The Journalism School
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"Crowdsourcing": Promise or Hazard?
Part A: Debate at the Fort Myers, FL, *News-Press*

In the summer of 2006, the editors of the *News-Press*, a metro daily in Fort Myers, Florida, worried that "watchdog" journalism—aggressive investigations of public officials and the use of public funds—was in danger. Short, timely news updates, rather than longer investigative pieces that often took weeks or months to report and assemble, increasingly set the standard for Internet-delivered news. At the same time, the *News-Press*' editors recognized that the Internet could be a tremendous aid to exactly the kind of watchdog work they hoped to perform.

That June, two executives from Gannett, the *News-Press*' parent company, visited the paper and proposed an innovative way to harness technology for investigative journalism. They suggested that the paper solicit the help of its audience in examining their community. The paper's readership, they speculated, had ideas, expertise, and access to people and documents that no member of the *News-Press*' small staff had. The paper could collect and share the combined knowledge of its own public.

This strategy, labeled "crowdsourcing," had already enjoyed success in the private sector. Corporations like the Boeing Company and Procter & Gamble had crowdsourced certain research and development functions, posting some of their most difficult scientific problems online and soliciting solutions. The Gannett executives wanted to see the strategy employed in journalism and hoped the *News-Press* would serve as a laboratory.

Editors at *the News-Press* were intrigued, but not entirely persuaded. The breaking story in mid-2006 that lent itself most readily to crowdsourcing was about a local utilities project. Prices for sewer and potable water hookups to homes in the city of Cape Coral had recently shot up, and the newspaper had reported on the project's devastating financial impact on city residents, some of whom feared they would be forced to sell their homes. It remained unclear, however, why the cost to citizens had skyrocketed.

There were potential benefits to crowdsourcing the story. Affected residents could suggest angles to pursue and offer eyewitness reports of the utility project's day-to-day progress. The *News-Press* might obtain from its readers information that would otherwise be unavailable to reporters. It would be as if the newspaper had thousands of reporters on the story, rather than the six who constituted the Cape Coral bureau. Residents were likely to be receptive if the paper appealed for their input, since the issue was one that affected many financially. The project could further engage existing readers and perhaps attract new ones.

But there were risks as well. The request for information could stimulate an unmanageable volume of feedback. The *News-Press'* editors worried about what they owed readers who offered input—were editors and reporters obliged to respond to each of potentially hundreds of emails and phone calls? How much could they trust their readers to offer credible information? What forum should the *News-Press* provide for reader input and, if it was public, was the paper responsible for the accuracy of what appeared there? If the *News-Press* were to test-run crowdsourcing for journalism, editors would have to make some challenging decisions.

The News-Press

The *News-Press*, with an average daily circulation near 100,000, primarily serviced Southwest Florida's Lee County; its main bureau was in Fort Myers, the county seat. Located on the Gulf Coast, Lee County was a popular tourism and retirement destination, and it had grown rapidly—by almost 30 percent—since 2000. Its population exceeded half a million in 2006.[1]

The *News-Press'* parent company was Gannett, the largest US newspaper chain by circulation and the owner of 90 newspapers including *USA Today*. Kate Marymont, the *News-Press'* vice president and executive editor, refers to the paper as Gannett's "petri dish": the company often tested new ideas in the *News-Press'* pages and on its website, news-press.com.[2] One reason for this was that Marymont had a close relationship with Michael Maness, Gannett's vice president for strategic planning in the Newspaper Division.[3] The two had worked together at Gannett's Springfield, Missouri newspaper, the *Springfield News-Leader,* and they stayed in contact and shared ideas.

Mackenzie Warren, deputy to the publisher for special projects at the *News-Press*, often participated in these exchanges. "We all share a belief that if technology is applied the right way, it can make up for the shortcomings of journalism, mainly by building a relationship with readers," Warren says. He continues: "[Maness] knows that if [he has] a cool idea… [that's] going to lead to

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[1] Census.gov, Lee County QuickFacts, 2006. Available: http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12/12071.html

[2] Author's interview with Kate Marymont, on August 15, 2007, in Fort Myers, Florida. All further quotes from Marymont, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

[3] "Maness named Gannett's vice president of innovation and design," Gannett press release, June 5, 2007. Available: http://www.gannett.com/news/pressrelease/2007/pr060507.htm

good journalism in our view, we're going to give it a try. So on a number of occasions he has called us or come to us."[4]

In 2006, Gannett was researching ways to "become more customer-centered and innovative" in its approach to gathering and distributing news.[5] Based in part on a year-long American Press Institute study, "Newspaper Next: The Transformation Project," Gannett's internal restructuring plan called for focusing on "seven jobs to be done"—tasks that newspapers were uniquely equipped to undertake.[6] The seven jobs Gannett identified were: **"**Public Service. Digital. Data. Community Conversation. Local. Custom Content. Multimedia."[7]

Gannett asked several of its newspapers to act as test sites, centers of experimentation for new approaches to the seven jobs. Managing Editor Cindy McCurry-Ross and Marymont eagerly volunteered their own paper as a test site for the "Public Service" job. A Gannett memo detailing the company's vision for its newsrooms explained:

> [Public Service] expands our very important First Amendment and watchdog functions. It encourages community participation at each step of the journalism process. Public Service coverage examines government issues, investigates wrongdoing, uses Freedom of Information standards and applies watchdog techniques. Journalists producing Public Service efforts connect all forms of electronic delivery, the print newspaper and reprinted summaries. Searchable databases, interactive elements and community engagement are frequent components of Public Service journalism.

Gannett's goals resonated with the *News-Press*' own. "I had a concern," recalls McCurryRoss, "that watchdog work… might fade away if we don't figure out how to do it in new ways." She adds:

> We were recognizing that the old model of research… and report and report and report for this… Sunday blowout, multiple story, hundreds of inches of copy model isn't really going to work in the future, because so many people are turning to the Web for their news and information.[8]

Executive Editor Marymont invited Vice President Maness to visit Fort Myers to discuss how to use technology to keep watchdog journalism alive. Maness had recently encountered a method

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[4] Author's interview with Mackenzie Warren, on August 15, 2007, in Fort Myers, Florida. All further quotes from Warren, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

[5] Memo from Gannett CEO Craig Dubow, November 2, 2006, via Jeff Howe. Available: http://crowdsourcing.typepad.com/cs/2006/11/information_cen.html

[6] For the API report, see: http://www.newspapernext.org/2005/09/report_availability_1.htm

[7] Ibid.

[8] Author's interview with Cindy McCurry-Ross, on August 14, 2007, in Fort Myers, Florida. All further quotes from McCurry-Ross, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

called "crowdsourcing" he thought might benefit Gannett papers. He wanted to test it at the News-Press.

Crowdsourcing?

The term "crowdsourcing" was jointly coined in early 2006 by Jeff Howe and Mark Robinson, two editors at Wired magazine. Howe defined the term thus:

> The act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call.[9]

Howe's interest in the idea was partially inspired by the book *Wisdom of Crowds*, by the *New Yorker*'s James Surowiecki.[10] The book explored the concept of "collective intelligence"—the ability of large groups, if their members are sufficiently diverse, independent, and decentralized, to make better decisions or more accurate predictions, on average, than any one member of such a group.[11] One example Surowiecki gave was of a weight-guessing competition at a 1906 country fair in Plymouth, England, where 800 people guessed the weight of an ox. Their answers averaged together fell within a pound of the ox's true weight.[12] The "crowd" had included farmers, butchers, and others with knowledge of cattle, as well as others with no particular livestock-related expertise. The anecdote illustrated Surowiecki's main thesis, which was that, "under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them."

Howe's article, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," appeared in the June 2006 issue of *Wired.* He described its applications in the private sector, including research and development at Procter & Gamble and at Boeing. These companies had posted some of their most difficult technical problems online, allowing anyone to try solving them, and offering a reward for the correct answer. They had discovered that doing so was a more cost-effective way to solve problems than paying full-time employees to spend weeks researching a solution they might never find. Howe explained:

> Technological advances in everything from product design software to digital video cameras are breaking down the cost barriers that once separated amateurs from professionals. Hobbyists, part-timers, and dabblers suddenly have a market for their efforts, as smart companies in industries as disparate as pharmaceuticals and television discover ways to tap the latent talent of the crowd. The labor isn't

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[9] Jeff Howe, "Crowdsourcing: A Definition." [Weblog entry.] Crowdsourcing. June 2, 2006. Available: http://crowdsourcing.typepad.com/cs/2006/06/crowdsourcing_a.html

[10] Ibid.

[11] James Surowiecki, *Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations*. New York, Doubleday, 2004, p. xviii.

[12] Ibid. pp. xii-xiii.

always free, but it costs a lot less than paying traditional employees. It's not outsourcing; it's crowdsourcing.[13]

Citizen journalism. By the time Howe and others began discussing crowdsourcing, there were already a number of ways for readers to interact with, or even contribute to, news outlets. Many websites already provided space for readers to comment on articles or opinion pieces. Some, notably washingtonpost.com, frequently hosted live webchats with their reporters or with individuals in the news.

Many news outlets also explicitly used reader contributions for their own reports. A dramatic example occurred in London in July 2005, when terrorists attacked the transportation system. Several bombs exploded on buses and subways—and news organizations like the BBC and CNN featured images and video taken by passengers using cell phone cameras, since their own staffs did not have immediate access to the scene.[14] Eyewitnesses filed similar dispatches from Southeast Asia when a tsunami caused widespread destruction there in December 2004, and from the Gulf Coast when Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005. In each case, readers had the dubious luck to be where news crews were not while a major story developed.

Meanwhile, some websites relied almost exclusively on reader contributions, rather than using them simply to augment the work of their own staff. OhMyNews, a Korean website, employed a staff of editors and reporters, but most of its published content consisted of lightly edited stories contributed by 33,000 "citizen reporters." Registered users of OhMyNews could submit 750 word stories and earn a few dollars per article, depending on its placement.[15] Slashdot, a technology site, was a hybrid blog and bulletin board, to which registered users could post short news items. So-called "hyperlocal" news sites, such as the Northwest Voice in Bakersfield, California, published reader-submitted accounts of daily life in their communities, like dispatches from Little League games or photos of Halloween costumes.[16] Summarized Dan Gillmor, blogger and former columnist for the *San Jose Mercury News*: "It boils down to something simple. Our readers collectively know more than we do."[17]

Such practices, often collectively described as "citizen journalism," had generated enthusiasm in some quarters and apprehension in others. At stake, in the minds of its critics, were the standards of rigor and accuracy that characterized professional journalism. Samuel Freedman, a professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, expressed uneasiness at the

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[13] Jeff Howe, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," *Wired,* June 2006, available: http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html

[14] Yuki Noguchi, "Camera Phones Lend Immediacy to Images of Disaster," *Washington Post*, July 8, 2005. Available: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/07/AR2005070701522.html

[15] Christopher M. Schroeder, "Is This the Future of Journalism?", *Newsweek*, June 18, 2004. Available: http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5240584/site/newsweek/

[16] Mark Glaser, "The New Voices," *Online Journalism Review*, October 26, 2004. Available: http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/041026glaser/

[17] Dan Gillmor, "Here Comes 'We Media,'" *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 2003. Available: http://cjrarchives.org/issues/2003/1/wemedia-gillmor.asp

movement's ethos of not just challenging professionalism but, in Freedman's view, circumventing it entirely. "However wrapped in idealism," he wrote on a CBS-TV blog, "citizen journalism forms part of a larger attempt to degrade, even to disenfranchise journalism as practiced by trained professionals." He continued:

> I appreciate the access that citizen journalism provides to first-hand accounts of major events. Yet I recognize those accounts are less journalism than the raw material, generated by amateurs, that a trained, skilled journalist should know how to weigh, analyze, describe, and explain.[18]

Crowdsourcing would add a new and unpredictable element of collaboration to existing models of citizen journalism.

Gannett comes to Town

Gannett Vice President Maness introduced the term "crowdsourcing" to the *News-Press'* editors over dinner on June 13, 2006. In attendance were Managing Editor McCurry-Ross, Executive Editor Marymont, and Deputy to the Publisher Warren, as well as another Gannett executive and other members of the *News-Press'* editorial staff. Maness had just as vague a grasp of what crowdsourcing would look like in journalism as the *News-Press'* editors did. "He said," recalls Deputy Warren, "'here's this idea in a vacuum. I've never tried it. I don't know what would happen. Figure it out.'"

Over the next hour, the assembled editors and executives discussed what crowdsourcing meant and what it should accomplish in practice. McCurry-Ross wondered whether the method could work at the *News-Press*. "It wasn't entirely defined, of course," she says. But she was excited by the idea. She continues:

> I've always thought what we do is really… about the audience… Sometimes we get big egos and think it's about us… but it's really about the readers… and touching them very personally or doing public service in a broader sense for the community.[19]

What excited her most about the prospect was its potential to introduce more transparency into the reporting process. She envisioned the *News-Press* communicating more fully with its readers—actively soliciting their input, and publishing new facts and documents on newspress.com as it received them, rather than hoarding and summarizing the information for the paper edition. Reporters could encourage readers to do their own reporting and contact the paper with what they discovered.

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[18] Samuel Freedman, "Outside Voices: Samuel Freedman on the Difference Between the Amateur and the Pro." [Weblog entry.] CBS Public Eye, March 31, 2006. Available:
http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2006/03/30/publiceye/entry1458655.shtml
[19] Author's telephone interview with Cindy McCurry-Ross, October 19, 2007.

The paper, she thought, would in essence be announcing to its audience: "We're going to share with you what we find out when we find it out, not down the road." In turn, the paper would ask its readers to do the same. Reporting would become a collaborative effort between the *News-Press* and its community.

Information Exchanges and Reader Forums

While crowdsourcing initially seemed an unfamiliar concept, some of its features were not completely untested at the *News-Press*. Part of Maness' impetus for visiting Fort Myers in the first place was the paper's openness to innovation. The *News-Press* had conducted an experiment similar to crowdsourcing in August 2004, when Hurricane Charley swept up Florida's west coast. Deputy to the Publisher Warren recounts that he and his colleagues realized that the storm would affect people "very differently from neighborhood to neighborhood, maybe even from block to block and door to door." He continues:

> We weren't going to be able to tell all their stories. So we cooked up this quick software solution. We called it Information Exchanges. We said, 'You're going to help tell the story. Connect here. Find people who have answers to your questions, because we're not able to answer them all.'

Warren feels that by providing the Information Exchanges, the paper performed a public service that would have been impossible in what he calls "the traditional journalism mindset of: 'We're going to hear what the police have to say, and then write it down on a pad of paper, and that's the story we're going to tell 10 hours from now when our newspaper comes out.'" The Information Exchanges were a particularly valuable tool for seasonal residents of Lee County who lived elsewhere during the summer and could not easily learn how their property had fared. One such seasonal resident was in the Philippines when the storm hit and successfully located, via the Information Exchanges, a missing relative she had been unable to contact after area phone lines went down. Others used the Information Exchanges to learn where beer, cigarettes, and gas were still available as retail supplies dwindled.

The offspring of the Information Exchanges were reader forums, space on the *News-Press* website, news-press.com, where readers could submit comments and discuss issues. The forums occupied their own section of the website, insulated from news-press.com's news content. Unlike Information Exchanges, reader forums tied related comments into topic threads, which readers could introduce themselves. Also unlike the Information Exchanges, which focused on a single issue—the hurricane—reader forums were, in Warren's words, "a free-for-all."

The *News-Press* was, in 2004, among the first American newspapers to adopt forum technology. Marymont recalls that the paper took a lot of criticism as a result. "Many around the industry were very apprehensive about open forums where people could make unsubstantiated claims, call each other names… rant and rave about anything," she recalls. Other "early adopters" of forums exercised strict control over what could be posted there; the *News-Press*, by contrast, decided early on to take a more laissez-faire approach. But the paper's editors still grappled with what kinds

of restrictions, if any, they should place on what users could post to their website. Publisher Carol Hudler consulted the paper's legal counsel about the *News-Press'* responsibility for the accuracy of what appeared on its forums. The lawyer gave Hudler a useful comparison:

> If you hold a town meeting, and someone says something that's true or not true… you can't sue the person that holds the town meeting for libel because they held a town meeting and someone said something… The whole idea behind it is to invite comment… Now, there are some that are real problems. Someone that enters in the forum and says something hostile and untrue about somebody could be sued for libel themselves.[20]

Liability apart, Executive Editor Marymont recalls occasions when she would "read something on the forums and blanch." News-press.com's immigration threads were especially acrimonious. Marymont explains:

> We have a lot of migrant workers here, and the debate over illegal immigration is very hot in Southwest Florida, and it's often very ugly… Some of the hateful racism, I remember [thinking], just pull it down. I don't want that on our website. That's just not right. But it's part of the community conversation.

For the most part, the *News-Press'* editors did not remove comments from the forums. This was partly because of their enthusiasm for the "town hall" model, but it also stemmed from a lack of capacity to police the forums. Readers posted hundreds of comments a day, and the *News-Press* lacked the staff to monitor them all for accuracy and civility. Ultimately, the only posts the *NewsPress* removed were physical threats or excessive profanity. Even so, Marymont says, "we let people get pretty raw."

Reporters had also used the forums to solicit sources. Betty Wells, Metro Editor of newspress.com, recalls that reporters would begin discussion threads with specific questions in mind. "If you have problems with your homeowners' insurance, let us know," Wells offers as one example.[21] Crowdsourcing could use the forums in a similar way to collect readers' reporting, tips, and perspectives.

The right kind of story

If the paper decided to experiment with crowdsourcing, however, the editors needed to find a story that could benefit from such an approach. To that end, Marymont and McCurry-Ross held a meeting of editors and writers on June 14, the day after meeting with Maness, to introduce the crowdsourcing idea and discuss possible applications. McCurry-Ross felt that it was important to

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[20] Author's interview with Carol Hudler, August 15, 2007, in Fort Myers, Florida. All further quotes from Hudler, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

[21] Author's interview with Betty Wells, on August 17, 2007, in Fort Myers, Florida. All further quotes from Wells, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

select a story that strongly impacted individuals. The investigation itself, rather than just the investigation's results, should affect readers. That way, they would be motivated to participate. Several ideas emerged from the discussion.

Nursing homes. One possible topic was nursing homes. They represented an intense personal issue for families who worried that their elderly members might encounter abuse and neglect at such facilities. The paper could even ask readers to take video cameras into the nursing homes they visited.

Human trafficking. Human trafficking was another possibility. Southwest Florida was a favored conduit for smugglers who transported impoverished immigrants to the US and enslaved them. The *News-Press* had been investigating the issue—in a traditional, paper-based way—for about a year, and had found that Florida's combination of numerous low-paying jobs, seasonal farm work, and a sex trade that accompanied migrant workers gave the state the third highest number of human trafficking cases in the US, after New York and California.[22]

Meanwhile, the formation of a human trafficking task force in the Lee County Sherriff's Department had brought more attention to the issue. The *News-Press* covered one case that involved a 13-year-old Guatemalan girl whose parents had sold her for $260. She had been brought to Lee County's Cape Coral, where she was forced into domestic and sexual servitude. The *News-Press* reported that the situation persisted for a year while police investigated the case.[23]

Taxes. Taxes, too, were an attractive candidate for crowdsourcing. As a slump in housing prices began in 2006, the taxable value of Florida homes nevertheless continued to increase. "In other words," Deputy Warren explains, "people were getting taxed higher, and their homes were going to be going down in value." What gave it the potential for reader-assisted reporting, Warren continues, was that much of the story involved analyzing public records, which any *News-Press* reader could access. Further, says Warren, "everybody's version of the story was going to be a little different, because everybody's got a different value of their homes."[24]

Insurance. For similar reasons, insurance rates could offer an interesting crowdsourcing experiment. The hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 had damaged or destroyed countless Florida homes and properties, and insurers often refused to cover the losses, arguing that water damage was the province of flood insurance, not hurricane insurance. "Lots of people lost their homes around here because of that," Warren recalls.

> And then on top of that lots of companies who write insurance policies started bailing out of the Florida market and saying… 'We're not even going to write insurance policies.'… Less competition means prices go up.

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[22] Jeff Cull, "Young Task Force Cracks Down on Slavery," *The News-Press*, June 10, 2005.

[23] Jeff Cull, "System Fails Abused Guatemalan Girl," *The News-Press*, July 24, 2005.

[24] Author's telephone interview with Mackenzie Warren, October 23, 2007.

However, Florida residents were required by law to purchase insurance. The so-called "insurer of last resort" was a taxpayer-funded system for the growing proportion of otherwise uninsurable Floridians. But this system, according to Warren, was even more expensive and less effective than private insurance. The result, as Warren describes it, was that "people were having their insurance rates go up 400 [or] 500 percent every year." He continues:

> And if you can't pay it, too bad, you've got to leave your house. But… you can't sell your house because nobody else is going to buy a house that has to have a $5,000 bill attached to it every year.[25]

The issue, like that of taxes, affected most homeowners and impacted each one a little differently. Insurance presented several reporting challenges that taxes did not, however. Not everyone had the same insurance, for one thing. For another, explains Warren, "[insurance] rate structures, although subject to public review, are not totally transparent."

The most attractive possibility, however, was one McCurry-Ross learned about in a routine phone call with Cape Coral Bureau Chief Tom Hayden before the meeting. In the course of inquiring about that week's developing stories, she had mentioned Maness' crowdsourcing idea. Hayden had pointed out that community dissatisfaction over an expensive public utility project was gathering force.

Cape Coral Utility Expansion

Cape Coral, with a population of over 160,000, was Lee County's largest city. For decades after it was founded in the 1950s, it was a small rural community that relied on septic tanks and groundwater wells rather than a centralized sewage system. Beginning in the 1990s, however, it had seen rapid residential growth. As new septic tanks and wells proliferated in expanding neighborhoods, the city faced two urgent risks – septic tanks threatened to contaminate the city's drinking water, while a steadily shrinking aquifer caused many wells to run dry.

In 1999, the City of Cape Coral undertook an ambitious construction project to install sewage, irrigation, and potable water pipes beneath all 105 square miles of the city. Initial estimates suggested that the project would last until 2017 and cost close to a billion dollars.[26] The city would require its residents, based on the size of their property, to pay a proportionate share of the utility expansion costs through what was called an assessment fee. Homeowners would also be subject to an impact fee, the cost of hooking up to the utility. State law required that all homes in the construction area connect to the new sewage and water lines upon their completion; irrigation hookups were optional.

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Jeff Cull, "Utility Projects Common In State," *The News-Press*, September 30, 2006. Available: http://www.newspress.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060930/CAPEWATER/60930001

In 2001, first assessments averaged about $11,000 per house site. In a city with a median household income below $44,000 a year, the fees sparked widespread complaint. By mid-2006, however, the assessment fee for a typical home site shot up to $22,000.[27]

Though the *News-Press* had, according to Executive Editor Marymont, "been reporting on [the utility expansion] for years," the growing community concern the rising costs generated brought new drama to the story. Cape Coral Bureau Chief Hayden recalls that readers were increasingly using news-press.com forums to complain about the construction's financial impact and criticize the city government: "People started getting onto our forums and… [saying]: 'How could the city government be doing this to us? There's nothing wrong with our septic systems. We don't need [sewers] now. Our wells are fine.'" It was in 2006, Hayden says, that "the human side of the story started to come out."[28]

One article that appeared in the *News Press* in mid-June 2006 described a sobbing homeowner who told the City Council at a public meeting: "You're hurting us."[29] Managing Editor McCurry-Ross recalls:

> These folks were in tears because the economic impact on their households was so huge that some were being forced to consider whether they would have to move, [or] whether they might get sued by the city government because they weren't going to be able to afford to pay these huge assessments.

The *News-Press* had been listening as the complaints grew in volume. Jeff Cull, an investigative reporter at the paper, recalls: "I had spent a good bit of time looking at [the utility expansion] and found a number of [suspicious] things, but there were a number of things that we just couldn't prove." Cull suspected that, at the very least, the City Council was wasting residents' money, paying too much for a job accomplished more cheaply just a few years earlier. But he did not have access to the accounting records that would help him determine how the money was being spent. He explains: "We just can't get some things without subpoenas."[30] Cull reported to Wells, Metro Editor of news-press.com, who remembers: "Jeff [Cull] kept saying, 'I can't get what I need… I just can't put my finger on what's going on here.'"

The utility expansion story seemed on balance the best candidate for crowdsourcing. For one thing, thousands of people were affected by the construction, which meant that the *News-Press'* Cape Coral readership could offer a wealth of information and diverse perspectives on the story. For another, as Cape Coral Bureau Chief Hayden notes, the city's population of 160,000 made reader

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[27] The city also offered a 20-year payment option which, thanks to hefty interest payments, drove the final bill above $100,000.

[28] Author's interview with Tom Hayden, on August 14, 2007, in Fort Myers, Florida. All further quotes from Hayden, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

[29] Don Ruane, "Assessments in Cape spark protest, tears," *The News-Press*, June 13, 2006.

[30] Author's interview with Jeff Cull, on August 16, 2007, in Fort Myers, Florida. All further quotes from Cull, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

help invaluable to the Cape Coral Bureau's staff of six. "There's no way we could possibly reach all those residents and do all that work without their help," Hayden says.

Cape Coral's demographics also seemed well-suited to an experiment with crowdsourcing. Cape Coral's population was younger on average than the rest of Lee County, with higher rates of Internet use. The *News-Press*' Cape Coral "microsite"—the subsection of its website devoted to Cape Coral—had been active for a few months and had enjoyed considerable success with the city's residents.

Debating the Merits

Not everyone at the paper, however, found crowdsourcing attractive. Investigative reporter Cull felt strongly that his primary requirement for covering the story reliably was an inside source, either at City Hall or within the firm Montgomery Watson Harza (MWH), which the city contracted to manage the sewers' construction. Cull hoped for a source who had witnessed wrongdoing and was willing to come forward with documentary evidence. A public appeal for reader help, perhaps accompanied by the publication on news-press.com of documents the *NewsPress* had already obtained, risked alienating such sources. Metro Editor Wells recalls wondering: "If we post the stuff, and… Jeff [Cull] is three steps away from finding [a] source… is that going to shut down those people from talking?" Absent such an internal source, furthermore, it was unlikely that the paper's general readership had access to the accounting records Cull sought. Crowdsourcing might be little help to Cull.

Executive Editor Marymont, too, was cautious. "The thing you have to think about first is credibility and veracity," she notes. "If the goal is to engage readers in watchdog journalism, we have to make sure that journalism is credible." If the *News-Press* took the risk of publishing its preliminary reporting on news-press.com, and asking its readers to share what they knew in newspress.com's forums, that meant, in Marymont's words, that the paper's name would be on a story "that is building and unfolding in new ways that we don't control." How could the *News-Press* post possibly incriminating material on news-press.com without seeming to endorse its conclusions? Whereas the reader forums were clearly identified as such, material such as documents published elsewhere on the website might seem to carry the imprimatur of the newspaper itself. Marymont realized, furthermore, that it would be difficult for her and other editors to relinquish editorial power over who received what information when. "We've always held those keys," she explains. "We've always made those decisions."

Balance. They had always made those decisions in such a way as to maximize, as best they could, the fairness and objectivity of the coverage. But as a story took shape online through raw documents and reader forums, the *News-Press* would not have the opportunity to impose a balanced structure on the narrative that emerged. McCurry-Ross explains:

> When you do a story for print… you've talked to all your sources. And within that story, you weave together all of their perspectives and points of

> views, and the story rolls out in that way. In this way, you put up one fact…
> at a time.

Such a strategy, McCurry-Ross reasoned, need not mean abandoning balance altogether, but the balancing would have to take place over a period of time, rather than within a single story. For example, the paper might post on news-press.com documents purporting to show fraud or waste without first seeking a response from City Council. But the Council would be welcome to use news-press.com forums to detail their side of the story, or indeed offer the paper documents supporting their own position to be posted on news-press.com. McCurry-Ross recognized, however, that the story's protagonists might not be receptive to the notion of long-term balance if they were not contacted for reaction before the *News-Press* published what it knew.

What to publish. Another question was whether, by embracing crowdsourcing, the paper imposed on itself the obligation to post on its website every relevant scrap of information it encountered. Cull had accumulated three boxes of data, all pertaining to the utility project, over years of sporadic coverage. Did it really serve the public interest to put all of it, no matter how mundane or technical, on the website? What criteria should the *News-Press* employ for the documents it published and those it held back? What aspects of the story should the *News-Press* address in more traditional, written articles?

Competition. Furthermore, if readers had access to the *News-Press*' ongoing reporting, so would the competition. Managing Editor McCurry-Ross notes: "We're all very competitive people in terms of other media." But she also reflected that the *News-Press* updated its website dozens of times a day, and that consequently, "any one of our media competitors knows what we're working on all day long, because when we know it, we put it up there."

Motivation. Another challenge would be motivating reporters to take on the experiment. Executive Editor Marymont notes:

> It is natural for us to gravitate to [traditional, paper-based journalism], and
> it is not natural for a lot of us to be thinking about how to produce watchdog
> [journalism] appropriate for [cellphones].

Distraction. She also feared that too heavy an emphasis on innovation could distract the News-Press from its day-to-day mission.

> If we invest too much time and energy in the new technology, we can lose
> our focus on the old-fashioned watchdog journalism and get more excited
> about playing with the toys than with delivering the news.

Appearances. Metro Editor Wells recalls: "I remember we talked a lot about the psychology of appearing needy… the whole notion that, well, we can't do this. We give up. We're your big bad newspaper, but we're at a loss." She also recognized that an appeal to readers might generate no

response at all. "Are we going to look really stupid if this doesn't work?" she wondered. "You've got to think about that."

Reporting challenges. Assuming that readers did respond, however, editors would have to decide how most effectively to collect reader input. Don Ruane, another reporter in the Cape Coral bureau, points out that print newspapers had long solicited reader input in their pages, urging those affected by a particular ongoing issue to contact the paper. The *News-Press* itself had done so, both in print and on its forums. But while a printed solicitation reached a paper's hard-copy readers, an online one could potentially reach readers around the world. That meant that the *NewsPress* risked receiving a great deal of reader input that it could not use. "We have a very active readership, and they don't mind sharing their opinions on things," Ruane says.[31]

Ruane also worried about encouraging rumors, which would in turn waste reporters' time. "So many things would be rumor-based that we would spend a lot of time checking out dead ends," he says. Ruane feared that his day-to-day duties covering Cape Coral's city government would leave him little time to mine news-press.com forums for readers' insights.

Acknowledging reader input. But Publisher Carol Hudler advised the editors that, if they decided to use crowdsourcing, they should be scrupulous about acknowledging readers' contributions. "If you're going to ask for their input, you damned well better do something with it," she says. "[Readers] get very angry if it's apparent that you don't. And so if you know that the volume is going to be huge, you've got to be clear up front what contributors can expect in return."

That might mean that reporters and editors not only had to cover their beats, put out a paper, update the website scores times a day, and search for tips in the reader forums. They would also have to take the time to acknowledge those readers who contacted them. Reader input might not even prove useful. Much of the utility story involved analyzing blueprints and financial accounts, and Cull doubted that the average reader of the *News-Press* would be able to offer much insight in those areas. Cull himself, on the other hand, held an engineering degree from the US Naval Academy. Perhaps he was best left to continue pursuing the story on his own.

Given the pros and cons, the newspaper's editors debated whether it made sense to apply crowdsourcing to journalism. Would coverage of the Cape Coral situation benefit or suffer from the approach? Could it help the paper serve readers better? Or might a majority of readers recoil from a new way of presenting news which broke so many of the old rules?

Meanwhile, the City of Cape Coral had hired the firm Kessler International to conduct an independent audit of the ongoing construction; auditor Michael Kessler would present his findings to the City Council in July, on a date to be determined.[32] Another critical City Council meeting would take place on July 17, when Council members would reexamine their contract with MWH and

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[31] Author's interview with Don Ruane, on August 16, 2007, in Fort Myers, Florida. All further quotes from Ruane, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

[32] Don Ruane, "Justice reviews Cape utilities," *The News-Press*, May 19, 2006.

discuss whether and how to proceed with the construction. On July 13, nearly a month after the paper's initial crowdsourcing discussion took place, Metro Editor Wells, Managing Editor McCurry-Ross, and Executive Editor Marymont congregated in the newsroom. Discussing their coverage of the Cape Coral utility expansion, they decided that if they were going to start crowdsourcing, it would have its maximum effect right before the July 17 City Council meeting.