

10 Lessons from 10 Years of User Participation in Journalism



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This is a live blog from a talk by **Lila King**, founder of CNN's iReport and head of News & Publishing partnerships at Instagram, for the [#10YearsUP Summit](#) organized by the Poynter Institute. Here's the description of her talk from the program:

"Community" was a buzzword 10 years ago when CNN iReport launched, and because of that, it was designed with community in mind. Since then the focus in social has mostly shifted toward broadcast and distribution, and "community" is too often a matter of follower count. But community in the context of participation is so much more nuanced than plain numbers — it's less about scale and more about creating the environment and conditions for people to express themselves. Lila King traces the history of the relationship between community and participation by looking at examples and lessons learned in the last 10 years.

Lesson 1: Ask the right question

When they originally launched CNN iReport they asked "What's happening where you are?" but nothing came back. It wasn't until they started asking specific questions that they got interesting responses. Her favorite question they asked was "[What was your favorite walk?](#)" They thought — "Wouldn't be awesome if we could see what the first day of spring would look like around the world?" They got responses from all 7 continents. It was one of those moments where we realized the world is big and the world is small. But the prompt itself took a lot of work.

Lesson 2: Try it on yourself first

So how do get to asking the right question? One way is by trying out your question on yourself and your colleagues in the newsroom. They did this with the walking video by sending out their reporters with video cameras to answer the question and it took several iterations. Not all of their attempts were a success. For example, at one point iReport asked people to reveal their credit card debt through a participatory video. Think about how many people did that — Zero!

Lesson 3: Go with it

When you have a good prompt, you know exactly what you want. As journalists, we know the story we want to tell. But it doesn't always go the way you think. Sometimes you get overruled by the people. The lesson here is to go with it and let the community lead. The most moving example of this is the one that happened for iReport after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. At first, images of devastation came into CNN iReport. It was horrible but what you might have expected. And then, a couple hours later, something else happened. People in the US were posting stories that had photo of a woman's face and saying "This is my mother. She is missing. Here's her address". iReport needed to act to help these people find their loved ones, but we didn't know how. What we ended up doing is turning those stories into a database of people that were missing and then found. They shared that out with the Red Cross and aid agencies. Our users helped us do that work.

Lesson 4: Create a clear framework for people to participate

The lesson from the above example is in creating a clear framework for people to participate and evolving that framework as the situation and the prompt for participation evolve and change.

Lesson 5: Include Lots of Ways In

In the example of the Haiti earthquake, we evolved many, many ways for people to contribute. You could help organize the Google docs. You could troubleshoot the conference bridge. You could do data entry. This was not the kind of work that was happening in newsrooms in 2006. This was all new in terms of ways of engaging your community. We were working on a collaborative project in a crisis situation with our audience.



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everydayafrica

Flipping out on Lumley Beach in Freetown. Photo by Ricci Shryock @ricci_s #africa #everydayafrica #everydayeverywhere #sierraleone #streetphotography #beaches #gymnastics #freetown #ricci_s

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Lesson 6: Channel Shared Passions

King shows an example of [#EverydayAfrica on Instagram](#). It's a group of photojournalists and photographers who share photos of everyday life in Africa rather than the tragedy, famine or war that regularly makes headlines in the Global North. There's also [#EverydayIran](#), [#EverydayClimateChange](#), and more. The lesson here is that these people care about the story enough to keep it going. Channeling shared passions makes those stories and hashtags and curation stick.

Lesson 7: Create a Safe Space

It's important to create a space for people to moderate and curate their own comments in ways that are appropriate to their communities. For example [#EverydayClimateChange](#) is somewhat controversial and has generated a lot of conversation. In the Netherlands, for example, there's an "Instagram Takeover" going on in which the Instagram account is taking over the [Noorderlicht Photogallery](#). As photos are added to the account, they are exhibited in the gallery space. It's growing the exhibit everyday as people post to it.

Beck - Wow (Lyric Video)



Lesson 8: Pay off participation (Say "Thank you")

Saying "thank you" to participants is a critical part of the ecosystem which journalists have had to learn. How do you properly thank people when they do participate? For example, Beck recently launched a new single, ["Wow"](#) and worked with artists to illustrate little parts of the single. He embedded all the posts and created a collaborative music video from many people. King loves this example because she says it's waiting out there for a reporter to take on the idea of bringing multiple perspectives together and string them together and put them into one big story.

Lesson 9: Use constraints to innovate

Many platforms have significant design constraints. Instagram is one. Facebook Live is another one. Making effective use of their design constraints requires experimentation. She shows an example of “Fragments of a Life” in which a NYT reporter found an old set of slides on the sidewalk and streamed it immediately on Facebook Live. Leveraging her community of followers helped to solve who was the owner of the slides that had been thrown in the trash and created a poetic story.

Lesson 10: Find the higher purpose

The thing these projects all have in common is that for people to be motivated they need to have a sense that they are part of something larger than themselves. The onus is on the journalist to find the higher purpose and help articulate that to a wide range of people. Why does it matter to participate?

Q & A from the audience

What about accounts like #EverydayHotGirls? This brings up questions about losing control as journalists. What do we do when that happens?

Part of the responsibility is in outlining the guidelines for the community that you are trying to create and making it transparent. Set the ground rules up front. It helped us all gain comfort at iReport when we could write down ground rules of communication.

If we move comments on social are we inadvertently NOT creating a safe space for participants?

That's a good question. Part of it is in choosing where you move the conversation. So much of community development is in creating relationships amongst people and creating a space and ground rules where they can have a conversation. I think it's less about where it happens and more about the care you take in nurturing it.

Can you offer examples of engaging marginalized communities? For example, non-English speakers in the US?

I'm not the best person to comment on that but I do think that there are people out there doing it. The #everyday accounts on Instagram definitely include some people whose first language is not English.

What about risks to a community or individuals for speaking out about something publicly? Assigning the public to chase stories or to give their opinion — did you ever give tips like that?

That was always part of the conversation. A lot of what we asked were things that people had already experienced or photographed. In cases where people had chased a news story and put themselves in danger and then submitted it to us we chose not to publish it. For example, a couple drove their two young children into the eye of a hurricane to capture footage of it and then submitted that to us. We did not publish it.

How does one teach this or how might journalism education need to expand to accommodate these practices?

This is very hands-on — you have to learn this by trying and doing and failing at it. So it would have to be through experimentation and doing.

Often community participation efforts are controversial internally because orgs are getting content for free and they might not want to devote the resources to nurturing a community. If you were advising an executive editor how would you advise her?

Two things. One thing is that there is no such thing as “content for free”. Creating and curating community participation is probably more labor-intensive than what we were doing 10–15 years ago. Community doesn’t necessarily mean audience and we often interchange those things. Community development creates a much more loyal and invested audience than you get from random eyeballs and social clicks. That would be the value that I would articulate.

One thing that doesn’t get mentioned because some of us are embarrassed is the “seeding” phase. We tell a story and put out a call and then the people love it and want to respond immediately. A lot of us do hard legwork to get those initial comments and responses. In the walking example, did you need to connect to influencers or particular people to get the word out? Why are we quiet about the work we do to get the ball rolling with user participation?

We were lucky in the walking example — there wasn’t really seeding in that case. Getting the ask right up front is really important.

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