"Crowdsourcing" at the Fort Myers, FL, *News-Press* Part B: "Help Us Investigate"

The *News-Press'* editors decided to appeal to their readers for assistance with the Cape Coral sewer hook-up story. Though the paper had on previous occasions used its forums to request information, the editors felt that the solicitation in this case should be more prominent. They wanted to make it visible to news-press.com readers who visited only the news sections of the website, as well as those who used the forums. They also decided to print the request in the newspaper. As Metro Editor Betty Wells recalls the discussion: "We came to the conclusion that… we need to just cross that bridge and flat-out say, 'What do you know? And what do you want to know? … How can you help us… figure out this mess?'"

On Friday, July 14, 2006, the *News-Press* and news-press.com published an editorial by Cape Coral Bureau Chief Tom Hayden headlined: "Help investigate controversial project." Hayden explained that the paper was launching an investigation into the Cape Coral utility story. He asked readers to contact the paper either by phone, email, or forum with their input and ideas. "Tell us what you want us to look into," he wrote. "Be our eyes and ears on the street. What's going on in your neighborhood? What are you being charged? Can you afford it?" He included his phone number and email address, as well as those of reporters Don Ruane and Jeff Cull. A similar announcement appeared on the front page of news-press.com, summarizing the paper's approach to the investigation and encouraging readers to comment in the forums or contact Ruane, Cull, or Hayden.

The audit

The editors timed the appeal to anticipate both an upcoming City Council meeting—scheduled for Monday, July 17, 2006—and the release of a construction audit the city had commissioned from the firm Kessler International. To their surprise, the solicitation yielded results

within 24 hours, when a confidential source contacted the paper and offered to leak them the full audit in advance of its presentation to the City Council.[1]

Hayden received the leaked document on Saturday morning, July 15. He, Cull, and Ruane spent the weekend reading and distilling the 80-page report to produce a summary for newspress.com. The audit contained numerous allegations of wrongdoing—ranging from lax oversight to possible bid-rigging—on the part of both the City of Cape Coral and utility project manager Montgomery Watson Harza (MWH).

The leak transformed the standard reporting equation. Ordinarily the *News-Press*, in covering such a damning document, would seek comment from those affected before publishing its claims. But the crowdsourcing technique seemed to demand that the paper share crucial information with its readers immediately upon receiving it. Further, whereas the space constraints of the print newspaper would have restricted it to publishing a summary of the report, the website allowed editors to give readers the entire document. In effect, the *News-Press* was now in a position to give Cape Coral residents access to the audit as soon as, or even before, the City Council saw it.

That Sunday, July 16, editors and reporters gathered in the newsroom to discuss what to do with the audit and how to take their crowdsourcing experiment further. They were unanimous that Kessler's report, as a public document commissioned by the city and paid for with tax dollars, should be freely available to the citizens of Cape Coral. But when, and in what context? Could the newspaper post the report and still maintain its objective journalistic stance, in effect contending that although it was publishing the audit, the *News-Press* reserved judgment on the document's conclusions? What effect would such a move have on other sources the *News-Press* had hoped to cultivate—those coveted insiders at City Hall or MWH who might now view the paper as an adversary?

Metro Editor Wells argued for posting the complete audit, allowing all readers, including city officials, to react to it on news-press.com forums. "It's up to the entire audience to make things balanced," Wells says. "We [would be] saying: 'Here's what we've got. It's not complete. It's not all there is. But here's what we've got right now.'" Executive Editor Marymont and Managing Editor McCurry-Ross agreed. "As a public document, paid for by the taxpayers, reporting back to the taxpayers… I can't think of any reason not to share that with the public," Marymont says. As consensus emerged around the table, the question that remained was not whether to post the audit but when.

The editors decided to post the full audit the following morning, Monday, July 17, at 8 a.m., along with the story Cull and Ruane had produced highlighting the report's major points. The article concluded with a set of questions under the heading "What We Don't Know." "What's the relationship between Cape officials and the contractor?" Cull and Ruane asked, citing emails between city employees and MWH that mentioned golf outings and parties. "Did residents get what

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[1] *The News-Press* has never published the name of the source.

they paid for? For example, did the city pay for 1,000 feet of water pipe and get 1,000 feet of water pipe?"[2] They listed numerous other gaps in their knowledge and encouraged readers to respond.

Almost immediately, Cull recalls, "all hell broke loose in Cape Coral." City officials were irate that the *News-Press* had released the document before they could respond publicly to its contents. "And the citizenry was very upset with the allegations, which were many, involving corruption, possible fraud, waste, abuse of taxpayer money," says Cull.

At the Council meeting that evening, the eight-member City Council voted unanimously to halt work on the project until August while they investigated Kessler's allegations. The next day, Tuesday, July 18, the Cape Coral City Auditor's office issued a point-by-point refutation of Kessler's report, pointing to a 2005 internal audit that had found no mismanagement.

As it had with the leaked Kessler audit, the *News-Press* posted the city's refutation. The paper's editorial board, meanwhile, issued its position. "In sorting out this mess, the first step is to replace the people responsible for it," the July 18 editorial read. "Heads simply have to roll."[3]

The onslaught

Meanwhile, Cape Coral residents responded in droves to the paper's request. Forums filled with hundreds of comments a day. Hayden, Ruane, and Cull, whose contact information Hayden had provided in the original solicitation, were inundated with phone calls and emails. Executive Editor Marymont recalls:

> I don't think we knew, really, what we were getting into until we jumped in and just started. We didn't anticipate the scope of public interest and involvement… It quickly became clear that we had this onslaught of email and phone calls that we needed to manage. So we had to make quick decisions on the fly about how to put some more firepower on managing it and sifting through all of it.

For example, who would be assigned to comb the forums for tips? Who should manage the day-to-day coverage? Did the story require extra reporters? How much of the growing online response should appear in print, and on what schedule?

Mackenzie Warren, deputy to the publisher for special projects, became the manager of the project. He, Ruane and Cull began monitoring reader comments. But between the forums and the phones, the workload rapidly became unmanageable. One unexpected obstacle was that the main newsroom's phones did not have caller identification. "That was a big issue for me," Cull recalls. "I had to answer every phone call because I was waiting for people to call me back on other issues-officials or what have you--so I couldn't screen out calls from the guy who just wants to call and talk." This was especially vexing for him because he felt it important to take calls from readers. "They're our customers," he remarks, elaborating:

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[2] Jeff Cull and Don Ruane, "An Auditor's Report: Questionable Practices." *The News-Press*, July 18, 2007.
[3] "Heads Must Roll," The News-Press, July 18, 2007.

> If we have to sit and listen to them for 20 minutes, maybe that's all they
> want. And I'm a firm believer that they just don't hang up and say, 'Thanks
> for listening to me.' They tell all their friends… 'I called this guy and he
> listened to me and said he'd do what he could do.'… That's good public
> relations for us. So you hate to let them go, but at the same time, you do
> have a job to do, so you've got to get it done… Email you can ignore until
> you can get to it, phone calls we couldn't. So that basically meant that I spent
> the entire next week on the phone.

Staying abreast of activity on the forums proved no less difficult. "We just didn't have the time" to read all the comments, Cull explains. He was busy analyzing contracts and requesting public records. Ruane, meanwhile, was knocking on doors in Cape Coral neighborhoods and asking residents how the utility project affected them. He was also covering the City Council's reaction to the Kessler audit and the political debate the document had sparked.

Aside from the sheer volume of response, Ruane found the forums difficult to navigate. Comments were organized into threads, in which users would respond to the statement that introduced the discussion topic. This meant that the comments were divided into hundreds of separate sections. Ruane recalls the result: "All of a sudden we've got… a hundred things to read that we have to try to catch up on."

Motivating reporters

Deputy Warren was enthusiastic about the crowdsourcing project's possibilities, but found it difficult to convince his reporters of its usefulness. He recalls:

> On the one hand there was me, a total believer that this is all going to work
> out, and… no matter what happens, it's going to be good. On the other end
> of the continuum was Jeff Cull, who said, 'All these people that are on [the
> forums], they're crazy… There's no credibility… It's not even worth wasting
> our time with.'

"That was a big struggle," Warren continues. The issue was "not just 'do I have the manpower to do this?' but 'can I motivate a reporter to do this?'" Contributing to the strain was the fact that Warren was significantly younger than Cull, a veteran investigative reporter. After a tense exchange, Warren asked Cull to concentrate on blueprints and project specifications, while he and Ruane scoured the forums for promising leads. Cull's responsibility was now to make sure that residents were receiving what MWH had agreed to provide.

Cull's reporting showed that they were, contrary to numerous tips he had received from residents who contacted the paper. "People said… 'When they were putting the utilities in our area, they didn't do what they were supposed to do. There [are] some missing pieces,'" Cull recalls. He visited several sites, comparing the construction to the blueprints. "They were all done according to the drawings," he reports. "They were all done according to engineering principles."

Meanwhile, Warren struggled to manage the forums. In addition to reading them himself, he occasionally pulled reporters off other projects and directed them to take a shift. He and other reporters looked for comments that recurred frequently, and used keyword searches to delve more deeply into users' reactions to a particular topic. In essence, says Warren, "We had to be reporters about what was being reported… We didn't use what was being reported by the audience as verified fact. We used it as a tip sheet."

Warren was encouraged, however, by the scope of reader interest in the investigation. He was also impressed by the independent reporting many were doing. He notes:

> [A poster] might come on and say… 'I'm a forensic accountant, so I'm going to look at the spreadsheet, and I'm going to tell you where they're fudging the numbers.' And other people would say, 'I'm an engineer, and I put a Freedom of Information request in for the architectural drawings of the pipes, and here's what I found.'… Here were people with expertise coming forward and asserting themselves and saying, 'I'm part of this. I'm going to look.'

Ruane had a different perspective. "A lot of [the posts were] opinions and just general comments," he says. "There were threats… [and] somebody searching for girlfriends." He did, however, follow up on reader suggestions of what to investigate. One example was a question that appeared in the forums several times: Did Cape Coral need sewers? Ruane cited a member of City Council who felt that installing sewers throughout Cape Coral was not a priority—rather, the city urgently needed drinking water infrastructure, and could install sewers at a later date.

Some other intriguing questions appeared as well. How much would it cost for the city to withdraw from its contract with MWH and start over? What was included in the hourly rates MWH charged? Would the cost of coffee provided for MWH employees go up once Cape Coral's first Starbucks was built? Ruane incorporated some such questions into his coverage, but few of them inspired full stories of their own.

In general, Ruane found the forum system "bulky and inefficient." "Posters should be required to state their specific question or situation… without going into lengthy dissertations and opinion pieces," he wrote in a memo after monitoring the forums about an hour a day for a week.

Transparency

The paper edition of the *News-Press* continued to publish stories on the utility expansion multiple times per week. Editors meanwhile emphasized transparency on news-press.com, urging reporters to post facts as soon as they uncovered them, in updates of perhaps a few sentences. Managing Editor McCurry-Ross found that the idea of total transparency, and the speed with which the *News-Press* published new facts, challenged the way she was accustomed to doing journalism.

> We've been doing our business the same way for so long that it's easy to spring back to original form. And so we had to keep coaching each other…

because our natural inclination would be to… get some new information… [and] say, 'That would be a great story for two weeks from Sunday' [allowing time for additional reporting].

Ruane recalls:

We were encouraged… to post things online as quick as we can, even if we don't have a lot of solid details. An example might be that emails showed a utilities manager for the city played a lot of golf with the construction managers. We would post something like that and then go back to work on it to fill in details of who played and when and whether that created any favoritism or softened the results of hard decisions because of the relationships established on the golf course.

Ruane was uneasy about this method, however. "It can create the appearance of a cozy city-contractor relationship," he notes. "I'd like to at least have a comment from the city or the contractor."[4]

Results

One development had the potential to cause the paper some discomfort. In early August, MWH hired accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers to review Kessler's findings, and by August 21 had submitted to the city auditor the auditing company's assessment that "almost all of the assertions raised by Kessler are unfounded."[5] Whereas Kessler had stated that the city had been uncooperative in providing him with documents, the new audit contended that "Kessler received all of the information it requested within weeks of its first request." It continued:

Kessler's request for additional materials such as cancelled contractor checks and raw salary and benefit information for MWHC [MWH Constructors] personnel is not typically the type of underlying data either requested or provided in an audit of this nature.[6]

The PricewaterhouseCoopers document raised questions about Kessler's credibility, as did several users on news-press.com forums. Warren notes:

Some people think the guy really knows what he's talking about. Some people think he took a bunch of shortcuts, blamed a bunch of things on the actors that he was evaluating and got… out of town and wasn't really fair.

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[4] Don Ruane's email to author, January 9, 2008.

[5] PricewaterhouseCoopers, "Evaluation & Response to Kessler International 2006 Audit Report," August 2006. Available: http://www.capecoral.net/citydept/Citymgr/pdf/PwC%20Audit.pdf

[6] Ibid.

But the newspaper had to take into account that the new charges against Kessler were being leveled by a firm retained by MWH. It was difficult to know whether the results invalidated Kessler's allegations.

On August 25, Cape Coral Assistant City Auditor Alan Bray, who had been Kessler's contact when the latter conducted his own audit, resigned, claiming the City Council blamed him for Kessler's unfavorable findings and that he lacked support from his superiors. On August 27, the *News-Press* and news-press.com hosted a town hall meeting, bringing together residents and city officials to discuss the utility expansion. News-press.com provided constant updates as the meeting progressed.

City Manager Terry Stewart found the exercise redundant. The City Council had hosted its own town-hall style meeting three weeks before, on August 2, to answer residents' questions about the Kessler audit.[7] "We were there for over six hours," Stewart says. "We had a set format. You have a question… you write it down. You turn it in. And we'll stay here and answer every question that is turned in."[8]

The *News-Press* town hall meeting dispensed with written questions in favor of a less regulated format, allowing participants to raise questions verbally. An editorial in the *News-Press* the following day deemed the meeting a success. "We succeeded in getting Cape city leaders to face 200 residents to hear and respond to raw questions and comments from nearly three dozen of them," wrote Community Conversations Editor David Plazas.[9] "We succeeded in keeping this issue alive and keeping the pressure on those in power to pay attention to taxpayers' concerns."[10]

On August 28, the City Council voted 7-0 to cut residents' assessments by $2,000 per lot, $4,000 for a typical two-lot home site. (One councilman was absent for health reasons.) Some of the savings would come from installing irrigation and drinking water lines on the same side of the road, rather than on opposite sides according to earlier practice. Doing so would reduce reconstruction costs. The fee for hooking up to the new pipes, however, would rise—though City Manager Terry Stewart assured residents that this increased cost would be less than the assessment savings. Residents continued to complain to the paper, however, that the savings were not enough.

Throughout this period, site traffic on news-press.com rose tremendously. Executive Editor Marymont told *Wired* magazine's Jeff Howe that the website received more visits than "ever before, excepting hurricanes."[11]

A survey the city conducted in October 2006 indicated that residents' ire over the utility project could impact their support for other government initiatives.[12] At stake was a referendum

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[7] Don Ruane, "Cape grills council over utility costs," *The News-Press*, August 3, 2006.

[8] Author's interview with Terry Stewart, on August 15, 2007, in Cape Coral, Florida. All further quotes from Stewart, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

[9] Community Conversations is part of the editorial section at all Gannett newspapers. The section's explicit aim is to engage reader feedback.

[10] David E. Plazas, "Cape leaders now listening to residents," *The News-Press*, August 27, 2007.

[11] Jeff Howe, "Gannett to Crowdsource News," *Wired*, November 3, 2006.

[12] Don Ruane, "Survey shows residents angry over utility costs," *The News-Press*, October 29, 2007.

about whether to allow the city to issue $110 million in bonds for a new public safety building. In April 2007, the measure was overwhelmingly defeated, with 78 percent voting against it.[13] Reporter Ruane points to several problems with the referendum, including the lack of an alternative plan, but notes that the distrust of the city government created by the utility expansion project played a significant role in the measure's defeat.[14]

In June 2007, over a year after the *News-Press* began its investigation, residents in the next utility construction area received their assessments. The construction and connection fees were now much lower, in general less than $14,000.[15] Accounts differ as to why this happened. Cape Coral Bureau Chief Hayden argues that the *News-Press* investigation, and the public outcry it generated, rendered the City Council more sensitive to residents' financial concerns, but that changing material costs also played a part in the cost reduction. City Manager Terry Stewart maintains that varying levels of subsurface rock in different parts of the city had more of an impact on the assessments than did the *News-Press* investigation.

In November 2007, Cape Coral voters changed the character of the City Council. Three members who supported the utility expansion project left the council because of term limits; voters meanwhile replaced two more utility expansion supporters. One new councilmember had sued the city over the fairness of the assessment method. "I can't prove it," Ruane remarks, "but I believe our crowdsourcing created enough uproar to influence the election."[16]

Precedent?

Crowdsourcing the Cape Coral utilities investigation generated an overwhelming response for the newspaper. Thereafter, the *News-Press* attempted similar appeals for reader help, with mixed results. A request for information about nursing homes, for example, received only a tepid response. "Clearly we got lucky on the Cape Coral thing," Warren says. "We still think we know what topics will work for crowdsourcing and which won't, and we are routinely proven wrong." He surmises that some of the initial project's success stemmed from the story's broad impact within Cape Coral. In addition, says Warren, "It's about something that's pretty damned important to them, and that's what's in [their] pocketbook."

Warren hoped to draw more deeply on the contributions of motivated readers, reasoning that those who participated in the Cape Coral investigation would be willing to contribute to coverage of other issues that impacted them. "That's an unfulfilled dream," Warren says.

> The volume is too great. We have other priorities. We have to fill the paper
> for tomorrow. We've got to get the website out today. It's a separate project
> that has to be done in… a laboratory setting where there are no new stimuli
> coming in, no new responsibilities.

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[13] Don Ruane, "Cape's bond plan bombs," *The News-Press*, April 4, 2007.
[14] Don Ruane's email to author, February 5, 2008.
[15] Don Ruane, "Cape utility-line cost lower," *The News-Press*, June 6, 2007.
[16] Don Ruane's email to author, February 5, 2008.

Ruane and Warren both felt that future crowdsourcing projects would benefit if the paper designated a "forum beat," assigning a reporter to monitor reader responses all day. Ruane also thought it would be useful to adjust the forums' organization, so that reporters would not have to sort through several different discussion threads and could instead visit a single comment page. Ruane further advocated that, to keep readers focused on a given story, the *News-Press* should use a form where users could suggest stories or ask questions. The paper should encourage readers to provide contact information.

Cull felt that, other than the Kessler audit, the newspaper received no concrete benefit from crowdsourcing. He advocated the method, however, to the extent that it might help the paper secure an inside source. "I think [crowdsourcing] has a whole lot of potential if you're prepared to be inundated with lots of stuff that you can't use," he summarizes. He also felt that it was useful for news-press.com to provide readers with a place to register discontent. The activity on the forums was clear evidence of citizens' anger with city officials, the extent of which a traditional news story might be unable to capture.

Executive Editor Marymont wished that the News-Press had explained the concept of crowdsourcing, and the style of its investigation, more thoroughly in its print edition. She reflects:

> Just as this was new to us… it was vastly different for our readers, too. They weren't accustomed to watching something like this develop…Online readers, I think, knew what was going on, but our print readers wished I had done more with columns and stories about what we were doing.

But Marymont found that the project was far more successful than she had anticipated: "It was messy and it was difficult at times to… work our way through … but it did what we hoped it would, and it got the community involved."