

## How the web is changing news and how you need to change with it

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*'What is Birmingham City Council's policy on receiving petitions?'*

It's a mundane question isn't it? It appeared in May 2009 on a new website that I've had a hand in launching.

Help Me Investigate is a tool which allows people to ask civic questions and collaborate to get answers. Think micro-volunteering for news.

The questions can be enormous or, more often, mundane. The active citizen who used it to ask this one explained that she had submitted a petition and twice it had been 'mislaidd'.

You'd think the answer would be easy to find, but it isn't. No journalist is going to want to spend time answering it either. A community of other active citizens might; people working together, sharing expertise, finding answers.

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Help Me Investigate is far from the only way the web changes what we think news is and how we make it.

Also in Birmingham, a group of online volunteers took a consultation document and translated it from 'regen-speak' into plain English, making something murky suddenly very clear. They turned that into an open, participatory website, helping the public to join a civic conversation.

MySociety has created remarkable tools for democratic transparency and accountability. TheyWorkForYou.com tracks what your MP does. WhatDoTheyKnow.com allows you to easily and publicly submit a Freedom of Information request.

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Yes the Daily Telegraph got the MPs' expenses scoop, but it wasn't their journalists who worked for five years to force parliament to hand over the receipts. That risk was taken by Heather Brooke and a group of informed campaigners.

The media aren't struggling simply because of falling audiences. Journalism itself is losing its unique selling point (USP).

That's happening partly because people now have the power to do what was once the privilege of news organisations. Anyone can choose to publish; anyone can choose to question and enquire. It's partly opportunity, partly threat. Be complacent and you too will come under scrutiny from a myriad of different directions.

What does this mean for voluntary organisations?

**Tell your own story (or better still tell other people's stories).**

Many already excel at this. Do it more. Help your supporters and staff do it for themselves.

**Build your own audience.**

Your media strategy may rely on organisations on the verge of going bust. You need direct relationships with people, often online.

**Don't behave like old media.**

Don't broadcast at people, talk to them. Don't dictate, collaborate. Most of all don't exploit. Your volunteers are not wallets or user generated content suppliers, their enthusiasm for your cause is your biggest single asset.

The main lesson of new news is...

**Be useful.**

When you communicate help people achieve the things that matter to them.