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Journalism in the Hands of the Neighborhood

By NOAM COHEN

PHILADELPHIA — “We are uncomfortable with the term ‘citizen journalism,’” said Todd Wolfson, 35, a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania and one of the organizers of the Media Mobilizing Project in Philadelphia. “We prefer the term ‘community journalism.’”

Citizen journalism has become the faddish name for the effort to encourage regular folk to use the Internet to report the news directly, but Mr. Wolfson had a point: many of the people whom his organization and an immigrant rights group, Juntos, are teaching to make video reports for streaming on the Internet are not citizens.

Many are not even legal residents.

The hope, however, is that they can be journalists.

The classes are supported by a \$150,000 news challenge grant from the Knight Foundation in Miami, which is donating a total of \$25 million over five years “for innovative ideas using digital experiments to transform community news.”

Gary Keibel, the administrator of the Knight Foundation news challenge grants, said the promise of wider access to the Internet means there “should be good content for communities, by the communities.”

“We live in, work in, pay taxes in, and democracy is organized around where we live; we don’t vote for virtual presidents or pay virtual taxes,” he said. “Democracy, the way we practice it, is geographically based.”

At a recent class at the Songhai City Cultural Center in the Philadelphia neighborhood of Brewerytown, all the challenges and opportunities of a still-unfolding experiment were evident.

The Brewerytown neighborhood is experiencing an intense struggle with gentrification and street violence — something I could have learned by searching Brewerytown at a news site like Philly.com (recent headlines: “Brewerytown Man Charged With Two Stabbings,” “Firearms, Explosive Devices Found in Brewerytown Home”).

But, in fact, I learned it by hearing the collective news judgment of Mr. Wolfson’s group. After a free-flowing discussion about the kind of news they see and read in mainstream outlets, the group of about 15 was encouraged by the class’s three teachers to suggest their own story ideas, a few of which they will turn into five-minute video segments by the end of the eight-week



MIKE Mergen for THE NEW YORK TIMES

From left, Susie George, Kenol Alcide and Lebe Welle using video techniques in a class with the Media Mobilizing Project.

class. A pattern quickly emerged: proposed topics included gun control, violence in schools, as well as crime against cab drivers.

Then gentrification came over to introduce itself, in the form of a resident from the new development across the street who saw a video camera on the street. He was eager to complain to a reporter about the noise he said he heard from the community center on weekend nights and revisit the fight in 2006 over whether the city should condemn Songhai, a converted garage, to allow for additional development.

The camera was rolling, but it became clear a class, and not an interview, was in progress — students were learning how to frame a shot and use light — so the man-in-street interviewee walked back across the street into his new townhouse.

As it happens, members of the class had earlier acted out interviews on the subject of gentrification, where they played each side of the debate — the happy new homeowners and the frustrated longtime residents who see gentrification as an attempt to displace them and as a movement that will do little to improve their lives.

Finally, there was the issue of immigration. The first classes, held in Spanish and made up of roughly 30 people, had Monday sessions as well, a common day off in the restaurant business. Their videos, which are still being edited, are more like public-service announcements dealing with health issues and the educational system, said Laura Deutch, 28, a film student at Temple University who has taught in both classes.

Gabriel Berrios, 35, project coordinator from Juntos, said that the students were highly motivated since he “couldn’t promise them it would be safe” to appear on camera. “Almost 100 percent are undocumented,” he said, “but they wanted to be

here anyhow.”

The free classes, which also include Internet training as well as the opportunity to buy a steeply discounted computer, were initially meant for immigrants. But that didn’t sit well with Joyce Haynes, 51, who works in housekeeping at the Gallery, a shopping center on Market Street East. She heard about the classes through the Service Employees International Union, and asked, “It’s a free program. Why is it just for immigrants?”

So while the class is still dominated by immigrants, Ms. Haynes and a few other nonimmigrants have joined as well, and for her report, she and a few others plan to look at the competition for jobs between union labor and

immigrant workers. Few of the immigrants were interested in exploring that topic (maybe it wasn’t exactly news to them that if they lack papers they are at the mercy of employers) and instead they chose to focus on gun violence.

Tekle Gebremedhin, a taxi driver from Eritrea, had suggested the topic and explained his reasoning. “It is easier to reach for a gun than to reach for a pen,” he said, adding that he had been a fighter in his native land. “A gun belongs in the army.”

Mr. Gebremedhin, an organizer of Philadelphia’s cab drivers, said that each year two or three cabbies he knew were killed.

Mr. Wolfson said his organization’s goal was to link community journalism to another issue summed up by the buzz words, the digital divide. “Citizen journalism is a wonderful idea, but it is only speaking to one segment of the population because of the digital divide,” he said.

(Philadelphia is in the midst of an ambitious effort to provide citywide wireless access to the Internet, which lately has been stumbling, with the recent news that EarthLink, which was setting up the network, wants to leave the municipal Wi-Fi business.)

“Poor communities are not involved in issues of digital divide,” Mr. Wolfson said, because they are only passive receivers of what appears on the Internet. “If I’m somebody who is learning how to make videos, I’ve got a computer, and I am low-income person and I can’t get on the Internet, that is going to stir me up.”

His group plans to create a Web site linking diverse groups together. “We want everyone to have e-mail, yes, but we want someone to tell their story to someone else,” he said.