

Written Remarks for the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities  
in a Democracy – Community Forum in Silicon Valley  
September 8, 2008

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Albany Today and the Future of Community News Websites  
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I am very glad to introduce you Albany Today, a community news website I created for the 16,000 residents of Albany in East San Francisco Bay.

I started Albany Today ([albanytoday.wordpress.com](http://albanytoday.wordpress.com)) about a year ago for my news reporting class. The aim was to provide good news and information service to Albany residents.

I am using the powerful Internet - specifically, a blog powered by Wordpress.com - as my publishing platform. Unlike a typical blog, however, most entries posted on Albany Today are news stories written under rigorous journalistic standards, rather than personal commentaries.

Besides news stories, there are also hundreds of photos, video clips, and notices of community events on the website, making it an appealing place for local residents to go for a variety of news and information they need.

Albany Today easily surpassed a local weekly paper in better meeting the community's needs for news and information. It provides news in a more timely fashion; it is richer in content and nicer in layout; and it has another major advantage : readers can directly post comments under each news story.

More and more people in the town are reading Albany Today. Its monthly page views increased by 100 times in a couple of months --- from 50 to more than 5,000. Dozens of readers have expressed their high appreciation for my work.

"I wanted to tell you how much I enjoy reading 'Albany Today.' I have learned so much about what is going on in this town I have lived in for the past 12 years...Thank you for keeping me connected to the community at large, " a reader wrote to me through email. My readers are also getting active in posting comments on the website. They have posted hundreds of comments in recent months. Many of them are so well-written that they read like newspaper Op-ed pieces. So I posted some comments as independent entries and created a new category named "Commentary From Readers"on the website. I have also published two photos taken by a resident at a local event and an essay by a local artist. I am very optimistic that there will be more and more content generated by my readers as they start to enjoy participating in Albany Today.

Readers are also providing news clues for me. Community groups send me their events announcements, parents tell me their concerns of school issues, and neighbors emailed me their complains on an abandoned house on their street. To me joy, many of my stories have helped to make a positive change in the community.

"This is an excellent example of how news blogs and individual journalists can fill the void of local news coverage, " commented Kathy Corcoran, a former journalism instructor of UC-Berkeley in an email to all faculty and students of the school introducing Albany Today. " This is an example of how the web can improve journalism for the 21st Century. "

I know precisely how many page views Albany Today receives each day, because Wordpress provides a tool that automatically counts the numbers. I also know how many views each story receives. For instance, a story on a middle school teacher charged with sexual assault on a former student (one of the most popular story on the website) has got 1027 views up until now.

The biggest challenge for me is how to keep the website updated frequently, which now largely depends on my time and effort. So I am trying to get students from my journalism school and Albany High School to contribute to the project. Albany Today will be able to provide the community with comprehensive news coverage once a few more students become committed to the project.

Based on the the successful model of Albany Today, the Journalism School of UC-Berkeley is launching similar community websites for neighboring East Bay communities, with the help of a \$500,000 Ford Foundation grant it has recently received. All the 60 first-year students in the school are being trained to work for the websites. Albany Today could become an attractive publication for advertisers, especially to local businesses, as its readership rapidly increases. Compared with newspapers, it has no cost in printing and delivery. I think It is quite possible that Albany Today will become commercially successful. I have no expertise in business, but I am trying to get help to explore this possibility.

Albany Today has found a new way to serve and stimulate communities with comprehensive and responsible news coverage, while newspaper companies are laying off reporters and shrinking news services. Communities ignored by newspaper companies will turn to news websites such as Albany Today, which will become a major force in meeting people's needs for local news and information.

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