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An Interview with Paul Sullivan, editor and publisher of Orato

by Cho
Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 10:03:40 AM EST

Although there are many different Citizen Journalism, blogging, or Community news sites on the web, I am always on the lookout for those trying something a little different or a little new.

Paul Sullivan's Orato is one of those experimenting with offering a something with a twist. It's not exactly a blog, not exactly an online newspaper, but something of a combination. At one time, Orato considered offering fact checking and editorial services for a fee, but as Paul explains below, they have postponed and are reconsidering that model.

Post additional questions that you may have for Paul and perhaps he will be able to drop by and answer them.

Citizen Journalism :: :: :: buzz-it!

1) Would you describe Orato for our readers, perhaps concentrating somewhat on how you see it differing from online newspapers on the one hand and blogs on the other?

Sullivan: Orato is a citizen journalism web site, which means there are no credentials required to post a story. That makes it very different from online newspapers, which feature the work of professionals. On the other hand, it's not a blog -- correspondents are asked to submit news stories about events in their communities. We encourage first-person "I-witness" reporting from people who are involved in or affected by the stories they are telling. We're looking for the opposite of objectivity--subjectivity! But we're asking people to tell stories relevant to one of our news categories, which is different than a blog, which is perhaps the ultimate in unfettered self-expression.

2) Even a quick preview shows that you add much more value to the stories you present than does NowPublic, the news aggregator the Associated Press just made a deal with. Can you speak to how you see yourself as more than an aggregator?

Sullivan: Well, we never thought of ourselves as aggregators to begin with. We were always serious about encouraging people to post directly to Orato. Perhaps we were a little naive..."if you build it, they will come." But that's exactly what has happened. I think our attempt to encourage original reporting through various mechanisms (e.g. assigning citizen journalists to cover events such as the Pickton trial) has prompted other citizen journalists to try their hand. At the same time, we'll encourage bloggers to post a relevant piece from their blog on the site. It's just not automatic -- it has an editorial dimension. The random dimension of the site is that anyone, anywhere, can post a story -- if they follow the guidelines and get through the banned words filters (we filter for obscenity and hate language).

3) How big is your staff and how are they compensated?

Sullivan: We have a full-time staff of two -- Senior Editor Heather Wallace and Associate Editor Cecilia Jamasmie and an intern (Avi Silberstein) (and me -- I run my own business and have a contract to provide Orato with editorial guidance.) No one's going to get rich on their stipends, as Orato is just beginning to generate revenue.

4) When did you start Orato and what, if anything or site, was your inspiration to create a Citizen Journalism site?

Sullivan: A lot of the inspiration props go to our founder, Sam Yehia, a local Vancouver entrepreneur, who approached me with the idea seven years ago, long before anyone coined the term "citizen journalist." He had this idea to be the "CNN of First Person Journalism." For a long time, we worked on the idea on a low-intensity basis. For a year prior to launch, we had a site demonstrating the sort of stories we were interested in, and soliciting correspondents. The current site was launched in the summer of 06 -- we finally decided to get the site online and raise capital later -- a brave decision! By 2006, it was clear that citizen journalism was a phenomenon waiting to happen. We went to school on a whole bunch of sites, I think Orato is unique.

5) In reading your site over a number of days, I noticed many stories about sex workers, Playboy models, toddler beauty pageant queens. Who is your readership and what sorts of topics do they seem to prefer?

Sullivan: Good question: Our audience is morphing like crazy -- it has tripled since December. Stories work through the site in cycles or strings. One Playboy model begets another. There are story strings that come from the correspondents and those stories we target -- Little Miss Sunshine was the inspiration for the pre-teen beauty queen. Generally, if you check out "This Week In Orato" And "Write Tomorrow's Top Story And Win," you'll get an idea of our editorial program. We're trying to identify events and phenomena that will prompt people to write their own stories -- men and women both.

6) Providing fact checking and editing services for a fee are part of your stated offerings. Did you have business model when you started? Was financial profitability



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part of your goals?

Sullivan: I thought we took all that stuff off the site -- we're not charging anyone to post and we're not providing editorial services at this time -- although we hope to in the future. Right now, we're trying to Build Our Community, and we want to keep the threshold of entry as low as possible, yet maintain a good environment so people will feel comfortable posting stories. We hope to be able to sell ads when the cost per thousand is competitive and we plan to provide services, including syndication, as we grow. Profitability is a definite goal.

7) [How will you know you are successful?](#)

Sullivan: When we get enough investment to realize our ambitions and are able to make the site at least self-sustaining, so we can take it to the next level...if that sounds incremental, it probably is.

8) [What do you think makes Orato unique?](#)

Sullivan: Orato is unique in that it's a collaboration between professional and amateur journalists --we want to provide a way for those without a voice to participate in the public discussion and we want to bring completely new, unmediated voices to that discussion. We want to support citizen journalism in new ways -- such as hiring sex trade writers to cover a trial of a man accused of preying on sex trade workers. When you think about it, it makes a lot of sense, but no one has ever done it before. We want to bring citizen journalism into the mainstream.

9) [What is a typical day for you at Orato?](#)

Sullivan: There is no typical day. I have my own Sullivan Media office, and down the street, I have a desk at Orato. So far today, I've answered 47 Orato emails, and it's not noon. We meet several times a week: on the next site upgrade, on editorial matters, with our trial correspondents, with investors, and Sam and I get together a couple of times a week. These days, I spend a lot of time talking to reporters, which is interesting. They run the spectrum from skeptical ("Citizen dentistry? Ha-Ha!") to fired up about the potential for citizen news. I just helped Trisha Baptie (one of the sex trade workers covering the Pickton trial) carry a computer I managed to find for her out to a friend's van, after her old one packed it in. It's a multi-tasking life, but it's fun.

10) [What is the source of your greatest frustration?](#)

Sullivan: Not having enough time and money. Isn't that everyone's? I also get the feeling that many people dismiss this as an Internet play...we're here to help empower people who have not had a voice to gain a voice, and I'm not sure we're getting that message out. I don't like preaching, but perhaps I should be proselytizing on behalf of citizen journalism more assertively.

11) [What are your plans for future of Orato?](#)

Sullivan: We are planning to update the site and add video and audio-based correspondents' reports early this summer. We want our correspondents to be able to use all the tools the web offers. With further investment, we want to offer services to our correspondents that, if they choose, will allow them to earn money from their work -- e.g. syndication.

12) [Anything else you would like to tell us about your Citizen Journalism site?](#)

Sullivan: I spent 30 years as a gatekeeper...now it's nice to be a facilitator, and to me, that's what's so meaningful about Orato -- helping other people participate in public discourse and add a new perspective to the array of information available today. Stories, voices, locations, ideas that aren't featured in the mainstream media. But let me add that we are backstopped by the mainstream, professional journalist. We are able to exist because there is a vibrant free press in North America. We should never forget that -- we're complementary.

Thank you, Paul Sullivan, for taking the time to answer our questions.

Display:

[An Interview with Paul Sullivan, editor and publisher of Orato](#) | 21 comments (21 topical, 0 hidden)

One more question that I should have asked before. (5.00 / 4) (#1)

What are the technical underpinnings of your site? Is it a scoop, geeklog, drupal, word press engine that keeps it running or did you build your own?

by [Cho](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 10:38:12 AM EST

Technical (5.00 / 5) (#5)

Hi Cho. Orato is built using Drupal. We're about to upgrade to Drupal 5.0. Of course, there has been extensive customization.

by [Paul Sullivan](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 11:15:27 AM EST
[[Parent](#)]

Very nice site! (5.00 / 4) (#7)

I took a little tour. :) now I have a couple more questions ...

Do stories get "rated" by readers to their position on the FP?

You have a "word filter" but do you ever have to filter just for basic content?

by [roxy317](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 11:25:29 AM EST
[[Parent](#)]

Great interview, Cho! n/t (5.00 / 3) (#13)

On [PTSD Combat](#) | [Email list](#) | [Book](#)
by [ilona](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 01:29:26 PM EST
[[Parent](#)]

Great interview (5.00 / 4) (#2)

cho. Thanks.

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I have a question for Paul ... where are you based out of?

by [roxy317](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 10:48:47 AM EST

Orato's Home Base (5.00 / 4) (#6)

We're in Vancouver, BC.

by [Paul Sullivan](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 11:19:07 AM EST
[[Parent](#)]

Thanks (5.00 / 3) (#9)

:)

by [roxy317](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 11:26:33 AM EST
[[Parent](#)]

Every day is a new day in blogland..... (5.00 / 5) (#3)

Great article.....it's sure nice to see what others are doing!!!!!!

by [avahome](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 10:58:23 AM EST

Paul, with regard to fact-checking and the (5.00 / 4) (#4)

"This week in Orato" section, to what extent -- if any -- are the editors pre-planning any articles? Are there some stories developed in-house, or is the content wholly dependent upon the contributions of others?

by [GreyHawk](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 11:04:59 AM EST

Developing Stories (5.00 / 4) (#8)

Good question. We try to prime the pump with "This Week in Orato" and "Write Tomorrow's Headlines and Win". At the same time, if we see a story we're interested in, we'll ask registered correspondents if they're interested in working on it. At times, we'll seek out correspondents we think will match the story, such as sex trade workers to cover the serial killer trial here in Vancouver. Most of the 400 or so stories on the site are posted by correspondents without our prior knowledge. If we think, or readers think, that it's a particularly good story, we'll work with the author to clean it up and improve if we think it will benefit from further editing.

by [Paul Sullivan](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 11:26:26 AM EST
[[Parent](#)]

Ah, thank you. That's important. (5.00 / 3) (#10)

It helps you ensure that some key content or potentially important stories aren't missed -- like providing a gentle guiding channel, but nothing locking folks down.

I haven't checked through things there yet, but I'll be over there shortly. Thanks for the interview with Cho, and for taking time to answer our questions. :)

(I hope there are a lot more coming.)

by [GreyHawk](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 11:37:49 AM EST
[[Parent](#)]

Think global (5.00 / 5) (#11)

publish local? Do you log the difference in views between the editor's and public's picks?

by [rba](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 11:44:20 AM EST

This sounds terribly exciting! (5.00 / 3) (#12)

On the other hand, it's not a blog -- correspondents are asked to submit news stories about events in their communities. We encourage **first-person "I-witness" reporting from people who are involved in or affected by the stories they are telling. We're looking for the opposite of objectivity--subjectivity!** But we're asking people to tell stories relevant to one of our news categories, which is different than a blog, which is perhaps the ultimate in unfettered self-expression.

I've already signed up, and have a question about one of your categories.

Could you explain what 'Podium' posts are all about?

On [PTSD Combat](#) | [Email list](#) | [Book](#)
by [ilona](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 01:27:07 PM EST

Thanks Paul and Cho! (5.00 / 4) (#14)

Paul, I notice there are stories written by Canadians and Americans. Are your readers the same sort of cross section too?

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by [standingup](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 02:56:15 PM EST

Site traffic? (5.00 / 4) (#15)

I can only find what [Alexa](#) has to say about your visits/visitors...

Orato.com users come from these countries:
United States - 44.0%
Canada - 20.0%
India - 16.0%
United Kingdom - 8.0%
Australia - 4.0%

Can you give us an idea if Alexa's numbers reflect your own statistics?

.....
by [wanderindiana](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 04:08:37 PM EST

PR (5.00 / 1) (#16)

Hi Paul, do you do any promotion of your stories to other media outlets or to other interested parties? With your unique targeted approach, I would think that a targeted PR push would flow naturally. How do you accomplish increasing your readership of specific articles?

by [DEFuning](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 05:39:43 PM EST

oooo... good question, DEFuning... (5.00 / 2) (#17)

Very interesting!

by [Cho](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 05:48:49 PM EST

[[Parent](#)]

Cho (5.00 / 2) (#19)

Did yu really mean to rate my post?

It does, after all, question many of the underlying reactions to Orato shown by most contributors on this thread?

by [Welshman](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 06:43:58 PM EST

[[Parent](#)]

Hmm. Noble sounding in purpose... (5.00 / 4) (#18)

...but I read the list of top ten story ideas suggested to and sought from writers with some direct experience: "Ridiculous or outrageous world records, Haunted houses, Lebensborn children of Nazi impregnated mothers, My fat child, Playboy cost me my job, I was abducted as a child (and, in fairness, one seeking experience of disappearing rain forests and another about blogging in Egypt)"

Each to his own and I wish the site and its writers every success in making a profit and having commercial success through future franchising opportunities.

I suppose, however, that I am a bit jealous of the name "citizen journalism" and, for this reason, may interpret it rather differently than some.

If I take the first word "citizen" it means someone owing allegiance to a state in which sovereign power is retained by the people and sharing in the political rights of those people Thus "citizen journalism" recognises the desire of such people to participate in their democracies and the full and broad spectrum of political issues that affect them within it. It does this by empowering them to take an active role in the journalistic process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news, information and opinion.

This process of journalism carries a connotation or expectation of "professionalism" (even though undertaken by unpaid , amateur citizens) in reporting, with consideration for truth, objectivity, fairness, balance, decency and ethics.

My problem with Orato is that seeks and encourages from its writers contributions substantially based upon personal experience. It looks for writers who have been "victims" of events (not necessarily unwilling or damaged) rather than those who are objective reporters and observers of these and how they affect society.

Having two sex workers record the events of the trial of someone who exploited colleagues in that trade is an interesting concept and could produce a fascinating article. Is it reporting as defined by most commentators? Is it citizen journalism as defined by most commentators? I don't think it is. It is an interesting experiment in writing, no more but - as writing is a noble occupation - no less.

To me Orato is a valuable site that acts as an enabler for untrained writers to develop their skills within an active and live workshop from which in time earnings might be achieved.

I feel that "Citizen journalism" is being used too broadly if it is to incorporate all types of "amateur" writing on the Internet.

by [Welshman](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 06:30:11 PM EST

Appreciate that critique. (5.00 / 4) (#20)

I'm skeptical of the value of a site like Orato, but who knows how it will work in the long run. My own view is that in its present form, it lacks the degree of civic responsibility that I equate with "citizen" anything - media, journalism, etc. It is not completely absent at Orato, but certainly it is not brimming over, hence my agreement with your hesitancy to regard it as "citizen journalism."

Perhaps in time it will gain focus, serving a particular community, geographical or virtual. Sites like Orato that reach across all subjects and all borders seem to me to try too hard; however, they have found an audience in those looking for an outlet for their voices, whatever they may be, and I don't fault Orato for offering that service - it just isn't my cup of tea.

.....
by [wanderindiana](#) on Tue Mar 13, 2007 at 10:31:20 PM EST

[[Parent](#)]

Solid point. (5.00 / 2) (#21)

I went to the site and was excited at the 'newness' of the thrust, of their desire to get 'alternative' voices a platform. Blogging or cj, we have to admit, is still mostly a white, middle/upper middle class, generally more male endeavor; voices like the one Orato is meant to empower are very far from this mean; so, it could go far in splashing a bit more color and variety into the news stream.

Perhaps everything going on over there doesn't fit the definition for the type of citizen journalism that most of us here at ePMedia seem to be drawn to, as you suggest. I'd agree with that assessment. We're still at the dawn of this new type of reporting, so there's still a lot not set in stone. What label would you come up with to uniquely define what they're doing, Welshman?

Eyewitness journaling keeps rolling around in my mind. Any others?

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