

## Ten steps to citizen journalism online

*By Stephen Franklin, Knight Fellow at the American University in Cairo's Center for Electronic Journalism.*

### 1. Why the Internet? What do you want to say? What kind of guide is this?

We all have news and stories to tell. But the Internet lets us tell our stories to the world. If you want to tell something important to others, this guide will help you. It's a basic outline that will help you build the machinery that runs your blog: your words and images. Other guides are technological. This tells you how to gather information and how to tell it – and tell it accurately. It will offer some general advice on how not to break any laws. Even when you are telling the truth, you sometimes have to know how to protect yourself. You will find advice on that here, too.

“I am a blogger and not everyone wants to be a citizen journalist.”

But some of us do. We want to share information. Many of us think that it does not matter if you are one person or one thousand people. It's your information that is important.

Online writing is different. To begin, bloggers learn to share their information. This may mean learning from the people who reply to your work on the Internet or from others who write online.

In many places, people like you are pioneers of a new journalism. This is a challenge. And if you hope to succeed and want others to listen and believe you, then you must win their support.

How do you do this?



### 2. Getting Started

It is easy. There are many Internet places that are free and the software that is available is also free. Here are some websites that will get you started, will answer your questions and hopefully will inspire you. Some Internet gateways are safer than others. That is, they protect your privacy.

This is important if you want to speak out in a situation where you may face problems. In some situations, everything you do or write can be tracked. That is why protecting your privacy and your work is important.

Some internet hosts also make it easier for us to write in languages other than English. Find out from other bloggers what they use. Or consult some of these websites:

Blog hosts:

<http://blogs.albawaba.com>

<http://www.wordpress.com> (also available in Arabic)

<http://www.blogspot.com> (also available in Arabic)

<http://www.livejournal.com>

Blogging Advice:

[www.kcnn.org](http://www.kcnn.org) (Knight Citizen News Network)

[http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id\\_rubrique=542](http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=542) (Reporters without Borders)

### **3. What to say and how to say it honestly and effectively.**

Think of yourself as a voice in your community. Make what is important to you important to others. Make the news you want to tell clear and explain why it is important. Provide as many details as you can and if possible include photos and video to show the truth of your report. If you can copy documents, then upload them to show what you are saying is accurate. If you can upload digital voice recordings, do so. The more we see and hear, the more we believe.

You can have your own point of view or opinion. But if you want people to pay attention to you, you must give them a chance to make a decision. You can present the information you think is important, and then explain your view. When people feel you are honest and credible, they will return to your place on the Internet. You can also separate your work into clear categories. This means you mark some of what you write as what you have learned and reported, and some as your opinion.

Learn how to use your camera effectively to catch the scene that most represents your story. The same is true if you can record on a digital tape recorder or camera telephone the voices that will add to your story.

If you use words to paint the scene or describe the persons you are talking about, you will make it more interesting and bring people closer to the scene you have witnessed.

When it comes to writing, rely on powerful words to catch people's attention, but do not overstate the facts. If you are telling a story, use drama and

suspense. Tell your readers in the beginning exactly what you want them to know. They can go elsewhere in seconds if they are not interested. Use lists and sub-titles to keep them interested. Use hyperlinks to show where to find more information.

There are several writing styles you can employ: You can use a question-and-answer format, in which you supply both the question and answer. You can report just the way you would read something on the front page of a newspaper. You can tell your story in a first-person format, as if you are writing a diary. You can begin the same way an author writes a book; your first few sentences are strong and powerful. You begin with a scene or a personal story and then you move to what the bigger story is all about.

For example, look at some of the ways that the young woman who had been blogging from Iraq in “Baghdad Burning” told her story. (<http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>)

Be creative. Can you write a poem or draw a cartoon? These, like photographs, may be a reliable way to tell a story – and sometimes they may be the best or safest way to provide an alternative point of view. If you want to be more visual, you might want to have a flickr account or a similar service.

Construct your story like a building, with a variety of elements: stories, questions and answers, photos, video, audio. The more forms of media you use to tell a story and to convey your information and opinions, the more powerful it will be.

#### **4. How to have people listen to you.**

There are technical ways to draw followers to your websites. See the technical sources listed above. But you can also create an Internet location that invites followers. Here are some rules that you might consider.

- File your posts often. Show you are involved in your blog. This generates interest.
- Ask your fellow online journalists to link to your blog on theirs.
- Use the tags that will link your blog or online journal to others.
- Sign on with an aggregator (like [www.technorati.com](http://www.technorati.com) or [itoot.net](http://itoot.net)) that will list your blog.
- Show that you are looking at different issues, and not always the same story.
- Provide as much information to support what you are saying as you can to convince readers that you are a source to rely upon.

When others think you offer a complete picture, they will rely on you as a source. Be honest and fair. Give others' points of view. Show that there is disagreement in what you are writing about and then draw a conclusion based on what you think is true. This assures some that you want them to make up their minds, and that you are looking at all of the issues. Do not guess or say more than you know. Admit that you have only so much information. Ask for others' help when there is information that you cannot acquire.

If you are interviewing, search for background information so you are prepared. Do not take up time in the interview making statements and pronouncements. Offer questions that will provide details and analysis. Use your questions as building blocks and remain open minded to changing the building you are making.

Don't discredit yourself or your colleagues by posting inaccurate information. Don't say something that can have a strong influence over others unless you are confident the information is correct. Wait and think over what you have written before you send it.

Questions: is your work complete, fair, understandable, and interesting? What do you have to do next to take this story to another level?

## **5. Before you begin, consider your safety. How to protect yourself and others.**

Unfortunately, in some places, we must consider your safety. Not everyone faces such a danger, but some of us do. And that is true even when we are doing our best to write honestly and fairly.

If you have reason to think your work online is being monitored by authorities, there are ways to use the Internet anonymously. That is not easy, but it is possible with some effort.

Here are some sources on how to do that:

<http://www.eff.org/Privacy/Anonymity/blog-anonymously.php>

<http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/?p=125>

<http://anoniblog.pbwiki.com/ArabicAnonymousBloggingGuide>

If you do not want to blog anonymously, then you have to consider the consequences. Some online journalists want to identify themselves and believe that it makes their efforts more credible. That is why they include their photos to show who they are.

There are other ways to protect your privacy. If you use a computer in a public place such as an Internet café, you might want to consider a password that

cannot be easily discovered. Such passwords contain letters and numbers or symbols. Do not use the same password on different Internet servers and do not share this password with others.

When you are finished with the computer at the Internet café, make sure you sign off. Always delete the computer's history and temporary files. Try to use software that provides more protection for your security. For your own computer, try to use software that protects your computer from being attacked by outside sources.

Many groups offer advice on security. One of them is [www.security.ngoinabox.org](http://www.security.ngoinabox.org). Others are:

<http://netsecurity.about.com/cs/generalsecurity/a/aa112103b.htm>

[http://www.thebitmill.com/articles/password\\_tips.html](http://www.thebitmill.com/articles/password_tips.html)

What to do if your work online puts you at risk:

If you belong to a community of online journalists or bloggers, make sure you have daily and regular contact with them. If one of you has a problem, then the others will be informed. They should know if you have been arrested or threatened. They should also know who to contact to see if you are safe, and who may be able to help you. Do not ignore threats. Keep them in mind and let others know about them. Nor should you ignore attempts to attack you.

You have to remember the safety of your colleagues. You do not want to write anything or take any actions that would cause them harm. You also want to protect those who have given you information. Journalist rely on sources and sources rely on journalists to protect them.

Sometimes meeting with your others can create a problem for you and for them. You should keep up to date on the political climate. This is a major point. You need to know whether meetings or simply communicating with others outside of your country on the Internet will cause you problems.

If you do not have a physical network, then try to create one online. You might create a community with lawyers, legal rights groups, religious, human rights, community groups, academics or others who are aware of the work that you do in your country. If you cannot find these in your country, look for these organizations in the region.

Often journalists rely on what they read on the Internet and so you can use them as a security net when you have problems. International human rights groups, organizations that defend journalists or that help scholars are good sources of support if you have trouble. It is important to have a network. This can be in your town or on the Internet. They may not free you from prison, but the attention they raise may help gain your freedom.

Here are some of their websites.

[http:// www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org) (Reporters Without Borders)

<http://www.cpj.org> (Committee to Protect Journalists)

<http://www.amnesty.org> (Amnesty International)

<http://www.hrw.org> (Human Rights Watch)

We will talk later about learning about your rights as an Internet journalist, and what you should do to avoid unnecessary legal problems.

## **6. Why you need to manage your blog.**

The magic of the Internet is that can be a conversation between you and me and possibly the rest of the world. By asking readers for their views and for information, you are telling them that you want to hear what they have to say.

But you have to be careful to screen for harmful or prejudiced views that will offend others. A good rule is to consider how you would feel if some harmful words were aimed at you.

If you are cautious and follow the technology that allows you to screen comments, you should create a community that talks to you and talks to each other in a civil way. You need to be in charge of the discussion, but you also should not stop others from giving different points of view.

When people disagree, be polite. That will help keep the conversation polite.

Question: What are your own limits for expression?

## **7. What are your rights?**

Human rights are not universal and they do not last forever. All of us have rights. But they may differ according to where we live. Do not ignore the rights and responsibilities that affect you because it may affect your ability to use the Internet. Remember that what you do may also affect others. Keep their safety and reputation in mind as you use the Internet.

Do not jump to say something. Make sure it is correct. Use sources that you trust and are reliable. Whenever possible, provide the source for your information for your readers. Avoid rumors and hearsay in most cases. Remember, freedom of expression is not absolute.

Here are some questions you should ask about your work.

How did you obtain your information? Does the law in your country allow you to transmit or transfer information that you have not received officially? Most nations have laws that allow us to receive information. You should know the limitations of this law. Some nations also have laws that place restrictions on reporting certain kinds of information. What is restricted in your country? You may violate the law of trespass if you gained information without someone's permission to be there. And lastly, are you allowed to produce video or voice files without others' permission? Most of what we find on the Internet is protected by copyright laws.

Often people will ask you to protect them if they give you information or their point of view. Can you protect your sources? You should know the legal limits to this protection.

Every society has its red lines. Some issues you cannot touch at all if you intend to continue sharing your voice on the Internet. That doesn't mean giving up. Rather, it means being careful.

A steady voice is often better than no voice. If you intend to become an activist, then consider how that will impact your online work. What is the price you will pay?

You should be concerned about defamation. You defame someone when you have injured their reputation. That is a very simple way of defining it. Does defamation differ in your country? Libel is what happens when written words create an attack on someone's reputation. You can do your best to make sure you avoid this legal danger by making sure that what you present is true. Whenever possible, you should attribute the quotation or data to the source that provided it.

For example, let us say you write that Party spokesman Ahmed said publicly yesterday that member of parliament Yusuf stole money from the government. That is not defamation because you cited a source. You are not saying this. If you add the reaction from Yusuf, then you would also be showing that you are providing all the information that you know. You may not agree with what others' say, but it is your responsibility to be fair. Sometimes we make mistakes in what we write and courts in some countries recognize honest errors in cases involving libel.

If you have any doubts about the source of what you are writing, you should say that is reported or that it is alleged. This lowers your risk of legal action.

Let's say you want to report some critical information about Minister Hasan. You should do your best to make sure that the information is accurate and you should say who provided the information. You might attempt to contact him or see if he has provided a reaction to this news before so you do not need him to give his point of view. The more sources you have the better. Remember, you are giving the news, not making it.

In some countries it is a crime to provoke the government or stir public unrest. The law is called sedition. You should know the government's views on sedition and recent examples of people who have been charged with sedition.

Here are some websites that offer general legal directions and information on media laws:

<http://www.ijnet.org>

<http://www.article19.org/>

<http://www.eff.org/bloggers>

## **8. Open-Source Reporting**

You can rely on others to help you do your work. This is especially true when you are working by yourself. You can do this several ways. You send out a message, asking for people to report on a situation. This allows them time to gather the information. When they send it back, you use their words and list the sources they give you. Remember to ask them to provide sources. You then become the editor and assemble the words, pictures or sounds that they have provided.

The other way is that you ask people to send you tips or suggestions for what can become a story or a blog. Maybe you enlist several people in one area, or several experts. You ask them to regularly advise you about what is happening. When something important happens, you can ask them to quickly inform you. This will make your work timely and authoritative. It will also make it more personal.

Opening your blog or internet publication to readers is important. Their involvement can provide the humanity and reality that makes the Internet a new way of communicating. If they feel involved in your work, they will also encourage others to do the same. Consider the work of Global Voices Online. They collect interesting and important blogs daily from all over the world. And many blogs and Internet publications have learned how to become connected.

<http://www.globalvoicesonline.org>

## **9. Why your voice is needed.**

When we live in silence, we suffer in silence. When we live alone, we suffer alone. When we speak up, there is no silence, and we are no longer alone. Everyday somewhere bloggers make a difference. This is your work.

Please tell me your experience, and what you would add here. Please make this your work and the work of all of us on the Internet.

You can read my blog about Arab journalism at [Stevebey.wordpress.com](http://Stevebey.wordpress.com). Also you can contact the International Center for Journalists at [editor@icfj.org](mailto:editor@icfj.org).

Stephen

*This guide would not be possible without the advice and generosity of many Egyptian bloggers and online journalists. It would also not exist without the guidance and help of the Cairo-based Arab Network for Human Rights Information, <http://hrinfo.net>. The International Center for Journalists is an international independent organization that promotes quality journalism worldwide in the belief that independent, vigorous media are crucial in improving the human condition.*

-----  
For more information about the Knight International Journalism Fellowships, visit <http://www.knight-international.org/>.