GlobalVoices

Community Council Issue Paper #2
Degrees of professionalization

Summary

Global Voices is an extremely diverse community, made up of people with a wide range of skills, professions, and educational backgrounds, from many cultures and countries, speaking many languages. This inclusivity has been a primary value of Global Voices since our inception.

In the past few years we have begun focusing on editorial quality, both in writing and translation. Our editors, translation managers, and core team dedicate substantial capacity to training, supporting participants with varying levels of skills and experience in order to produce stories and translations of higher quality—while trying to maintain a diversity of knowledge, ideas and sources.

In this poll, we will consider how the composition of our community determines our outputs. We will ask: **Should inclusiveness continue to be our primary value with regard to the composition of our community?** Or should we require contributors to have higher levels of proficiency and specific types of knowledge in order to participate?

The answers will help us determine whether we should be a community primarily dedicated to learning and growing our own skills and knowledge, whether our primary aim is to inform and engage an external audience, or whether the solution is designing programs that allow us to manage the tension between these goals.

As we look ahead, we ask ourselves: ***When it comes to the skills, knowledge and diversity of our community and our outputs, what is most important to us? What do we most want to achieve?***

The origins of GV's present structure

Many GV participants are professionals or advanced students in a range of fields, and our motives for contributing are usually civic -- giving to our communities and sharing our experiences. Many of us are not professional writers, editors or translators, but enthusiasts with a common aim of finding, sharing, translating and explaining stories that are important in our countries and regions.

In the past few years, we have shifted our storytelling from primarily linking, quoting, curating and amplifying to include more original research, reporting, and long-form writing. In an era of competition for attention, and heightened costs for mistakes, we have increased our editorial capacity in order to produce more professional, well-written work.

At the same time, we continue to accept a diverse group of contributors. We recruit both through our networks and social media outreach and receive applications via forms on our websites. As a result, we spend a great deal of time training and supporting new contributors.

We have also built more editorial rules and processes to support that work. Our editors and our community guides offer instruction on everything from story structure and style, to writing for translation, to in-house rules for grammar. We frequently try to strike a balance between a contributor base with varying levels of skill and experience and our commitment to producing high-quality stories.

Our [how-to and informational guides](#) illustrate this tension. They provide essential information about how to contribute to GV, but their existence also highlights just how complicated it has become to write a GV story. Editors often spend many hours training and working with our less-experienced volunteers. We don't have the resources or the time to build programs to help contributors learn essential skills for storytelling at GV before they dive into the newsroom. This leads to uneven support for contributors, and a too-frequent struggle to help contributors learn and maintain knowledge of GV processes and rules.

At the same time, contributors to some of our sections have become experts or professionals in the growing fields of digital rights, online expression, access to the internet, and data-driven analysis of online news. These fields are now recognized professions, supported by university degrees, dedicated organizations, and available career paths. Many on our team also contribute to partner organizations, are professional academics, lawyers, policy experts, journalists, technologists, and human rights activists. Many GV contributors go on to become leaders in these fields, starting their own organizations, working for philanthropies, other media outlets and advocacy organizations, running for office, and becoming well-known academics and public intellectuals.

Pros and cons of current model

Pro	Con
A wide diversity of contributors helps us find and report on a diverse array of stories in many languages.	Staff time spent on training, editing and managing increasingly complex editorial rules and processes limits our capacity to produce a high volume of stories and to run advocacy campaigns.
A frequent intake of new contributors keeps the community open to new ideas and influences.	Inexperienced contributors often need additional support in learning GV editorial rules and style, lengthening the time it takes to publish stories. This creates stress and delays throughout the editorial process that can frustrate everyone.
Our editorial rigor helps readers to understand the increasingly complex topics that we cover, and ensures our credibility as a source of high-quality, accurate information.	Many new authors only contribute a few stories, and editors find themselves having to coach larger teams of contributors with varied skill levels.

Possible models

1. An open learning community

In this model, our primary goal is to help our community to learn skills and knowledge. A team of mentors and trainers work with volunteers to teach them select topics and skills most relevant to our mission—from digital rights and freedom of expression issues, to storytelling, translation, journalism, participatory research methods, story framing, digital forensics, and social media reporting. For example, contributors would share ideas and story leads in a learning-focused "story lab", where some story ideas are brought to fruition while others are simply part of a learning process. Our editorial output—stories published and translated on our website—is important, but our primary goal is to help our community to learn storytelling skills and topical knowledge. In addition to translating stories, translators support our ability to reach and share ideas across sub-communities within GV.

Description	Global Voices embraces a wide diversity of contributors and prioritizes community learning and training in its goals and activities.
Output	We become a "storytelling and translation learning lab" and produce stories, as products of community learning experiences.
Contributor Roles	Contributors join to learn new skills and increase their knowledge base; peer-to-peer learning is a key component.
Staff Roles	Staff provide executive management support, fundraising and development, and tech. We hire skilled trainers and editors who are also experts in storytelling, journalism, social media, internet and rights policy, technology, advocacy.
Pros	Responsive to community structure and expressed interests of many members. Formalizes the training and mentoring that is already a big part of our work. Provides a feed of skilled individuals who contribute to GV, our partners and related fields - many of whom become leaders in our fields over time.
Cons	The motivating forces for contribution to all our sections becomes less clear. We may lose some of our more skilled volunteers who do not have experience or interest in training. Fundraising for training platforms and learning is quite competitive.

2. GV Classic Plus

We maintain our current overall structure, but develop an internal strategy for structured training and mentoring of volunteers who wish to develop new skills. This strategy is in the service of our existing work, and remains focused on influencing target audiences and communities. We might also expand professional staff for editorial, technology, project management, and other skill sets.

Description	We maintain our current balance of activities, but increase support for contributors, with more structured learning opportunities and more professional support for some projects.
Output	Similar to our current output, but with a potential increase in volume and quality of stories, thanks to our training program.
Contributor Roles	Contributors write, translate, promote work on social media, join campaigns, edit, collaborate on self-generating projects.
Staff Roles	Staff provides executive management support, fundraising and development, and editorial, topical and technical expertise.
Pros	We address known challenges, with the assumption that our current model still has a lot of value, and will have more impact with more training and resources. We retain and reinforce the essential volunteer spirit and values of our community.
Cons	Does not address the concerns expressed by many that our current model needs more than incremental adjustment; challenges of story production may remain. Projects requiring dedicated, professional-level staff support and contributor participation will be difficult to undertake, unless we find more development capacity and funding. Finding the funds to support this model may be challenging.

3. Focus on skills and experience

We emphasize the community's skills and knowledge in our chosen areas of expertise, such as digital rights, freedom of expression, access, personal narratives and storytelling, social media analysis and forensics. Our output is high-quality research, writing, investigations, translations and other media output as appropriate, supported by professional editors, media producers, data journalists, and technologists. The quality of our output and our ability to achieve results are the measures of our success. Standards for participation are more rigorous, and we expect a minimum commitment of time and labor from community members to use and share their skills to advance our mission. We offer specific benefits to members, from access to networks, to speaking, educational and job opportunities, to assistance in seeking funds and supporting their own projects.

Description	GV defines itself as a community of peers with significant expertise and skills, even as we volunteer those skills to advance common causes.
Output	High-quality research, writing, investigations, and other media output as appropriate.
Contributor Roles	We expect advanced skills and knowledge, even as we donate our time in the service of our work. We may have some programs to help contributors maintain and advance skill and knowledge bases, as part of the benefit of contributing to the community. People are also compensated when they participate in defined and funded projects that require sustained work to deadlines, with clear obligations.
Staff Roles	Staff provides executive management support, fundraising and development, and editorial, topic and technical expertise.
Pros	Focused community of skilled peers can build momentum for change on our primary issues. Clear standards for GV contributors means greater efficiency in writing, research and other outputs of our work.
Cons	There is little room in the community for people without specific skills or experience, and we lose diversity as a result. We may lose important perspectives, life experiences and knowledge from our current community members who have less expertise, especially from parts of the world that are less connected to our network. We lose some serendipity, access to unexpected or unusual connections between topics and the experience of our community members. We become less unique and more similar to other nonprofit media outlets.

4. Diversifying types of participation - Hybrid

We create a clear distinction between categories of contributors. Inexperienced participants share ideas, tips and leads, have opportunities for learning and training and contributing to group projects led by editorial teams, and have a structured path to more responsibility. Those with strong topic knowledge, and writing, editing, and translation skills are responsible for ensuring high-quality work, have more publishing rights and have more responsibility within the community. Prospective contributors apply for different tracks based on their current skills and experience, and their goals and aspirations.

Description	GV creates categories of participants, with a clear distinction between those who are learning and building knowledge, and those who write stories, propose and run editorial and programmatic initiatives. People may advance into the second category when they reach defined thresholds of knowledge, skill and commitment.
Contributor Roles	Participate in structured learning projects, share story ideas and leads, build knowledge, and participate in team-driven editorial projects. More advanced community members write stories, mentor new volunteers, collaborate on editorial project design and lead team-driven editorial projects. People are also compensated when they participate in defined and funded projects that require sustained work to deadlines, with clear obligations.
Staff Roles	Staff provides executive management support, fundraising and development, and editorial, topical and technical expertise.
Pros	Provides distinct paths for participation both for inexperienced, new participants and more committed community members, as a way to manage existing tensions. Provides a structured path for learning for new participants. Supports committed and skilled GV participants to take more responsibility and ownership over their work, and take on new opportunities. Places editorial priority on the work of committed, skilled community participants, leading to more focused and higher-quality stories.
Cons	Adds another layer to GV, introducing new hierarchies and potential complications within community. We will likely have less diversity, both of participants represented and story perspectives. Finding resources for mentoring and structured learning opportunities could be difficult.

5. Professionalized collaboration with networks and partners

We refocus on clear mission and goals based on editorial and project results. We employ experienced writers, editors and translators, and pay for their services. We offer training opportunities in select communities to ensure a diversity of contributions, and our projects work with collaborators of varying levels of skill and experience to produce stories, always filtered through a rigorous editorial process.

GV sections might focus on projects such as education, network-building, civic advocacy, and digital rights, and staff are responsible for producing results. GV volunteer communities may set up separate collectives and organizations, and collaborate as partners.

Description	A fully professionalized Global Voices works with partners and communities to reach defined editorial and project goals.
Contributor Roles	None within GV, though GV collaborates with other communities that have volunteer contributors, including possibility of a radically decentralized GV network of former contributors running their own projects.
Staff Roles	All writers, editors, program teams, translators contributing directly to GV do so on a paid basis.
Pros	GV becomes an organization that addresses urgent needs in our field. Community members and sections have more authority over their priorities and interests. Model facilitates growth and visibility, which are crucial to having significant impacts in the world.
Cons	GV as a cohesive, transnational community is disbanded. Serendipity of relationships and spontaneity are less likely.

6. 100% volunteer

GV becomes a fully volunteer community, a peer group of writers, translators, technologists and activists contributing our time and resources for commonly agreed purposes, and managed through community standards and deliberative processes. We abolish all staff roles. Contracted consultants take care of essential services, such as insurance, technology, and legal support.

We produce stories, translate, coordinate advocacy campaigns, and create collaborative projects, designing a decision-making process to set priorities, build teams and manage disputes. All community members have equal status to propose ideas, and to contribute as they have the knowledge, skills, or labor in the service of projects.

We create community standards and structured deliberative decision-making to encourage equitable participation, ensure that community members with less strong language skills or who are naturally less vocal are comfortable participating.

Description	A fully volunteer community comprising writers, translations and activists managed through community standards and deliberative processes.
Contributor Roles	Everyone is a volunteer and participates in the production of stories, translations, coordination of advocacy campaigns.
Staff Roles	None. Needed services are performed by paid contractors and consultants.
Pros	Eliminates hierarchies that currently exist in the community. Fullest expression of GV's ideals. Relatively inexpensive to deploy, once the right funders can be found.
Cons	People without resources and free time would find it harder to participate. More confident and motivated individuals may tend to dominate agenda setting and outputs. Managing editorial processes and disputes when we are unpaid volunteers can be very difficult. A lack of clear authority may lead to difficulty making decisions and setting priorities. Dependence on volunteer input might mean that difficult or uninteresting tasks might not get done, or not done in a timely manner. Will still need some funds to manage technical and legal issues, so will need an ongoing fundraising effort.

Next Steps

In addition to these six models, we may find that alternatives and combinations of these options develop as part of our discussions. The models we present are idealized versions of the choices available to us.

The development of a new model will in practice require substantial discussion, testing and design work, and also most likely coordinated fundraising to support the new direction. We will also evaluate the options in the context of the other major issues, and the results of all of the polls.

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