St. Louis Beacon and the economy of online sharing

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An Abstract

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Abstract

By Matt Bird-Meyer

Newspapers as a medium are declining, but another medium is filling that void. Nonprofit online news sites are gaining momentum at a pivotal time for journalism. The nonprofit model is in the experimental phase and is one answer to dwindling newspaper advertising revenue. To sustain operations, nonprofit online news groups promote various share channels, such as Facebook and e-mail, cautiously utilize user-generated content, vigorously promote offline events and seek niches to motivate users to interact with the site.
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Introduction

The *St. Louis Beacon* is clearly at the forefront of a growing trend of nonprofit online journalism. The rapidly expanding number of online news organizations is a testament to this trend and is one of the industry’s responses to the decline of newspapers across the country. The *Beacon* is at the spearhead of testing innovative methods to discover a sustainable model. In addition to securing diverse funding sources from individual contributors, foundations and fundraising events, success for the *Beacon* and others like it depends on fostering a sense of community, encouraging users to freely share the content on multiple platforms, and facilitating user interaction online and offline.

The available literature on the subject and the findings of academic studies and foundational reviews of company practices all closely match the practices and groundbreaking work of the *St. Louis Beacon*. At the risk of going too far and saying the *Beacon* is facing the decline of print media in the exact manner required, it is difficult to uncover inefficiencies or what the company is doing wrong. One large caveat: This was not a study on the dynamics and personalities that exist in the newsroom, or even the quality of the reporters and their reporting. That quality was clear after I became an e-mail newsletter subscriber, but no content analysis was performed on the copy. However, as a regular reader, I find that the high quality of the employees was clear as well.

Participatory journalism and sharing content and the manner in which users interact with online news were the primary focus areas of this study. Thus, it was difficult to miss how the *Beacon* hit the mark when it targeted building community interactions in its mission statement.

That mission statement is quite simple and elegant:

“To provide news that matters to people in our region and a place where we can thoughtfully discuss it.” (*St. Louis Beacon*).
The first part simply defines the *Beacon* as a regional news organization. The second clause frames its mission as a conduit for community interactions.

True enough in practice, the *Beacon* excels at political reporting, in-depth news about current events and coverage of the arts – online. Offline, the *Beacon* hosts regular face-to-face gatherings to talk and listen. These events are its annual fundraising gala, a multi-day festival, Beacon & Eggs, and Barroom Conversations. Beacon & Eggs takes place once a month, when staff members visit and highlight different parts of the community and also discuss issues. Barroom Conversations are more informal roundtable discussions that begin with a topic and expand from there.

The end result of this study was to offer some type of recommendation for improving the *Beacon*’s “share economy.” However, one of the more exciting aspects of this study was taking a fresh look at a developing and thriving model.

Other research has probed online news during the past five years, which has shown to be a pivotal time for this emerging journalistic model. These studies have agreed on several successful qualities of a nonprofit online news organization: mixed funding sources, high-quality reporting by trained journalists, not relying too heavily on citizen journalists working for free or little money and creating direct connections to the community through interaction online and offline.

**Review of Literature**

The *St. Louis Beacon* is an all-online news site that started in 2007 by veteran journalists, many of whom previously worked at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. The *Beacon* covers some national news and statewide issues, but its primary focus is the St. Louis region. Malone (2008) reported that the *Beacon* received startup funds from two prominent St. Louis families, Pulitzer and Danforth, as well as the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.
User interaction is a vital part of the Beacon’s business model. The Beacon does not advertise itself nor does it rent billboard space. Thus, it is important that the Beacon reach out to the community and that the community finds the Beacon and shares its content.

Domingo et al. (2008) studied audience participation in 2007 with 16 online newspapers in eight European countries and in the United States. These sites are considerably different than the St. Louis Beacon and the nonprofit, online model. The sites studied were mainstream, elite publications such as The New York Times, USA Today, The Times and The Guardian in England and El Mundo in Spain. However, it is an important study because as elite publications, these organizations inherently have large readerships and continually develop new methods of attracting and retaining readers.

The study found that the most common means for user participation was through commenting on stories and ranking stories. Few of the sites studied allowed users to actually produce content, although users were invited to submit photos and video along with story ideas. Also, only a few of the sites engaged the users in a way that promoted “community-building” (Domingo et al., 2008, pg. 334). What the study appeared to have revealed was the reluctance of mainstream media to fully invest in online tools that engaged user interaction. USA Today experimented with these tools more than the others by setting up user profile pages and a means for recommending other users to participate.

Not surprisingly, the news sites studied kept closed the “selection and filtering” process of gathering and selecting news. The stage in the news process that was most open to user participation was at the end of the process – the interpretation stage.

This suggests that the institutional media had largely kept the journalistic culture unchanged even when exploring participation opportunities for the audience. The core journalistic role of the ‘gatekeeper’ who decides what makes news remained the monopoly of professionals even in the online newspapers that had taken openness to other stages beyond interpretation (Domingo et al., 2008, pg. 335).
As for the economic factor, companies can cut reporting costs by leaning on their audience to gather sources for investigations. This is called crowdsourcing.

Michel (2009) wrote that *The Huffington Post’s* OffTheBus project used “crowd-powered methods of newsgathering,” specializing in fly-on-the-wall coverage of private fundraisers, campaign conference calls, volunteer meetings and rallies (pg. 42). This was made possible by the work of some 12,000 volunteers, including 1,700 writers. Michel admitted the effort was messy and the workload was heavy because they had to recruit and mentor citizen journalists and eventually edit and fact-check the large amount of copy they produced.

Michel (2009) said the hard part was not getting the people to volunteer, “It was figuring out what they were willing and able to do after that, and then cost-effectively coordinating their efforts so that they added up to real journalism” (pg. 43).

Still, Michel felt the experiment with an unpaid, amateur trove of journalists was effective, as it produced a much-discussed scoop by Mayhill Fowler, a Bay Area blogger. Fowler was at a private fundraiser for Obama in 2008 that was closed to the press when she overheard the future president disparage rural Pennsylvania voters.

However, scooping the mainstream press was not their goal. Their goal was to extend the reach of journalism and engage citizens to become active users of media rather than passive users. Essentially, Michel (2009) said having a working relationship with the public won’t solve the problems facing journalism today, “but it could be a central component of the solution” (pg. 45).

There is a risk in leaving the door completely open to the untrained masses. The *LA Times* was burned in 2005 when it allowed users to change the paper’s online editorial. *The Guardian* (Glaister, 2005) reported that at one point, someone completely deleted the editorial and replaced it with a new one. Eventually, the *Times* removed the “wikitorial” altogether “because a few readers were flooding the site with inappropriate material” (Glaister, 2005).
Thurman (2008) studied the rise of citizen journalism at nine British news websites and the proliferation of blogging in general. He surveyed these nine British websites and discovered seven primary formats for user participation: “polls,” “have your says,” “chat rooms,” “Q&As,” “blogs with comments enabled,” “pre-moderated message boards,” and “post-moderated message boards” (Thurman, 2008, pg. 140).

Some of the editors relished the interaction of blogging and commenting, and some disliked the legal issues associated with unmoderated comments and the amount of resources it takes to sift through and edit comments.

Many of the editors in this study found a majority of bloggers unappealing because they did not have a broad reach. Overall, the editors found the blogs were dull, full of mean-spirited shouting, amateurish, and poorly crafted.

However, overall, there was no “fundamental prejudice against the form…” (Thurman, 2008, pg. 154). He found blogs are a good way to inspire users to participate because people comment on them, ridiculously or not: “Blogs represent the best-known form of invitation that writers use to initiate conversations with readers online” (pg. 145).

Chung (2007) interviewed online news producers and found they were interested in features that encourage interactivity, but they were cautious about implementation. The websites studied included MSNBC.com, NYTimes.com, USAtoday.com, WashingtonPost.com, and other mainstream sites. Interactivity included e-mail, commenting on stories, message boards and linking.

With the use of the Internet, participatory journalism can change the current top-down journalistic model to a bottom-up phenomenon of information distribution; it suggests a model that is decentralized with the news audience having increased control and greater involvement over its news consumption process (Chung, 2007, pg. 44).
Again, the subjects of Chung’s study found the process of moderating content time-consuming and expensive, taking reporters away from their primary newsgathering tasks. Many editors refused to even post staff e-mail addresses to avoid inundating reporters and editors with messages that would distract them from their daily activities. Chung (2007) said news organizations still do not know the best way to utilize interactive features, noting that, “While the general consensus is that it is a good thing, concrete problems are associated with a more liberated communication environment” (pg. 56). The LA Times’ incident with users posting indecent material on its site, as previously mentioned, comes to mind.

Thorson (2008) studied how news recommendation engines, such as the “most e-mailed stories” link, affect how news is consumed. Online readers have a myriad of choices to make regarding how they view stories. They can use the main navigation bar, click headlines on the page, click external links or the “top stories” or “most e-mailed” links. Thorson said any of these features “may affect how the reader understands, interprets and trusts the story” (pg. 475).

Stories that remain on the most-e-mailed list for days demonstrate that people use this list for navigation rather than “editorial cues” from headlines. Thus, news recommendation engines create a sort of “public endorsement effect” (Thorson, 2008, pg. 475). That means users are setting the site’s agenda through participation. This powerful, interactive tool is growing in popularity with news sites as “the rise of NREs marks the first time that the public has been able to act on such a large scale to shape patterns of news consumption” (Thorson, 2008, pg. 486).

Robinson (2010) studied the difficult task news organizations face in creating a policy for users commenting on stories. Unfortunately, the research did not provide a model policy suitable for all news groups. What the research did reveal was the fact that this remains a divisive issue between traditional and younger journalists at a time of “industry turmoil” and “identity battles.” The younger journalists are more technologically savvy, thus they embrace the unfettered nature of the Internet. That means they object to requiring registrations to comment, they are less
willing to delete comments, and they are more likely to read the comments attached to their stories.

The traditionalists have trouble breaking out of the enduring top-down practices of journalism. Thus, during the initial decade of online development for newspapers, Robinson (2010) believes these traditionalists focused on the content, rather than audience participation. Then there are those who identify the quantity of comments on their stories “as a way to gauge their story’s worth to the community” (Robinson, 2010, pg. 133). This speaks to the journalistic focus on the process, rather than a news organization’s desire to build a sense of community.

Nguyen (2008) wrote that newspapers migrated online in the 1990s in fear of losing market share. Thus, news groups jumped online using defensive strategies against emerging media instead of experimenting with the full range of possibilities the technology offered. These early experimenters typically committed resources “to new media ventures with a caution designed to ensure that the new media will not become a competitor to the old” (Nguyen, 2008, pg. 93).

That means many of the newspapers that migrated online simply created a product indistinguishable from the print product. Early online experiments are informative in demonstrating the growing demand for user participation, such as the creation of videotext in the 1980s. Newspapers tried the service, offering users text, graphics and interactivity. However, Nguyen (2008) wrote that newspapers failed to fully invest in the service and failed to give users the range of interaction they wanted. Newspapers eventually gave up on videotext, but other non-newspaper organizations, such as France Telecom and British Telecom, kept experimenting with videotext and “survived and thrived after they realized the widespread interest in interaction and adjusted the service to enable interactive options” (Nguyen, 2008, pg. 94).

Finally, Mersey (2009) revealed the relevance of online news groups in terms of impacting a region. Although the Internet connects the world, Mersey (2009) found that
geography still matters. Thus, for forward-thinking news groups, “focusing on the potential of the Web to serve geographic communities should be the driver of future industry innovations and industry-oriented research” (Mersey, 2009, pg. 358).

This is certainly the case for the St. Louis Beacon, which centers its coverage on regional issues and connects with the people locally through offline events. The Beacon, for instance, has a correspondent in Washington, D.C., who localizes national issues so they are relevant to the St. Louis region or the state in general.

Carol Guensburg (2008) wrote about the proliferation of nonprofit news organizations in the face of shrinking newsroom staff and shrinking space allotted for news in print and broadcast. She found that the primary funding mechanism of these nonprofit organizations is the generosity of foundations.

Guensburg (2008) reported that the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation is the top funder for journalism, injecting some $300 million into journalism projects worldwide. Other funders include the Pew Charitable Trusts, Freedom Forum, and the MacArthur Foundation.

Beleaguered journalists who once clung solely to the business model of paid advertising and circulation now recognize the urgency of developing new revenue sources for labor-intensive newsgathering. For some, foundations hold increasing promise as allies in meeting the public’s information needs – beyond superficial headlines and celebrity sexploits – so long as there are safeguards for editorial independence (Guensburg, 2008, para. 5).

As the advertising industry has proven to be unstable for newspapers, so too is the reliance on foundation funding. Guensburg (2008) said the economy affects nonprofit journalism equally as it does commercial news.

Shifts in the economy boost or deflate endowments. Developments in research, demographics or regional politics, changes in leadership or board structure – all can affect attitudes and funding priorities. No wonder only a quarter of all grants get renewed (Guensburg, 2008, para. 32).
Thus, it is important for nonprofit news organizations to diversify their funding sources. Judging from the 990 reports, the *Beacon* and other emerging nonprofit online news groups need to improve the diversity of their funding sources. The *Beacon*, which reported some 63,000 unique visitors in March, had $851,300 in contributions and grants in 2009 (IRS, 2010). The $851,300 breaks down into $59,975 from fundraising events, and $791,325 in other contributions, gifts and grants. Advertising revenue was just $4,148.

Although nonprofit news groups are limited in the amount of revenue they can generate from advertising, which according to Fremont-Smith (2009) the IRS considers unrelated business revenue, there is room to increase advertising for the *Beacon*. In fact, that is something the *Beacon* is working to improve.

The *Beacon* has received a sufficient amount of grants, but a majority of its financing comes via individual contributions. Hollway (April 8, 2011) reported that the *Beacon* receives 65 percent of its revenue from donations and 15 percent from foundations. The company is in the second year of a five-year plan to reduce its reliance on philanthropy and increase earned revenue. She wrote that the goal is, by 2014, to have sponsorships and advertising comprise the largest percent of revenue, 33 percent, followed by donations at 30 percent.

*The Voice of San Diego* in 2009 brought in $969,286 in contributions and grants (IRS, 2010). This breaks down into $83,453 from membership dues and $885,833 in other contributions, gifts and grants. Advertising revenue was $17,144.

*The New Haven Independent* in 2009 had $520,205 in contributions and grants, $25,921 in advertising revenue and $4,680 from legal notices revenue (IRS, 2010).

Thus, the *Beacon* is not alone in lagging advertising revenues. *The New Haven Independent* had the largest amount of advertising revenue, but that amount paled in comparison to contributions and grants. This speaks to the troubled advertising market that is endemic to the news industry in general.
Guensburg’s caveat that foundation-supported journalism must remain independent was one topic of a 2010 panel discussion with some of this nation’s (and Canada’s) leaders in nonprofit journalism. The roundtable gathering was titled “Ethics for the New Investigative Newsroom” and convened at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

“Nonprofit journalism changes the way journalism is done; alters its economic base; and develops new linkages between journalists, funders, and audience,” wrote Stephen J.A. Ward, director of the Center for Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin (Ward, 2010, pg. 5).

The *St. Louis Beacon* had to raise a substantial amount of money to launch its operation in 2007, and Freivogel told the panel in Madison that her group went into the community and talked to people – individually and in groups. It was the start of a community-building relationship that became rooted in their mission and continues today.

The ‘arms length relationship (regarding finances) that you tend to have as a traditional journalist’ is clear-cut, ‘but it really may not exactly be what’s most useful’ at a nonprofit newsroom. Although I would have loved to have somebody plop millions of dollars in my lap, so I didn’t have to do that, in the end I think we would have been weaker. Because we started to establish a relationship with the community, that is a positive thing (Freivogel, as quoted in Ward, 2010, pg. 9).

This experience speaks to the fact that experimentation for online news sites means stepping out of your comfort zone. Kurpius et al. (2010) studied the rise of hyperlocal media in the face of declining newsroom staff. Hyperlocal media are news groups based in metropolitan areas that focus on regional coverage. The researchers studied the finances and reporting practices of 10 hyperlocal media sites, including the so-far successful *Voice of San Diego* in California, *MinnPost.com* in Minneapolis, and *NewWest.net* in Missoula, Montana.

Traditional media suffers not from a lack of readers “but an outdated advertising-based business model combined with high operational costs that make it difficult to provide the on-demand news and information audiences want” (Kurpius et al., 2010, pg. 360).
The *St. Louis Beacon* is a good example of this hyperlocal model with its regional focus, metropolitan appeal, and in-depth coverage that so far appears to be in demand. Kurpius et al. (2010) further expands the definition of hyperlocal media as operating “at the crossroads of highly focused, locally-oriented news with technology-enabled potential as tools for civic engagement” (pg. 360).

The market-based model has a striking difference compared to the hyperlocal model in that hyperlocal media can focus on its philosophy and mission instead of worrying about the bottom line. The market-based model relies on a mass audience and is focused on attracting advertisers. Thus, “the news content tends to favor the sensationalistic and the superficial, which has more mass appeal, at the expense of deeper, more contextual public affairs coverage” (Kurpius et al., 2010, pg. 361).

Kurpius et al. (2010) reported that funding types for hyperlocal media include private investor “angels,” foundation grants, employee contributions and advertising. Freivogel, for example, chose to forego a salary for nearly three years as her contribution to the startup of the *Beacon*. Freivogel explained that “part of the reason that I’m taking a salary now is I think it is really important to have decent paying jobs for journalists. And if our goal is building a sustainable organization, it needs to be sustainable with an editor who gets paid” (interview, February 21, 2011).

Kurpius et al. (2010) said securing multiple funding sources is crucial for sustainability because the company would be more likely to have other funding sources should one diminish or dry up altogether.

The researchers warned that although these hyperlocal media groups are filling a need for in-depth local coverage, the model is still relatively new and sustainability is uncertain.

It is not enough to declare hyperlocal media operations the antidote to the decline of traditional media outlets in the United States. None of the evidence suggests that any of these projects has developed a
working model that can be easily replicated in other communities and maintained for the long term (Kurpius et al., 2010, pg. 374).

The Beacon, for example, was fortunate to already have deep connections with the community because its staff members and founders are mostly former St. Louis Post-Dispatch staffers. This experience and dedication to the region, and connections to families and foundations with money, is not something “easily replicated” as Kurpius noted.

The researchers found that user participation is important for the long-term sustainability of hyperlocal media. That means having the users finance coverage directly or indirectly by sharing the content and making the operation more appealing to advertisers. Kurpius et al. (2010) stress the user’s role in such media, saying that “without participation and reliable funding, these sites are unlikely to survive in the long term” (pg. 374).

Schaffer (2010) compiled a report on five years of funding for nonprofit online news organizations through J-Lab’s New Voices program. The mission for most of these sites, which the Beacon is not among, was to augment existing coverage.

The report found that the most successful sites operate year-round, keep the sites current and engage the community in a number of ways. Less successful sites had frequent turnover, technical problems and infrequent site updates.

Engagement can happen in the form of sharing photos, videos, and links to other stories in the state or region, as well as commenting, and posting community announcements and meeting agendas. Schaffer (2010) said people who are frequent contributors are valuable sources down the road, noting that “it is good to seek out partnerships with neighborhood activists, power posters, issues experts, and prep-sports participants” (pg. 18).

The report found that although many of the New Voices projects are experimenting with different funding models, none of the sites are bringing in enough money to pay for salaries and benefits. “Instead, they are eking out income via such sources as memberships, donations,
sponsorships, advertising, coupon deals, events, fee-based training, crowd funded stories, consulting and grants” (Schaffer, 2010, pg. 20).

It appears the generosity of foundations is critical for at least launching a quality nonprofit online news site. The jury is still out on a firm funding model for long-term sustainability.

What is clear is that social media are important for online news organizations. “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” (Schaffer, 2010, pg. 7).

J-Lab offered a list of recommendations for anyone who wants to start a community news site. These included having an editor who knows the community and can better identify potential contributors from the community, having a partnership with established agencies, such as university extension offices and public libraries, and being able to “think of your task as not just covering community, but building it as well” (Schaffer, 2010, pg. 29).

Thus, the research question for this paper is how do other nonprofit online news organizations handle user interactions, and do these interactions impact the sustainability of the organizations?

**Method**

Nicole Hollway, the St. Louis Beacon general manager, and I developed a plan to study this question.

First, I created a list of 17 online publications (See Table 1) that share a similar profile with the St. Louis Beacon – nonprofit news organization with regional coverage and a serious mission dedicated to improving the region with investigative or in-depth reporting that augments existing coverage. Out of the 17 organizations that were e-mailed questions, five responded for a response rate of 29 percent.
I gathered the IRS 990 forms from Guidestar.org to review the sources and amount of funding the organizations received in the past two to three years.

In the meantime, I attended one of the Beacon’s Barroom Conversations at 6 Row Brewery in St. Louis. Earlier that afternoon, I interviewed Margaret Freivogel, the Beacon’s editor, to ask her the same questions posed to the other news organizations.

I also became a regular reader of the Beacon by signing up for the daily e-mailed newsletter, which links to each story posted daily to the website.

**Results**

Based on the survey responses from other nonprofit online news organizations, the Beacon is well ahead of the curve in offering multiple share channels and researching additional methods to interact and reach out to users.

The nonprofit online news organizations that responded to the survey – The Voice of San Diego, The Gotham Gazette, Charlottesville Tomorrow, Connecticut Mirror, and The New Haven Independent – represent small to large cities.

E-mailed newsletters and Facebook topped the list of most important share channels. The Voice of San Diego, for example, reported sending out tens of thousands of e-mails each week.
By comparison, the Beacon has some 980 daily subscribers and 800 weekly subscribers to their newsletters (N. Hollway, personal communication, January 18, 2011).

Freivogel said each share channel has its own purpose and should be used the way people are accustomed to using them. “We try to use each of those channels in a way that’s appropriate to what they are, which is a little bit different. So, it is not just that you say the same thing in each place about what’s going on, because it doesn’t work very well that way” (interview, February, 21, 2011).

Thus, it was surprising to see a number of the respondents reported they basically post the same content on Facebook as they have on their primary website. The Voice of San Diego was the only respondent that posts unique information to Facebook.

Grant Barrett, Voice of San Diego engagement editor, said, “Most of our content that’s on our website gets mentioned on the FB (Facebook) page, but we also post links on FB that aren’t ours. If you only link to your own stuff, then people tend to ignore you,” (personal communication, March 3, 2011).

The Beacon connects with its readers in a unique way. It is a member of the Public Insight Network (PIN), a national service started by American Public Media. The Beacon started with this network about 2½ years ago as the first non-public radio station member. The PIN is a sophisticated database tool where people sign up to become sources for the organization. They answer general or specific questions and provide background information about themselves. The network members can then search for people with certain information or knowledge and use them as sources in stories.

Freivogel said the sources they have are stored a large database that American Public Media can use as well. The Beacon has some 1,800 sources (interview, February 21, 2011).
Linda Lockhart, Public Insight Network analyst with the *Beacon*, will see who is in a certain area of St. Louis prior to an offline event, such as Beacon and Eggs, and contact those who have signed up for the network and see if they would like to attend.

Freivogel said, “It kind of combines the broad reach of the web, but you still use the sort of traditional vetting and checking that you do with any kind of reporting, but it really expands your source list beyond the people that you might know already” (interview, February 21, 2011).

Freivogel said the *Beacon* has published many stories using sources they have found through the PIN.

Three out of five survey respondents said they are gleaning story ideas from user-generated content. Gail Robinson, editor-in-chief of the *Gotham Gazette*, said they recently implemented a new interactive program called Councilpedia and hopes this will generate more crowd-sourced story ideas.

Freivogel said the *Beacon* does not get too many story ideas from comments, but they get ideas from other people during events, especially Beacon and Eggs. For example, Freivogel recalled one Beacon and Eggs in Maplewood where she overheard a conversation between the superintendent of schools and a man who runs the Schlafly’s bottle works, which includes a nice restaurant. The superintendent asked if the guy could use quail eggs, adding that their students were tired of raising chicken eggs and wanted to start a new quail eggs project. That led to a story about how the students were raising chickens, making honey, and selling the products to people in Maplewood.

Freivogel provided the best insight to the question of whether users are interested in other users’ contributions. She said a number of times there were good discussions going on in the comments section under *Beacon* news stories – “substantive conversations about things where people will be really debating something” (interview, February 21, 2011).
A good example was a conversation some time ago when voters were deciding a tax for the metro bus. A discussion started in the comments section regarding how much it would cost the common household and on what those figures were based. The *Beacon* staff joined in the conversation and helped clarify the issue, which led to an additional story. “I think that actually ended up really clarifying the situation in a way that wasn’t happening before,” said Freivogel (interview, February 21, 2011).

All of the news organizations said they host some form of offline event, from speakers to live blog sessions. *The Voice of San Diego* appeared to have the greatest diversity of events with monthly coffees to meet the staff, conferences, debates, and roundtable discussions.

One of the more difficult questions to answer was what motivates users to participate or interact with the news site. The consensus was that readers want to participate because they are simply interested in an issue or topic.

For many of our readers, they either have a back yard or economic interest in our stories and research. For some, it is a particular communitywide issue (i.e. in everyone’s backyard) that motivates their engagement. For others, it is general interest in transparency and open government (Brian Wheeler, executive director of *Charlottesville Tomorrow*, personal communication, March 11, 2011).

In general, the respondents felt that sharing content helps make the organization more attractive to investors and advertisers. Paul Bass, editor of *The New Haven Independent*, said, “But mostly I value (sharing content) just because it helps us fulfill our mission – being a true civic commons sparked by journalism but carried out by readers” (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

Freivogel said determining the value of sharing is something the *Beacon* needs to improve.

We would love to understand that network really well. Because if you do, you can figure out how to give people things they’re really interested in, which is our goal. We don’t want to bother them with stuff
they're not interested in. I think, in all cases, the best way to spread the word is when somebody else passes
the content along (interview, February 21, 2011).

Barrett, of *The Voice of San Diego*, said media companies have to be shared in order to
be successful.

We’re not in the business of parceling out tidbits only to the rich and powerful. We want every kind of
person who can use it to have it. If they have it, then they will understand our mission and perhaps
participate, either by volunteering here or by contributing to our financial needs, (personal communication,

**Discussion**

The mistake newspapers made during the early days of the Internet in the 1990s was not
fully investing in the new technology. To make matters worse, when newspapers dabbled in the
technology they held firm to traditional top-down methods, sidestepping the wave of the future
in interactivity.

Organizations, such as *The Voice of San Diego* and the *St. Louis Beacon*, signal an end to
fear-driven models of preserving the old while incorporating the new. These nonprofit online
news groups are not afraid to experiment while delivering consistent in-depth coverage of
regional issues and topics.

The *Beacon* is in the process of building a new content management system for the site
that will also help them understand who they are in contact with, as well as how and what they
are interested in and why.

I think news organizations are just beginning to understand why this is so important. There aren’t off-the-
shelf systems that you can go out and buy that help you do this because people are just kind of starting to
understand how the world works this way. I think that it is a really promising area to focus on and we hope
that we can begin figuring this out better (Freivogel, interview, February 21, 2011).
These appear to be experiments worth trying. However, one experiment Freivogel believes should be abandoned is charging for online content. “That’s just not the nature of the web,” (Freivogel, interview, February 21, 2011). “The nature of the web is to share freely.”

Potentially, a sponsor or an advertiser might be interested in reaching people who are sharing content and then that becomes a valuable connection. She said being successful online is not just click-throughs, page views or how many times someone clicks a banner.

“Our goal is to have a deeper kind of engagement with the people we are reaching. If our goal was strictly to increase the traffic, we’d go about it in a different way,” (Freivogel, interview, February 21, 2011).

One of the primary connection-builders for the *Beacon* is its offline events. The topic of its Feb. 21 Barroom Conversation, for example, was a recent incident when KKK members in full Klan dress handed out recruiting fliers in Park Hills, a community south of St. Louis. The talk eventually shifted to issues of class, the labor disputes that were occurring in Wisconsin and the political upheavals in the Middle East. Women’s issues became a topic, specifically the lopsided incarceration rates for women compared to men in crimes involving the killing of loved ones or spouses.

Danny Kohl, 82, a retired biology professor from Washington University in St. Louis, said afterward that he is mostly a browser of the *St. Louis Beacon* (Kohl, interview, February 21, 2011). However, he said he does correspond regularly with *Beacon* editors to offer story ideas and he writes a “fair number of letters” to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the metropolitan daily newspaper.

Kohl said he comes to the Barroom Conversations for the interaction.

“I like conversation. I like people,” (Kohl, interview, February 21, 2011). “It is really good for morale, for my morale, to know there are people who care.”
Limitations

The *St. Louis Beacon* is on the cutting edge of this relatively young, yet growing, shift toward nonprofit online journalism. However, the *Beacon* and others like it are too young to reveal positive or negative trends that speak to a sustainable or unsustainable future. Follow-up research, after the *Beacon* reaches its 10th anniversary in 2017, is necessary to discern whether the company has a sustainable business model.

This project did not utilize a random sampling method to determine which nonprofit online news organization would receive a survey. There simply were too few available to receive an adequate response as only five out of 17 returned the survey. A more thorough review of the nonprofit online news organizations that exist in the country is necessary for future research. Personal interviews with editors or publishers would also be prudent to obtain richer information and to eliminate the need for follow-up questions when survey responses are thin or superficial.

Likewise, future research should gather more data from newspaper and online news readers. For this project, a handful of readers were interviewed following a Beacon-sponsored event, but a larger, random sample should yield better results.

Conclusion

The mission for a majority of the nonprofit news sites studied was clearly focused on supplementing the reporting done by existing traditional media with more in-depth, investigative stories. They are not out to overtake the existing daily newspaper in town, but to dig deeper into issues and events, from national and statewide politics to issues that impact a region or community. Thus, to succeed at this mission, these nonprofit, online news organizations strive to make more meaningful connections with the users of their sites – the readers.

The *Beacon* has a highly experienced and capable staff. It is continually upgrading its website, and it hosts a handful of meaningful and popular offline events to draw in influential and active members of the St. Louis community.
The *Beacon* is already implementing strategies to strengthen its powers of user interaction. According to a report the *Beacon* prepared for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the *Beacon* is encouraging people to share its content through a referral-based contest application. The program allows the *Beacon* to see data on sharing and how often users share content.

The organization discovered that the top-viewed stories from its website differ from the most clicked-on stories from its daily newsletter. Therefore, the *Beacon* is developing a way to investigate trends among daily newsletter readers.

Thus, it is difficult to provide specific recommendations for improvement. However, there are some things the *Beacon* can enhance and some things it could add.

Increase the frequency of Barroom Conversations or at least experiment with different ways to encourage more people to attend. A “family conversation” at an all-ages venue might draw in a different demographic. It is wise not to have reporters cover these conversations, allowing the discussions to flow freely without potentially discouraging more timid attendees from participating fully. However, Nicole Hollway offered some insights after this particular Barroom Conversation in her blog.

“When I think about the phrase we use at the *Beacon*, ‘Meet people where they are,’ I suddenly take it beyond just platforms and methods of delivery and apply it to ideology” (Hollway, 2011, February 22). “To truly move forward, we have to find a starting point. Sometimes, that means looking for common ground where at first there appears to be none.”

These conversations are obvious starting points, and the *Beacon* is finding common ground among intelligent and caring people who want to be involved. The conversations energize people, and if they had not read the *Beacon* before or were passive users of the site, I found they soon wanted to be more involved.
For example, Karl Hutchinson, 51, said after the Feb. 21 Barroom Conversation that he is more of a passive user of the *St. Louis Beacon*. However, he said he attends events such as the Barroom Conversations “just really for the honest, open dialogue” (Hutchinson, interview, February 21, 2011). He said he intends to be more of an active user of the news site in the future by commenting on stories, linking and e-mailing stories. “It is just a matter of doing it,” he said.

Shaum Shrinivas, 30, said he had not heard of the *Beacon* prior to attending the Feb. 21 Barroom Conversation with a friend, Meredith Lammert, 27.

I read the *Beacon* more regularly now. I would say that I mostly read the articles about local/state affairs and some of the items on arts. I really don’t comment on any of the stories. However, I don’t comment on stories on other sites as well, nor do I have a blog. I typically get all my news online (Shrinivas, interview, February 21, 2011).

The *Beacon* should steadily ramp up staffing to be better equipped to break news on the 24-hour news cycle. That sounds like a corporate move, but dipping into the market share controlled by the competition is certainly one way to improve long-term sustainability.

Additionally, the *Beacon* should continue to develop additional offline events, such as the multi-day, multi-location festival. These tend to attract new users to the *Beacon* who could potentially speed up the cycle of sharing content with others.

Another option for the *Beacon* is to include a section for letters to the editor on the website, and include a link to this page under “Voices” in the main navigation bar. Readers should also be able to comment on the letters to create a true community discussion. Freivogel said the *Beacon* has considered including a venue for letters, but found that the comments section under each story is adequate.

I agree to an extent because there are times when people have issues on their minds that do not fit the topic of any available story on which to comment. There are times when people feel they are doing their civic duty by writing letters to the editor about community issues or
about a good gesture (or just the opposite) that they witnessed while in the park or walking out of
the grocery store.

Also, I believe the same standards for online letters should apply for letters submitted for
print. The writer should include their name, address, and contact phone number, and someone
from the publication should call to verify the letter writer and their intention to have their
thoughts published. Those who comment on web stories must create an account with the Beacon,
but there is no real policing to verify they are who they claim to be. A phone call to verify letters
is a step closer to credibility and accountability.

People do not want to read 200 comments after reading a story, so news organizations
should not fear that requiring registration and verification might discourage people from
commenting on stories. There is something more meaningful about reading a letter with a name
and hometown attached rather than a meaningless screen-name.

Finally, the Beacon should create an application to facilitate the use of mobile devices to
access the Beacon. This could encourage more user interaction as people contemplate issues
while away from laptops and desktop computers. Thus, if a user is at a restaurant and navigates
to the Beacon on a cell phone, that user can comment on stories or e-mail the Beacon with ideas
or comments when the information is fresh on their minds.

Hopefully this report, the review of literature and responses from other comparable
nonprofit online news organizations will be useful by revealing trends and demonstrating what
works and does not work. If anything, the knowledge the St. Louis Beacon has gained through
experimentation, its policies, mission and philosophies serve as tremendous learning experiences
and a model for leading the media into the next frontier of journalism.
References


Appendix A (Questionnaire)

How do you define online interactivity? Human to human? (message board, e-mail links on stories) or Medium interactivity (users interact with technology, links to stories, story ranking).

How do you define user-generated content? (comments at end of stories, blogs, message boards, etc.)

What motivates readers to participate? Are they politically or economically motivated, trying to get favorable public access for their constituents, supporters, customers or investors?

Is user-generated content expensive to run and maybe a disincentive to operate (moderating comments, moderating blogs and message boards)?

Do you have any insight into whether users are interested in viewing other readers’ contributions?

Are you getting story ideas/story content from user-generated content?

What is your most valuable share channel? (Facebook, e-mail, links, daily e-mail subscriptions, etc.)

Do you post different content on Facebook and other share channels than you post on your website?

Do you find value in users sharing your content? Does it benefit your company in a quantifiable or qualitative way?

Does sharing in any way help your company sustain its operations?

How do you collect information about your readers? Do you have them voluntarily complete online forms? Do you have data-collection software?

Does your company conduct any “offline” activities or events? This can be community outreach programs or fundraisers. If so, can you describe them?

Are you identifying any patterns in readers in regards to whether they are active or passive users? In other words, are your readers simply reading and moving on or are they commenting, writing letters, writing blogs, submitting video or other content or submitting story ideas?

What type of content gets shared the most? Do you have any indications why?
Appendix B (Responses)

How do you define online interactivity? Human to human? (message board, e-mail links on stories) or Medium interactivity (users interact with technology, links to stories, story ranking).
Latter

How do you define online interactivity? Human to human? (message board, e-mail links on stories) or Medium interactivity (users interact with technology, links to stories, story ranking).
All of the above plus movement on listservs, Facebook and Twitter.

How do you define online interactivity? Human to human? (message board, e-mail links on stories) or Medium interactivity (users interact with technology, links to stories, story ranking).
Human to human.

How do you define online interactivity? Human to human? (message board, e-mail links on stories) or Medium interactivity (users interact with technology, links to stories, story ranking)
With respect to our content, “online interactivity” is any human online access or engagement with the data we produce. I limit this to human interactions and thus would not include RSS feeds that move our stories from point A to point B. But when that story is viewed on another site, found in a search, or read in a feed reader, then we are back to the human interactions anyway.

How do you define online interactivity?
Online interactivity means that the data moves two ways. The old model was that it went mostly one way, from publisher to reader, with the reader only showing up as letters to the editor, quoted sources, as advertisers, etc. The new model is that the reader actually makes some of the content by blogging, by commenting, and by indicating what they like. It’s not a perfect two-way channel, but it’s more robust than it was.

How do you define user-generated content? (comments at end of stories, blogs, message boards, etc.)
Comments, story tips, article and photo submissions, participation in live online fora.

How do you define user-generated content? (comments at end of stories, blogs, message boards, etc.)
Comments and op-ed or commentary pieces

How do you define user-generated content? (comments at end of stories, blogs, message boards, etc.)
Until now, our user generated content has come in the form of comments on our stories and blog posts. We, though, have just launched Councilpedia, a crowd sourcing project on local politics and hope readers will use that to exchange information, such as news tips, and discuss issues.

How do you define user-generated content? (comments at end of stories, blogs, message boards, etc.)
This would be content related linked to our content that we did not create. In our operation that
includes: Tweets; e-mails; story comments on cvilletomorrow.org; Facebook comments/recommends; wiki articles/edits on cvillepedia.org; Flickr interactions; Foursquare interactions; survey/poll responses.

**How do you define user-generated content? (comments at end of stories, blogs, message boards, etc.)**
Tips and story leads
Social media “likes” and shares
Comments on stories
Letters to the editor
Op-eds
Blogging on our site
Participating in our face-to-face gatherings

**What motivates readers to participate? Are they politically or economically motivated, trying to get favorable public access for their constituents, supporters, customers or investors?**
They get motivated by issues framed in news stories.

**What motivates readers to participate? Are they politically or economically motivated, trying to get favorable public access for their constituents, supporters, customers or investors?**
Interest in the subject.

**What motivates readers to participate? Are they politically or economically motivated, trying to get favorable public access for their constituents, supporters, customers or investors?**
Our readers tend to be very involved in NY politics and issues and care about the city. That’s largely what motivates them.

**What motivates readers to participate? Are they politically or economically motivated, trying to get favorable public access for their constituents, supporters, customers or investors?**
This would be difficult to pin down in a short response. We cover growth and development issues and local politics. For many of our readers, they either have a back yard or economic interest in our stories and research. For some it is a particular communitywide issue (i.e. in everyone’s backyard) that motivates their engagement. For others, it is general interest in transparency and open government.

**What motivates readers to participate? Are they politically or economically motivated, trying to get favorable public access for their constituents, supporters, customers or investors?**
Mainly, they want to be heard, they want to be acknowledged and they want to be respected. They also, frankly, tend to enjoy discussing things they are about. They just like to mix it up a little bit and to enjoy sparring with another intellect.

**Is user-generated content expensive to run and maybe a disincentive to operate (moderating comments, moderating blogs and message boards)?**
We do spend a lot of time on moderating comments, 50-100 a day> We review all before they appear on the site and rigorously enforce a standards policy. Otherwise not so not bad.
Is user-generated content expensive to run and maybe a disincentive to operate (moderating comments, moderating blogs and message boards)? I do monitor comments and we will monitor Councilpedia but so far that has not cost us much time or any money.

We do not allow anonymous comments. As a result, we get many fewer interactions to moderate. What I see happening is a proliferation of engagement points that requires more resources for us to manage. At the same time, I think that is a good investment in our time because it builds stronger connections with our readers.

It isn’t for us and it doesn’t have to be. There are all levels from free to expensive. It does cost us, but it’s well worth it.

Do you have any insight into whether users are interested in viewing other readers’ contributions?
No hard evidence but I think it is safe to assume they do.

Do you have any insight into whether users are interested in viewing other readers’ contributions?
They are. There’s a feature that notifies people when others have responded to their comments. And debates continue for days that way.

Do you have any insight into whether users are interested in viewing other readers’ contributions?
I think so because they often respond to each other’s comments.

Do you have any insight into whether users are interested in viewing other readers’ contributions?
I don’t have a way to measure that.

Yes, they are, especially if those other users are people they know or there’s some evidence that those other people are like them.

Are you getting story ideas/story content from user-generated content?
Yes.

Are you getting story ideas/story content from user-generated content?
Not often. We hope Councilpedia will change that.

Are you getting story ideas/story content from user-generated content?
I would say this is very limited for our business. Our site does not aggregate other user content (e.g. other community blogs). We do get story ideas from other local bloggers, but not via our site.
Are you getting story ideas/story content from user-generated content?
All the time, everything from anonymous tips to phone calls to standard letters-to-the-editor.

What is your most valuable share channel? (Facebook, e-mail, links, daily e-mail subscriptions, etc.)
We do all the above. Facebook has suddenly become the most valuable.

What is your most valuable share channel? (Facebook, e-mail, links, daily e-mail subscriptions, etc.)
Links.

What is your most valuable share channel? (Facebook, e-mail, links, daily e-mail subscriptions, etc.)
Not sure how I’d rank them. We have been stepping up our use of Facebook and Twitter, which I think are becoming increasingly important for us. Traditionally we have relied more on our daily e-mail (a digest of NY policy and politics news) and subscriptions to our various e-mail newsletters.

What is your most valuable share channel? (Facebook, e-mail, links, daily e-mail subscriptions, etc.)
Besides the website itself, our most important channel is our weekly e-mail update.

What is your most valuable share channel? (Facebook, e-mail, links, daily e-mail subscriptions, etc.)
E-mail, by far. We send tens of thousands of e-mails each week, mainly as part of our daily news e-mail.

Do you post different content on Facebook and other share channels than you post on your website?
No.

Do you post different content on Facebook and other share channels than you post on your website?
Not yet.

Do you post different content on Facebook and other share channels than you post on your website?
Not usually.

Do you post different content on Facebook and other share channels than you post on your website?
Facebook has been limited to links to each story we post on website. Twitter is used to share different content (e.g. live tweeting of a public meeting).

Do you post different content on Facebook and other share channels than you post on your website?
Yes. Most of our content that’s on our website gets mentioned on the FB page, but we also post links on FB that aren’t ours. If you only link to your own stuff, then people tend to ignore you.
Do you find value in users sharing your content? Does it benefit your company in a quantifiable or qualitative way?
Yes.

Do you find value in users sharing your content? Does it benefit your company in a quantifiable or qualitative way?
Absolutely.

Do you find value in users sharing your content? Does it benefit your company in a quantifiable or qualitative way?
Absolutely. Our goal is to have our stories make a difference. They have to be shared for us to have maximum impact. It’s quantifiable because we see all of our indicators going up: how many readers, subscribers, advertisers, letter writers, attendees to our events, etc.

Do you find value in users sharing your content? Does it benefit your company in a quantifiable or qualitative way?
As a small nonprofit site, we appreciate anything readers do to spread the word but can’t really quantify it.

Do you find value in users sharing your content? Does it benefit your company in a quantifiable or qualitative way?
Certainly we find value because it increases the number of people exposed to our work. It leads to new e-mail subscribers and visitors. We currently do not ask subscribers how they learned about this so it would be difficult to quantify this area of engagement, but we know it happens anecdotally by watching re-tweets and e-mail forwards.

Does sharing in any way help your company sustain its operations?
No.

Does sharing in any way help your company sustain its operations?
Yes.

Does sharing in any way help your company sustain its operations?
Only in that it drives traffic to the site -- not sure how much -- and that in turn makes us more attractive to advertisers and foundations.

Does sharing in any way help your company sustain its operations?
Yes. Sharing of our content leads to new e-mail subscribers and visitors. Our e-mail subscribers are tracked in a contact database that allows us to target them for donation appeals.

Does sharing in any way help your company sustain its operations?
Yes! A media company has to be shared in order be considered successful. We’re not in the business of parceling out tidbits only to the rich and powerful. We want every kind of person who can use it to have it. If they have it, then they will understand our mission and perhaps participate, either by volunteering here or by contributing to our financial needs.

How do you collect information about your readers? Do you have them voluntarily
complete online forms? Do you have data-collection software?
No.

How do you collect information about your readers? Do you have them voluntarily complete online forms? Do you have data-collection software?
For now, Just Google Analytic but we will do formal reader research this year.

How do you collect information about your readers? Do you have them voluntarily complete online forms? Do you have data-collection software?
No we don’t -- beyond a tracker. We did a survey a couple of years ago.

How do you collect information about your readers? Do you have them voluntarily complete online forms? Do you have data-collection software?
We only collect information from readers who decide to subscribe to our e-mail alerts or from donors who make a contribution.

How do you collect information about your readers? Do you have them voluntarily complete online forms? Do you have data-collection software?
Mainly through Google Analytics and anecdotal evidence gathered in face-to-face encounters.

Does your company conduct any “offline” activities or events? This can be community outreach programs or fundraisers. If so, can you describe them?
Yes, we sometimes hold live-blog sessions and live streams of public events. In one case we invited Diane Ravitch to town for a forum on her school reform book. We assigned the book to a dozen teachers, students, etc; then with a TV station we held a forum at a school in which they discussed the book, while simultaneously a second panel of journalists and elected officials led a live-blog discussion with readers and folks in the audience.

Does your company conduct any “offline” activities or events? This can be community outreach programs or fundraisers. If so, can you describe them?
We will do forums/conferences on topics we cover such as environment, health etc. We also do speaking engagements and we expect expand our outreach as another “platform”

Does your company conduct any “offline” activities or events? This can be community outreach programs or fundraisers. If so, can you describe them?
We are published by Citizens Union, a longtime good government group. They do offline events, such as talks with officials, two fundraising events and an occasional forum on a key issue. As for Gotham Gazette itself, we have done few, if any, but are looking at holding a few informational sessions on Councilpedia.

Does your company conduct any “offline” activities or events? This can be community outreach programs or fundraisers. If so, can you describe them?
We have at least one major annual event to build community awareness of an issue on which we are focusing our reporting. This has included having an outside speaker, having an educational exhibit in a public gallery, having information tables at public locations. Most of these events are not viewed as fundraisers but rather “friendraisers.”

Does your company conduct any “offline” activities or events? This can be community outreach programs or fundraisers. If so, can you describe them?
We hold monthly “coffees,” in which members come to meet some of the staff, and we also will hold events on civic, social, political, and financial affairs that affect our region. The events are usually structured as conferences, debates, or roundtable.

**Are you identifying any patterns in readers in regards to whether they are active or passive users? In other words, are your readers simply reading and moving on or are they commenting, writing letters, writing blogs, submitting video or other content or submitting story ideas?**

Comments have increased quite a bit; during this year’s snowstorms they sent lots of photos. And some contribute stories.

**Are you identifying any patterns in readers in regards to whether they are active or passive users? In other words, are your readers simply reading and moving on or are they commenting, writing letters, writing blogs, submitting video or other content or submitting story ideas?**

Active in many ways given the nature of the content.

**Are you identifying any patterns in readers in regards to whether they are active or passive users? In other words, are your readers simply reading and moving on or are they commenting, writing letters, writing blogs, submitting video or other content or submitting story ideas?**

Like most sites I imagine, we have a core group of involved readers who comment often, approach us with ideas and sometimes even donate to the site. Most readers are less involved. Many have come to the site for a specific story, directed here by a search engine.

**Are you identifying any patterns in readers in regards to whether they are active or passive users? In other words, are your readers simply reading and moving on or are they commenting, writing letters, writing blogs, submitting video or other content or submitting story ideas?**

I think most users are still passive today. We certainly see more people liking and sharing content on Facebook. Because we have a partnership with the daily newspaper (The Daily Progress) which publishes 60% of our content in the print edition, we routinely see letters to the editor, editorials by the newspaper, and speakers at public meetings referring to our reporting. We do not have the resources to track these engagements.

**Are you identifying any patterns in readers in regards to whether they are active or passive users? In other words, are your readers simply reading and moving on or are they commenting, writing letters, writing blogs, submitting video or other content or submitting story ideas?**

Most of our users are consumers, but we have a percentage of contributors/participators that, given their age and backgrounds, are generally in line with the kind of behavior you see nationally.

**What type of content gets shared the most? Do you have any indications why?**

Links to fast-breaking stories. Readers want analytical stories that nevertheless give them up-to-the-minute data.
We cover public policy and attract a serious, expert audience who share information regularly as part of the daily conversation on public policy at the state level and how that affects all cities and towns in CT.

**What type of content gets shared the most? Do you have any indications why?**
We don’t really measure this.

**What type of content gets shared the most? Do you have any indications why?**
This is actually disheartening, but what seems to get shared are articles and news related to new commercial activity related to things we don’t have and the residents perceive we need. Things which you can form an opinion about instantly. This runs counter to most of the focus of our work which is to dive into complex community issues, break them down, and make them understandable. That takes some work and thinking by our readers. Anything we write about new theaters with the words “stadium seating” is bound to spark a lot of activity. That’s because Charlottesville doesn’t have a movie theatre with stadium seating. Same would be true with a new business like an Olive Garden. I spent 3.5 years on a weekly radio talk show talking about growth and development news. What made the phones ring? Not talk about sewer pipes and local government budgets, it was PIE. Long story, but good pie is something everyone has an opinion about. People who enjoyed listening to the show and learning about the local news were not likely to engage on that topic publicly because they were not 100% confident on the topic (e.g. I don’t know enough to make an informed statement on the radio). We started working pie in as a theme for connecting people to the community and other issues. I think movie theaters and Olive Gardens work in the same way as pie. People are ready to share that content because they can form an opinion instantly. What’s your favorite pie and where do you buy it? See what I mean?

**What type of content gets shared the most? Do you have any indications why?**
People tend to share stories that confirm their worldview or opinions, especially if they are confirmed in a very positive or very negative way. They like the extraordinary, unusual, exciting, upsetting, outrageous, etc.