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Citizen Journalism

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Among the 300 journalists covering the murder trial of Robert Pickton in Vancouver are two women who have no journalism qualifications or experience. The two, former sex-trade workers who were hired by the Vancouver-based Web site Orato.com, are an example of a growing movement in the news industry called "citizen journalism".

While the practice of using citizens without journalism training to cover real news stories has been around for some time, the Internet-fuelled trend of consumer-created content has led to an explosion of online citizen news sites and blogs.

Even traditional news outlets are looking at the practice as a way to keep costs down and connect with their audience in a more meaningful way. CBC announced that the new format of its supper-hour newscasts, starting in February 2007, will include "civic journalism" where viewers will be encouraged to upload pictures and video and add comments to stories through the CBC Web site.

Critics warn that the practice of citizen journalism is a slippery slope which will lead to the spread of misinformation, the dumbing-down of the journalism profession and an increased focus on "micro local" news, while supporters view it as a positive example of audience empowerment and the democratization of mass media.

We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information, a seminal report on citizen journalism, offered this description of the practice: "The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires."

The challenge for teachers, in this new age of participatory news, is to teach students to think critically about the news information they are accessing, in order to determine if it is authoritative and accurate.

To learn more about citizen journalism see:

Center for Citizen Media
<http://www.citmedia.org/>

Bowman, S. and Willis, C. *We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information*. 2003, The Media Center at the American Press Institute.
http://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/download/we_media.pdf

The 11 Layers of Citizen Journalism, Poynter Institute
http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=83126

Orato.com
<http://www.orato.com/>

For classroom resources on authenticating online information see: