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Middletown blog takes pulse of city

By JENNIFER HAWKINS , Special to The Press

MIDDLETOWN - Hot-topic issues affecting the city now have a forum via a blog called the Middletown Eye. Recently Advertisement founded by local activists/entrepreneurs Jennifer Alexander and Ed McKeon, the blog mixes politics, cultural and lifestyle pieces with links and graphics. Within a few months, the Middletown Eye has become a go-to site for ongoing discussions like potential military base sites currently under consideration.

For many, having a local newspaper is key in community building and sharing, while others have left even traditional TV newscasts in favor of online news and, for niche reporting, blogs.

The luxury of a local paper, where tag sales, weddings, local sports, movies, births, deaths, school notices - the things that have a direct impact on a community, is often taken for granted. When anyone with access to a browser can get the latest Associated Press headlines, are we losing the small-town connection?

The Middletown Eye is a newsblog that seeks to extend the depth of discourse on key issues while providing a format for diverse communities to be heard. With a clear mission to cover more of a city that has an active city government with meetings multiple times a week, the newsblog also has its focus on the city's many community-based initiatives on preservation and green living, as well as the multiple venues offering sport and cultural events. The job, as Alexander and McKeon see it, is simply too large for a print newspaper alone.

"Our city newspaper has to dedicate a certain amount of space to the neighboring towns as well, and it's impossible for the staff to attend and report on every town meeting. We are made up of volunteer reporters, who can go with a tape recorder, camera, or laptop and quickly submit it to the blog," says McKeon. "Without the same constraints, we are able to stay for the entire government meeting, we're able to report more of what takes place."

While most newspapers include some weblogging as part of their online presence, there remain substantive differences between a newspaper's staff bloggers and independent weblogging. In an arena dominated by personal weblogging, the content of the blog is directly related to the writer's interests and concerns and not considered as reflecting the views of any one but the blogger. By naming the blog Middletown Eye, the site's founders and chief contributors have aptly defined their scope and have given themselves room to be at times watchdogs or simply illuminators of some particular aspect of life in Middletown. Conversely, in offering copies of meeting transcriptions and including the full length of reports, the blog is able to bring into focus an unprecedented level of detail in civic issues of concern to the community.

"Jennifer came up with the idea two years ago," says McKeon. "It seemed like something she was trying to get going as a business, and I came into this seeing how few reporters are able to attend local meetings and keep up, so I saw a need. Government unchecked is government unchecked, and in order for citizens to act they need to be informed."

Listening to McKeon and Alexander discuss city goings-on is a dizzying exercise in "catch up." The two will finish each others sentences in their race to include the latest news, the latest go-to person, the most recent developments in nearly every aspect of life in Middletown. Equally knowledgeable in the city's recent history, they are skilled at weaving back stories into a grasp of local issues.

Dedicated citizens, McKeon and Alexander have a long history of working on a variety of committees and local causes, which has helped them to build a solid understanding of the local scene. Their grasp of an array of proposals brought before the city - from housing development to the preservation of open space to the health of the local businesses is reflected in the scope and detail they bring to the blogosphere.

"It seems like this community is made up of a lot of separate grassroots groups acting independently," says McKeon "Twenty percent of the people tend to do most of the work."

"Well, that's the social capital, you put in the time over a project or an issue and then it starts to pay off," says Alexander. "Without a community groundswell to support different issues, like the current interest in Harbor Park, there is often no interest in having a newspaper reporter pursue it," adds Alexander. "Bringing it to the blog, it's a positive step to take. I think the blog is as much about community building as it is about the news."

The blog attempts to keep a balance between reporting and editorializing, says McKeon. "When it's news and reporting a meeting, it ought to be straight-ahead. But the beauty of the blog is that we all have opinions and that needs a format as well."

Blogging depends on individuals who can make the commitment to following through the often labyrinthian paths that city initiatives may seem to take. In some ways, this is the latest community service activity - to voluntarily agree to understand and disseminate the many complex and sometimes laboriously pedantic steps along the way for committees, initiatives, and developments on a wide range of topics.

The standard of investigative reporting embraces the four guideposts of thoroughness, accuracy, fairness and transparency. The ability for newspapers and bloggers to link to the original source material and to archive complete meeting minutes, memos, reports etc. supplies the reader with a greater sense of transparency than ever before. As we bring traditional journalism values to the Internet, the perception between a private platform for pundits and a useful tool in keeping local issues as transparent as possible begins to meld into an interdependent web of mutually referencing entities.

That the various media reference each other has long been practiced by television and radio news programs and even the giants of investigative journalism have quoted independent bloggers like the nationally known DailyKos. The impact of a locally focused blog like The Middletown Eye is more subtly understood and its contributions to the local dialogue are more readily sought out by those already

immersed in a given subject. The Eye, while often in first person and written in op-ed style, delivers substantive coverage on a swath of local concerns, and, by steadily adhering to the need for transparency, has straddled the space between a journalistic undertaking and a platform for expressing personal views.

"We try to be careful about not crossing the line," continues McKeon. "Most people are not that interested in local politics but are interested in bigger issues, the military, wetlands."

Inviting the public to become "citizen reporters" has already attracted a number of bloggers to contribute on a variety of issues, generally topical ones. McKeon and Alexander are looking to expand more into sports, school- and education-related issues, and increased cultural coverage.

"You can't have a full-time job and families and keep the blog really active on the shoelather side of it. We would like more people on the street reporting. We'd like to see a bigger tent - more sports, arts, education. We're inviting people to have different takes and points of view on things. With a wide breadth of opinions from the people reporting," continues McKeon, "you get to hear from people who are passionate about other things."

"I think we are in the right place, though, with it being a citizens'-directed blog," agrees Alexander. "I have new respect for how hard it is to cover local news."

Both would like to see the blog eventually turn into a paying venture wherein citizen reporters would be paid for their published work, but for the time being, this is strictly a volunteer-driven endeavor.

The question the Middletown Eye seems to be asking is - can a local paper and an independent weblog support and complement each other? Can there be a meaningful exchange of information and can discussions begun in print media be continued in an independant blog and vice versa?

That a community can access and support both a local paper and an online weblog was evidenced during these weeks of discussions relating to the military base which may come to Middletown. Every interested party, including the mayor's office, can track the meetings and developments on the Eye with ample archived material as well as the Eye's own summation.

Mayor Giuliano referenced the site multiple times as a quick fact-checker and as a refresher on the various meetings relative to the proposed base. "The link to Middletown Eye, especially during the discussions with the Corps of Engineers, was very useful," Giuliano says. "I referred to it several times and I know the Corps of Engineers did as well. It's great that we have this new way to enlist the community in discussion."

"We can't link to a weblog directly from the city's official Web site because some people, when they see a link, think that's there's an implicit endorsement of a blog. And blogs have the freedom to be more political," Giuliano says, adding, "But I do think the Middletown Eye should be in everyone's favorites folder."

For the citizen consumer, Middletown offers a feast of accessiblity in knowing local newspapers, reporters and editors and, now with the Middletown Eye, knowing local citizen journalists. That these outlets are approachable and accountable directly contributes to the richness of civic life.

Persons interested in contributing their reporting or digital picture taking skills to the Middletown Eye are encouraged to log on and contact the editors. The Middletown Eye can be found at <http://middletowneyenews.blogspot.com/> or by simply "googling" Middletown Eye in most search engines.

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