

Tooth and Dagger



Life

Jobs 2.0

Ever played Hungry Hungry Hippos? An afternoon at NowPublic.com

By: [Jackie Wong](#)

As big trusted news sources become things of the past, Vancouver's NowPublic.com is breaking ground for a new institution of citizen journalism.

Recently named one of the year's best 50 websites by Time magazine, NowPublic serves up the people's news out of a Gastown loft space overlooking the railway tracks and the ocean. There, half a dozen staff members park laptops at a long, picnic-style table for the day's work.

Although the company employs 18 (two-thirds of whom work in New York and Europe), a teeming mass of contributors dwarfs the staff: the two-year-old participatory news network counts nearly 97,000 contributing reporters around the world. These members upload news, videos, and photos from over 140 countries.

"The only information we get [from members] is their email address and postal code," says contributor relations specialist Jordan Yerman. "So, half of our best contributors, we don't even know their real names."

"They're as involved in this process as we are," says Ryan Nadel, content and contributor manager. "Even maybe more so—on a totally volunteer basis."

Getting news from anonymous bloggers can seem disconcerting, but Nadel, who spent the last year in Israel working for the Jerusalem Post, contends that citizen journalism improves upon the voice of mainstream media by providing on-the-ground coverage of news events.

"People often ask me, 'aren't you dismantling traditional journalism, aren't you just killing it?'" Nadel says. "The reality, I think, is totally the opposite. We're pushing traditional journalism and mainstream media to the next level."

He cites a recent East Vancouver restaurant shooting as an example. "We had a contributor there who lives across the street and has photos, and there's a natural need to share that experience with people. We've created a platform to make that very easy, and very interactive."

New information is posted to NowPublic every minute, and contributors and readers flag top stories. “I think we’re a generation who is very hungry for information,” says Kaitlin Fontana, contributor relations manager. “It used to be enough to sit and watch the six o’clock news and go, ‘that’s my information for today,’ and now, that isn’t enough for us,” Fontana says. “We are going to a million places to find out what happened about one event. That is something that NowPublic is doing.”

When asked to describe a typical workday at NowPublic, the group pauses. “Have you ever played ‘Hungry Hungry Hippos?’” laughs Yerman.

The Vancouver staff work through the daily tide of NowPublic posting, managing content, contributors, and producing their own material. “The site is very organic in nature so we are much more passive than a traditional print editor,” says Nadel.

“There are cases where I will ‘assign’ or recommend topics to individuals who have expertise or interests in a specific area,” Nadel says. “For example, [one user] used to be the official spokesperson for NASA, so I’ll drop her an email when there’s a story about the space shuttle.”

“I refer to these types of users as people who are living the news cycle. They are not simply journalists learning about a topic and then writing an article. [These contributors] actually experienced it.”

Beyond the big three—hate speech, pornography, and advertising—anything is fair game at NowPublic, and contributors determine what news rises to the top.

“The cool thing about this is the idea that anyone [...] has the same ability to [decide] if something is worthy of being thought of as news. We are the river onto which you can drop that boat—your own news, your own version of the news,” Fontana says.

NowPublic’s success is an indicator of the vast number of online citizens looking to share stories and participate in creating the media they consume. “NowPublic is for everyone who has ever shouted at their television news program,” says Yerman.