

# Chapter 39

## Connecting Real and Virtual Neighbors: The Interplay between Physical Space, Civic Journalism, and Online Community

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### ABSTRACT

*Unlike most of the literature surveying the proliferation and increased usage of social media in society at large, this study analyzes the potential of blogs to mobilize local communities. It focuses on blogging in the context of a geographic locality and describes a participatory action research project in inner city Detroit built around the “Going Home” blog hosted by The Detroit News. The results of the project demonstrate that blogging can be used as a catalyst for neighborhood revitalization. United by positive feelings towards the neighborhood, geographically separated social groups of current and former residents connected online, shared sentiments and information, and combined their efforts to bring about positive social change in the physical community.*

### INTRODUCTION

The 2008 Great Recession brought a dour business climate for the newspaper industry in the United States. In Michigan, several former dailies—*The Bay City Times*, *The Saginaw News*, and *The Flint Journal*—reduced print frequency and consolidated production. To survive the economic downturn, *The Detroit News* and *Detroit Free Press*, which

already functioned under a joint operating agreement, have cut home deliveries to three days a week. After 174 years of continuous production, the iconic *Ann Arbor News* has seized its print edition and left an online only version, which provides substantially less local news coverage. Nationally, more than 300 large and small American newspapers folded between 2010 and 2011 (Mendolera, 2012). During the first decade of the new mil-

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lennium, the revenue of newspaper industry has fallen 43%, and some industry representatives projected that in the future most of the remaining dailies might shift to the weekend delivery mode (Pew Research Center, 2012). However, the Pew Research Center's survey, "How people learn about their local community," revealed that both print and online newspapers continue to play a vital role in the people's daily lives (Rosenstiel et al., 2011). Although Americans continue to rely on television for breaking news and weather and traffic updates, they turn to local newspapers, both print and online, to be informed about the current state of affairs in their communities.

In a democratic system of government such as the United States, local governments have a significant impact on everyday lives of individuals and citizens regularly follow the local news. Due to the vital role of city, county, and state governments in the political and social affairs of the nation, people continue to rely on local newspaper reports on local governments to stay informed, connected and, thus, be able to effectively govern themselves (Domingo et al., 2008). Although journalists tend to value the glamorized role of rapid-reporting watchdogs, the public appreciates journalism that provides a community forum and offers solutions to neighborhood problems (Heider, McCombs, & Poindexter, 2005; Moe, 2008). Ultimately, if the role of journalists is to both provide information and facilitate dialogue, a better understanding of the interplay between journalism, physical and online communities, and online social interaction is essential.

Building stronger community ties may be accomplished through online means by connecting residents working together to address real-life problems and sustain the healthy growth of the physical communities. Maintaining ongoing awareness of events and tasks remains fundamental to remote coordination of collaborative work (Kraut, Fussell, Brennan, & Siegel, 2002). Recent developments in Internet-based technologies bring new synergy to the interplay of face-to-face and

mediated communication. They allow for breaking temporal and spatial boundaries. Those who are no longer physically present in a certain neighborhood but still care about their development—even people who have been separated or estranged for a long time—can make connections by taking advantage of the interactive nature of social media. The authors extend this position by examining the role of a neighborhood-focused blog, "Going Home: A Journal on Detroit's Neighborhoods"<sup>1</sup> hosted by *The Detroit News*.

In the first half of the 20th century, Detroit was an industrial metropolis and an economic engine for the American Midwest. In the second half of the century, its fortune had changed as automotive and other manufacturing moved first to the suburbs, then to other states and overseas. As a result, Detroit experienced a demographic drain losing more than half of its population since 1950, its finances went into decline, and in July 2013 it declared Chapter 9 bankruptcy. While policy makers and federal, state, and city government officials continue to argue about scenarios of rebuilding Detroit as a livable city, many residents and whole neighborhoods initiate community-based revitalization efforts spearheaded by such networking groups as Motor City Connect<sup>2</sup> or Motor City Blightbusters.<sup>3</sup>

The city has an active diaspora of former residents who have created new lives for themselves in Detroit's suburbs or elsewhere in the United States. However, they all share a common tie: many still consider Detroit to be *home*. Virtual spaces may rekindle connections among current and former residents of the Motor City, an approach that follows in line with Hampton and Wellman's (2001) argument that "access to free, high-speed, always-on Internet increases social contact with distant network members" (p. 479). Although the Internet in the Greater Detroit area as well as in most of the United States is neither free nor ubiquitously accessible at the micro level, the impact of an information environment enabled by social media creates a legitimate research interest.

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