

# Columbia Missourian

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## Blogging for change

Citizen journalist writes to inspire his neighborhood

By **LINDSAY TOLER**

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For residents of Columbia, home of the world's first journalism school, it can sometimes seem like there are more journalists in town than citizens. But as the blogosphere expands, the line between citizens and journalists is blurring.

Mike Martin, a full-time freelance science writer for publications like Science and Spirit Magazine and NewsFactor and a resident of Columbia since 1997, typifies this increasing haziness.

In November 2005, Martin turned what he called "over-the-fence talk" into The Columbia Heart Beat, an online neighborhood newsletter that brings an alternate, grass-roots perspective to the issues affecting the north-central Columbia neighborhood. Martin's insider's take on the area has attracted the attention of community members and officials across Columbia, including the City Council.

"It grew out of a need to just report neighborhood news," Martin said. "Just to let people know."

The newsletter is distributed to more than 2,400 people via e-mail, a Yahoo group and a blog.

"(Martin) started it as an avenue of wanting to get things started," said Nancy Harter, an active community member and reader of The Heart Beat. "People are fed up, but they have no way to communicate or change. A lot of this is leading to openness in this town."

Martin writes all of the newsletter's content with a focus on what he calls the "hyperlocal," everything from persistent potholes to general elections, especially as they affect residents in the "Village," a moniker the North-Central Columbia Neighborhood Association has given to its area.

"In many cases it's very simple things," like a structure being torn down, Martin said.

But not always. During the City Council and school board elections, Martin sent out a One-Size-Fits-All survey to each candidate asking uniform questions about growth, jobs and other hot topics around town. The survey was sent across the blogosphere, as well as to the local papers.

"You can see the effect, like a reflection in a mirror," Martin said of the relationship between hyperlocal coverage and interest in local political seats. "All this interest has to do with coverage," from all of Columbia's media outlets.

And will Martin be running for office anytime soon?

"No," he said. "Journalists don't make good politicians. We're meddlers."

Martin publishes The Heart Beat every other week or so. Each issue generally sparks a community conversation through follow-up e-mails to the listserv and Yahoo group.

"The more local the coverage, the more readership you're going to get," Martin said. "That is the purpose of the blogosphere, at least as it exists in my little corner of Columbia, Mo."

As local as the coverage is, there's never a shortage of news.

"I've got stuff backed up three or four months," Martin said. "If I could get them all out at once, I'd do it."

So why can't he? Publishing online allows unlimited space for stories, so why not put them all out at once?

"People are only going to read so much," Martin said.

When it comes to online, "lean-forward" media such as blogs and listservs — as opposed to the lean-back style of newspaper reading — "you have to be very focused and get a lot of information in a small space."

Martin said another reason The Heart Beat is so popular is that the audience for news is getting younger, and

it's looking to the Internet for content.

"This would be a medium, not only more local, but more directed at a younger demographic," Martin said. Martin doesn't fear controversy or muckraking.

"That's the nature of the blogosphere," Martin said.

A recent edition of The Heart Beat covered what he says is a recent increase in crime at rental properties in Columbia. One article highlighted a young couple who moved out of their home on Alton Avenue — right in the heart of the Village — because of drug dealing in the neighborhood.

While the story focuses on Alton Avenue, a topic such as neighborhood drug trafficking can pull an entire community into the conversation.

"You start to see pretty quickly what you write (about one neighborhood) has appeal everywhere else," Martin said.

Martin seems as candid in person as he does in his writing.

Leaning back in his chair, one arm cocked over the backrest and the other holding a Flat Branch green chile beer, Martin pauses before answering a question, as though he didn't hear it. Then, without warning, his face lights up as he sums up his answer in one quick sentence followed by, "I'll give you an example."

His examples come in stories or scenes and answer every question but the one asked. But when he comes back to his original point, he leans forward, excitedly and vigorously gesticulating with his fingers spread apart. His writing topics — science and the Village — draw the wildest hand motions out of him.

Martin does most of his interviews via e-mail using the "massively" high speed internet at his home office.

"You've got a written record of what you talked about," Martin said. Plus, e-mailed responses allow sources time to think about their answer.

"It's often a lot more thoughtful," he said.

So does Martin consider himself a "journalist?" Not quite. He finds the label "citizen journalist" more accurate.

Citizen journalism is a buzzword in the news industry that describes members of a community who are published but not affiliated with any traditional newspaper or media outlet.

"I suspect it describes a whole milieu of writers on blogs and e-mail newsletters," Martin said.

More important, Martin said, he is a blogger who writes "in a virtual space with a local focus."

Harter, who said she reads "everything in Columbia that I can get my hands on," disagreed that Martin's work — at least the writing he does for The Heart Beat — is any sort of journalism.

"Because (Martin) is all over everywhere, he might seem like a journalist," Harter said. "I think that what he's trying to do is put forth a voice that's not being heard in this town. ... Everybody reads it because it's an instrument that is grass-roots. It's of the people, by the people and for the people."

Betty Cook Rottmann, a charter member of the North Central Columbia Neighborhood Association, said Martin's voice is expanding the influence of the "Village" in Columbia.

"I see him in the role of advancing this strong neighborhood association," Rottmann said. "His skills and innovative actions, such as The Heart Beat, are significant."

But it's not journalism.

So why isn't it? Perhaps the question is moot.

"Most readers don't draw the distinct line of what is journalism," said Clyde Bentley, an MU journalism professor who founded MyMissourian.com, an online publication in which the readers write the news.

"They read and use whatever they like."

And the growing blogosphere is giving people more choices for where to get their information, including those with clear ideological or political bias. So, readers beware.

"It's moving the burden of truth to the news consumer," Bentley said. "The news consumer is forced to look to multiple sources. They have not only the interest but the means to triangulate on truth."

So rather than shoehorn Martin's "citizen" role into a more traditional journalism definition, maybe it's time to re-examine the definition reporters and editors have been working under.

"The change in journalism — and I mean Journalism with a big 'J' — is that it's moving away from being a content creator to a content navigator" that guides readers through information gathered by traditional

reporters, citizen journalists and other community members, Bentley said.

“Five years ago, (Martin) would be writing letters to the editor,” Bentley said. “Now he’s putting those letters to the editor on his blog. He doesn’t just pass it on; he writes it. That’s new.”

The media presence in Columbia may seem especially strong, but as the tools of the journalistic process are being handed over to the general public, the media landscape across the country has come to reflect this medium-sized, Midwestern town.

“(The blogosphere) keeps a free flow of information going,” Martin said. “We’re reshaping the debate.”