firm. She has worked on many types of communication challenges and through her research has provided insight and new perspective to these situations.

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Jan Schaffer has led pioneering initiatives in civic journalism, interactive and participatory journalism, innovations in journalism and citizen media ventures. J-Lab rewards innovations in journalism through the Knight-Batten Awards. It funds citizen media start-ups through its New Voices project and the McCormick New Media Women Entrepreneur initiative. It produces Web tutorials at [J-Learning.org](http://J-Learning.org) and it tracks community news startups and foundation funding of journalism through its Knight Citizen News Network ([www.kcnn.org](http://www.kcnn.org)). She previously directed the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, a \$14 million initiative that funded more than 120 pilot news projects. She is a former Business Editor and a Pulitzer Prize winner for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, where she helped write a series that won freedom for a man wrongly convicted of five murders. Currently, she serves as a speaker, trainer, author, consultant and Web publisher on digital storytelling models and the future of journalism.

See this report online at [www.NewMediaWomen.org](http://www.NewMediaWomen.org)

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