



# Readers Make a Newspaper Their Own

AN INTERVIEW WITH LEX ALEXANDER

*U.S. newspapers are redefining themselves in a changing media environment. Papers at the forefront of this trend are breaking down traditional barriers that have existed between their newsrooms and their readers, and bringing the audience into the process of shaping the journalistic product issued daily in print or online.*

*Lex Alexander is the citizen journalism coordinator for the News & Record of Greensboro, North Carolina.*

The growth of burgeoning new media has come at the expense of the old. Just a half-century ago, newspapers were giants in the media universe. Fifty years of expansion in broadcast news and around-the-clock cable television news have tumbled newspapers from their once dominant position. To hang on to a place in the news business, to maintain product viability in a more competitive game, and to profitably remain in business, newspapers are moving their products online.

The *News & Record*, with more than a century of publishing history in Greensboro, North Carolina, adopted a new model for its online product in 2005—the Town Square, offering readers more interactivity, community journalism, and involvement. Lex Alexander, now citizen journalism coordinator at the paper, proposed the new concept and spoke with *Global Issues* managing editor Charlene Porter about the new product and the public response.

Photo montage: The News & Record of Greensboro, North Carolina, reaches out to engage readers with interactive features on its Web site. The Town Square section includes staff-written blogs, which contain additional information to stories that appear in the paper, and Hometown Hubs, where readers can contribute content. (Courtesy News & Record)

**Alexander:** Most of the feedback we've gotten has been very positive. Some of it has been in the form of constructive criticism and some of it has been in the form of comments: "We like what you're doing, keep it up, and here is something else you might think about doing."

**Q:** Describe the different fora that the *News & Record* has created to generate more public involvement in this product.

**Alexander:** Almost the first thing we did was greatly expand the number of blogs we were producing. We began blogging, as a staff, in the middle of 2004. After we announced what we were going to be doing in early 2005, we began creating a bunch of new blogs because staff members had expressed an interest and because it really did seem a natural extension of covering a particular reporting beat.

We also began looking at ways to increase our overall transparency. That is, to begin talking more with readers about stories we were working on and angles that we ought to pursue, talking more with readers about why we covered certain stories and not others. Historically, news organizations have not talked a lot about the way they do their jobs. It was considered bad form, and even bad ethics, to make your news organization part of the story. There has been a realization in the last few years that in some cases the news organization is going to be part of the story and that we need to accept that and be willing to talk honestly about how and why we do the things we do.

**Q:** Blogs by your staff are written products by the same journalists who have been your primary contributors for decades. Do their blogs somehow give readers more of the story?

**Alexander:** That's correct, and we also have the capability of including various kinds of files with blog posts. We can include scans of documents. We can include small snippets of audio or video. We can include pictures or graphics. We can put a link from the blog saying, "If you want to read the entire 48-page indictment of John Doe, here's the link." In cases where documents are an important basis for news stories, our editor and I have been encouraging reporters to put those documents online so readers can judge whether we are reporting on them factually and contextually.

**Q:** What do citizens, with their involvement, bring to your newspaper, your Web product, that reporters and editors weren't providing in the old journalism?

**Alexander:** A lot of people know more than we do about a lot of things. The blogs keep readers informed

about what we're working on and give readers a basis for thinking, "Here is another angle that you guys haven't thought of, or, what you're looking at isn't really the main issue; the main issue is over here." I think it enables readers to have more confidence in the quality of our reporting.

Beyond that, readers are contributing news of their own through our Your News section, where people can submit stories to be posted on our Web site. We have two special sections of the Web site called Hometown Hubs that serve specific geographic areas outside Greensboro where readers can contribute content. We have a photo blog to which readers can contribute photos they've shot, and we're looking at other ways to involve readers. We want to make newsgathering less of a one-way conveyance of information and more of a discussion, a dialogue, a conversation.

**Q:** What do your audience surveys show about how people are responding to the blogs?

**Alexander:** As of October 2005, the most recent figure I have handy, we're looking at roughly 450,000 page views for that month just on our blogs. That's out of a total of between 5 million and 6 million page views on all of our sites, which include *News & Record.com* [<http://www.news-record.com>], *GoTriad.com* [<http://www.gotriad.com>], our arts and entertainment site, and a couple of other sites that we maintain that are primarily revenue producing.

**Q:** What do you conclude from the popularity of the new products?

**Alexander:** I think as more people have gotten online and discovered the joys of interacting with other people via computer, there has been more interest, particularly among younger people, in using the Web as a means of getting information and sharing information. I think the fact that we've developed an audience for the blogs is just one example. There obviously is an appetite out there for online discussion, so I think we're meeting a need.

**Q:** How do the blogs and the discussion sites give readers an opportunity to feel part of this media product, and part of their community?

**Alexander:** It's important that we try to find ways of building and reinforcing community wherever we can. America is becoming an increasingly atomized society, and I don't think the long-term results of that are going to be good for our politics, our culture, or our economy. Anything we as a newspaper can do to build a sense of community, expand community, and make people feel

like they're part of something greater than themselves is going to be helpful in the long term.

**Q:** What contribution has this *News & Record* online community discussion made to the community at large?

**Alexander:** A lot of the discussion on our kindergarten through 12th grade education blog, The Chalkboard, focused on the school board's recent decision to abandon a lottery-based school attendance system and go back to neighborhood attendance zones. I can't prove the connection, but the blog became an online gathering point for people who wanted the board to make that change. There was a huge amount of discussion on that issue over an extended period of time.

**Q:** You and some readers held quite a debate on your blog early this year about what's important in news coverage. On the one hand, traditional media have long been criticized for failing to cover stories that are important to a community. But technology allows you to see that stories of the weird, the wacky, or the salacious attract the most readers, rather than those important community stories. How do you come to terms with that?

**Alexander:** We know what our mission is here at the *News & Record*, and that is to try to give people the news and information they need to run their lives and to govern themselves as effectively and efficiently as they would like to. We believe there is both intrinsic value in that and economic value. We think it is a winning business strategy as well as good journalism.

Newspapers have always been interested in getting the occasional story in about weird stuff that people talk about around the water cooler. I don't think we're going to be going out and looking for that kind of thing any more than we normally do. I think the larger question is, are we providing content that people need and want and will use? We wrestle with that in print just as we do online.

I think the solution long term is that we devote our

scarce—and growing increasingly scarcer—resources to carrying out the mission we've chosen for ourselves, simply because, if we don't, nobody else is going to. Some stories can only be tackled with the firepower of a full-time newspaper staff.

But that doesn't mean we're going to be able to cover everything we want and need to cover. What I hope will happen is that networks of people will evolve in the community to fill in the gaps in our coverage and provide

more of the local news that people say they want.

**Q:** Are you suggesting that you envision clutches of citizen journalists who provide coverage of the need for a new sewer system in their neighborhood, for example?

**Alexander:** Among other things, yes. In fact, to a certain extent, we've already done that with our Hometown Hubs. We have people in Summerfield, a town just northwest of Greensboro, contributing news and photos of interest to their neighbors, and it appears online. We also take some of the best submissions and print them in the Sunday edition of the paper.

We envision having Hometown Hubs not only for geographic areas—geographic communities—but also

for communities of interest. For example, youth soccer is a huge deal in Greensboro. Thousands of families are involved. I could envision us starting a youth soccer Hometown Hub or a youth soccer blog, or both. I imagine that it would get a very intense following among the families whose kids participate, and that intense following in turn would be of interest to certain kinds of advertisers.

One thing that has come up in recent discussions about citizen journalism is that very few people actually want to be citizen journalists in the sense of going out and



Photo montage: The *News & Record* invites readers to submit pictures to a photo blog; images include a wedding, a youth soccer game, and a local college football game. (Courtesy *News & Record*)

reporting and writing stories or producing video, but they do want a role of some kind in the news as discussion, as dialogue. We need to figure out a variety of ways that people can contribute to the community's total news product.

**Q:** Are you going to pay citizen journalists if they are providing content for your newspaper?

**Alexander:** The criticism we frequently get is, you're getting citizens to cover events or issues for free so you can cover other things. My response is, no, they're covering things that otherwise wouldn't be covered at all.

If there is a way for this partnership to generate significant revenue—and I think there is, we just haven't found it yet—I hope that we would find a way to share that revenue appropriately and proportionately with the people who help contribute to the content that brings in the revenue.

**Q:** With the success the *News & Record* has experienced over the last year in creating the Town Square, have you regained readership that statistics showed was being lost to other electronic media?

**Alexander:** I don't know that I could make a blanket statement either way. Our last circulation audit showed that we did lose a little circulation, but our loss was only about half of the industry average. So I don't know whether to score that as a win or a loss.

We do know that our online audience and our online advertising revenue both grew dramatically in 2005.

I am confident that the online audience is going to continue to grow rapidly for the next several years. Advertising revenue is going to follow that audience, and we need to be in a position to give the audience content it wants and needs and capture some of that available ad revenue.

But there is a real tension between the kinds of stories that would be useful to people, depending on what segments of the population they're in, and the kinds of stories that would be of interest only to certain segments the advertisers are interested in reaching. You run the risk of a kind of journalistic redlining and I worry about that from a community-building standpoint, I worry about it from a moral standpoint.

At the same time, we're not a charity. We're a for-profit business and we are struggling to find a way to ensure our long-term survival. At this point, it is hard to know how that tug of war is going to work itself out. We're still wrestling with that issue. It is not resolved and I don't foresee it being resolved any time soon. ■

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*The opinions expressed in this interview do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.*