

how to...

# Be a citizen journalist

Activism guide • September 2018

The internet has empowered what we now call 'citizen journalism' in ways that would have been impossible in the traditional news scene.

Members of the public now have access to the tools of the trade and, if they're smart about it, they can build huge audiences for their work. People from a

range of backgrounds who may not otherwise have seen themselves in a media role can easily carve out a space for their voice, and so citizen journalism offers a real opportunity to diversify the media.

But what exactly is citizen journalism, and how can you do it?



Raoni Garcia / Mídia NINJA

Brazilian photography collective Mídia Ninja capture stories and events the mainstream corporate media ignore.

## Why is citizen journalism useful?

The media at a national and local level has been in decline now for many years. National newspapers have laid off staff in round after round of redundancies, while local newspapers have faced savage cuts to resources over a prolonged period.

This has left a growing gulf in reporting. Many things which used to be considered the bread and butter of general and local reporters - like covering council meetings and decisions, or covering the courts - are now often dealt with by press release because there are not enough journalists to cope with the demand of pressing deadlines.

But in contrast, we've seen a rise in the number of citizens taking matters into their own hands and becoming citizen reporters on issues of local or national interest.

Sometimes it can arise around an immediate issue. For example, if a terrorist attack happens it's often the people in closest proximity who immediately switch on their camera phones and record footage. They're often quick to get on social media and report what happened around them, what they saw, and any information they have. Employed reporters will look to social media first now for information on breaking stories of this type.

On other occasions citizen journalism covers more long term or complex issues. For example, there was an explosion of citizen journalism in Scotland around, and since, the time of the Scottish independence referendum. Independence Live is a great template for budding citizen journalists: using tablets and smartphones, Independence Live gathered volunteers throughout the country who were happy to hit record and live stream any local meetings, demonstrations or events they attended, ranging from the political to the cultural and artistic.

## CASE STUDY

### Nathaneal Williams 28

I first started writing about current affairs as a citizen journalist seven years ago, at the age of 21. Having visited Russia at that time I also became very interested in those who write outside official channels of communication.



Using foreign languages skills I was able to read about events being reported in media abroad that were not being picked up in the UK. I was also motivated by an interest in foreign affairs and how international topics are covered in the mainstream press. I started my own blog on Google where I would do printed

interviews and essay descriptions of what was happening in different places globally.

Alongside this, I became more interested in video journalism and being able to capture topics or people's views visually. So I set up my own YouTube channel where I could upload videos, edit frames, add graphics and link back to what I was writing.

An important tool I used was making sure all my blog pieces were linked to my social media accounts on Twitter and Google Plus to broaden my readership. Later, I began recording podcasts using Soundcloud as a way to talk to guests about foreign policy and politics. I also used iTunes uploads as a way to widen my listening audience.

Seven years after starting out in citizen journalism, I'm now a reporter for Common Space, a Scottish news and politics website.

The Occupy movement is another example of how people used digital tools to spread information about what was happening on the ground.

## How can you do it?

Firstly, decide which method of communication works best for you. People often associate journalism with writing, but the increased use of smartphones now means that members of the public have access to a range of broadcasting options, too. If you're a better speaker than a writer, you could record reports instead of writing them.

**Writing:** It's easy nowadays to set up a website and get your own web domain. You can use Wordpress and all its built-in tools to design a site for free, and domain registration is quite cheap. It's up to you how you set your website up: it might be an individual blog, or perhaps you want to set up a platform that multiple people will use to post stories and information. (Either way, it's relatively easy to get set up.) You can learn more about how to get started with Wordpress at [learn.wordpress.com](http://learn.wordpress.com)

**Broadcast:** All you need is a smartphone or tablet and an internet connection. You can pay for good video editing software, but if you want to just focus

on getting a basic job done there are decent free editing suites which should do the trick. With Google and YouTube, you don't need to worry about not already having these skills - tutorials are a huge help, and while you might not become a professional editor overnight you will gain enough knowledge to do a half-decent editing job. Just google video editing beginners tutorial

The same applies for podcasting. Podcasts are often quite popular for longer-form broadcast content because people can download and listen to them while travelling, while video content tends to do very well in short bursts of just a few minutes at a time. Pay attention to the kind of media you consume: what do you like about it and what can you learn from it? There is a useful video on how you can put a podcast together called "BECOME THE MEDIA - Part 2 SparkleMonkey Makes a Podcast on Youtube".

**Social media:** Some people rise to prominence just by using social media to report information or offer analysis. Using Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other platforms can be a good way to build an audience network.





Guillem Dombrowski / Flickr

## Things to be aware of:

There are a lot of **legal restrictions** that apply to journalists that citizen journalists often mistakenly think don't apply to them. This is not true: once you become a publisher, whether that's on a website or on social media, you are subject to the same legal restrictions as a newspaper or broadcaster.

There are **differences in the law** in different parts of the UK, so if you're trying to find out about how the law might apply to you, make sure you're searching for the correct information.

**Defamation, or libel**, is one of the biggest things that may affect you. If you publish any material that contains allegations that could damage a person's reputation, you have to be absolutely sure that you have evidence to back up your claims in a court of law in case legal action is taken against you. This is an expensive process whether you're in the right or in the wrong.

**Contempt of Court** is another area of the law citizen journalists should be aware of. It is an offence during "live proceedings" to publish information that could compromise someone's right to a fair trial. This means that while a legal case is ongoing – this also means before it actually gets to court – journalists are on very tight restrictions about what they can and can't say. Breaking this law could result in a fine or imprisonment.

**Pick up a media law handbook** if you can. You don't need to become an expert in media law, but you should have something you can consult if you're not sure about where you might stand legally if you publish something. Don't take risks – it could be very costly, not just for your pocket but for your reputation.

## Keep your standards high, don't report rumours

It's important to try and make sure that information you're publishing and intending for public consumption is accurate. This means you should always try and gather evidence before you make claims about anything, and make sure you don't fall into the trap of reporting rumours or making assumptions about things in your work without proof.

Often, the biggest learning curve in citizen journalism is learning how structures work and how you find out more information about them. For example, lots of people don't really understand how their local councils and local democracy works until they need to for a reason. Similarly, citizen journalists often learn on the go.

This is ok, and you should never feel stupid because you don't understand something. The point of journalism is to ask questions, so if there's something you don't understand, don't be afraid to ask.

The NUJ Code of Conduct is a good ethical guide on how to approach your work.

## Drawing attention to your work

Using social media is the most obvious way to raise the profile of what you're doing. Think of social media as a digital newsagents: this is how you distribute your content. You have the constant eyes of passers-by but you're competing with a whole load of other titles for attention. What can you do to make your project enticing enough to get people to click on a link to your website, or watch your video?

Another good way of getting information out to a much bigger audience is to buddy up with other media outlets. Often, if you have gathered strong information or have a particularly informed analysis of an issue, local or national newspapers will be happy to work with you. Sometimes it takes a bit of persistence, and it can be useful to get to know journalists who cover specific beats and try and build some communication with them.

Citizen journalism doesn't tend to be about making profit, which removes old-fashioned media concerns about competition. Rather, the main aim is just to get information out there, and so working with a range of others is a good option.

Building a following will take time and commitment, so don't be disheartened if it doesn't happen very quickly. Stick at it, and keep looking for new ways of heightening interest – use gifs, memes and other popular social media graphics to make your work more prominent, for example. Small things can make a big difference.

## Citizen journalism and campaigning

While citizen journalism and campaigning can be very closely linked, there are still important differences between the two.

Journalism should still revolve around fact-based, well-sourced information. If conclusions are reached or analyses offered which rely on weak evidence but fit a narrative that a writer has pre-determined, it will be obvious to other journalists and readers.

Being a journalist means always questioning information and asking why. That also means being open to the idea that evidence will change your analysis.

That's where a clash with traditional campaigning can occur. A citizen journalist must have a critical eye, and have the integrity to both praise and criticise when merited.

## Join the union

If you've been up and running for a while and you're publishing regularly, you should think about joining the National Union of Journalists (NUJ).

- A strong union means there's a better chance in the long run of all journalists having better working conditions.
- Membership of the NUJ will give you access to resources, like legal help, should you need
- Joining the NUJ means you can get more involved in the wider conversation about journalism itself.
- Having a press card issued by the NUJ will give you credibility as a serious journalist.
- You can get in touch with your local branch for advice and information.

Campaigners are often angry at poor journalism and fact-checking - and rightly so. In that context, citizen journalists should aspire to do a better job rather than simply repeat the same bad practices in the name of a good cause.

So, while citizen journalism can have a useful relationship with campaigning, they're not exactly the same thing, and anyone serious about citizen journalism will be more successful in their endeavours if they understand the difference.