Global Voices

Community Council Issue Paper #1
Is having a specific focus important for Global Voices?

Summary

A key premise of Global Voices (GV) is that contributors write about subjects they know and care about. Through our stories we can show readers around the world why these issues matter.

Social movements and protest, human rights, political conflict and underrepresented voices are a few of the themes we cover frequently. Some GV sections have a specific editorial focus. For example, Advox works on digital rights and threats to freedom of expression. Rising Voices supports communities that are telling their own stories online. Both projects have networks of peers and like-minded organizations that also contribute ideas and subjects for stories.

In this poll, we ask: ***Should GV be open to all topics? Or should we narrow our focus?***

The answer will help shape the future size, character and identity of our community. It requires us to think about which topics matter most to us, and how we will choose them. It will also require us to think about what kinds of readers we want to engage. Do we seek a general audience, or one interested in specialized topics?

Likewise, we might decide to narrow the focus of our project work. Might we also restrict projects by topic, by geography, or by some other factor?

As we look ahead, we need to ask ourselves: When it comes to storytelling focus, what is most important to us? What do we most want to achieve?

The origins of GV's present structure

Global Voices began as part of the open knowledge movement of the mid-2000s. Our community came together because we valued the potential for anyone to recognize an important story and tell it to the world.

In the beginning we were explainers, helping readers better understand conversations in the many blogospheres that blossomed around the world in the mid-2000s. Our aim was not to report the news, but to explain and contextualize what was already being told, in an effort to elevate and amplify important stories that were not covered by mainstream media.

We therefore set ourselves relatively few absolute restrictions on the types of activities we undertake and stories we write. This is most evident in our newsroom, where volunteers can write about everything from corruption to censorship to culinary crazes.

Openness is also part of our structure. At Global Voices, authors have the power to determine topics of interest, rather than simply taking direction from our editorial staff, as they might in a more traditional media organization. And translators bring another layer of openness to our work, by freely choosing which stories get translated and which do not, creating a new layer of thematic curation outside editorial control.

As our community grew and online media evolved, we started diversifying our activities. While most GVers remained dedicated to writing, others began building new projects with a clear focus, such as translation (Lingua), and protecting (Advox) and enabling (Rising Voices) free speech and access to information online, and creating space for personal essays and ideas, with the Bridge.

GV's storytelling section, which we started calling the Newsroom around 2014, continued to cover a wide range of topics. But over time we focused on certain topics and issues more than others.

Pros and cons of current model

Pro	Con
Our newsroom encourages a diverse array of participants to tell the stories that are most important to their communities.	Our current model leaves teams with limited time and capacity to pursue story topics that have strong urgency and can achieve impact.
Our current model supports serendipity – we are able to discover new ideas and connections between topics and events, wherever they originate.	GV's openness to all topics makes it difficult for readers to understand what we are.

Five possible models

Here are five possible directions in which GV could develop:

Platform

Authors have even more authority to choose what topics they write about, and how they tell their stories. In this model, we might create spaces for participation in which individuals create a presence based on their interests. Similar platforms, such as The Conversation, work with academics and university partners and support larger communities. Global Voices would have better search and sorting functions and encourage a wider selection of individuals and partners to publish, expanding the community and doubling down on serendipity.

Description	The Newsroom becomes more open— authors have greater autonomy and fewer editorial restrictions.
Role of Authors	**Authors** have the freedom to choose what they write, and to publish stories with minimal editorial review. Some contribute tips, leads and ideas, but may not write full stories.
Role of Editors	**Editors** work with authors who wish to have editorial guidance, and perhaps shift their energies to work on editorial partnerships and special coverage.
Pros	We could have a quicker, smoother process for publishing, that is more in tune with the tempo of the Internet.
	When there are few boundaries, projects and stories emerge spontaneously and we're free to pursue them, as we are not fully committed to focused projects or campaigns.
	We could build an even larger community of people who support the GV ethos.
	We might find more possibilities for collaboration across a more diverse and broader community, if properly structured.
	This model could give us an alternative to our highly structured editorial approach, that is costly and difficult to fund.
Cons	A more distributed community might be more diffuse/less connected, if we do not have unifying areas of focus.
	Unverified, inaccurate information will be more likely to appear on GV.
	The quality of our writing may fall if we decrease editing requirements.
	Relying on self-organization for people with common topic interests to work together may not work. Historically, we have found that most such collaborations tend to be short-lived and sometimes fail.
	The role of Lingua and the translation community is unclear in this model.

GV Classic

We maintain our present openness to a wide range of editorial topics, with narrow restrictions on certain types of stories that don't fit Global Voices goals. We have editorial processes through regional and language editors, sub-editors to proof facts and correct style and grammar.

Description	We maintain our current model.
Role of Authors	**Authors** are free to cover a wide range of editorial topics, with narrow restrictions on certain types of stories that don't fit Global Voices goals.
Role of Editors	**Editors** work to ensure that stories are accurate, offer important context and meet other standards of quality.
Pros	We maintain space for novel ideas, serendipity, and surprises. The community remains open to many influences and ideas. We have a relatively effective balance of openness and editorial control.
Cons	Changes to the social media ecosystem demand that we be responsive; minor, incremental changes to our approach may not help. We often miss opportunities to do robust coverage of or build momentum around specific story topics that we are uniquely well-positioned to cover. Fundraising for our current model is more and more difficult - donors love new projects, but don't like to pay for ongoing operations.

Designated Topics

We develop a strategy that seeks to have impact on the world by focusing on specific topics identified by the community that align with GV's' values and that allow us to leverage our unique skills and cross-regional knowledge. The Newsroom becomes more closely aligned with projects like Advox and Rising Voices, and Lingua communities increase our global impact by making our stories accessible to readers in many languages.

Description	We focus on specific topics identified by the community that align with Global Voices' values.
Role of Authors	**Authors** write stories and contribute ideas, tips, research and writing to collaborative projects that reflect our topics of focus.
Role of Editors	**Editors** work with their teams to identify important stories within selected topic areas, edit stories, and organize collaborative projects.
Pros	Prioritizing a small set of topics will allow us to focus our energies and resources on specific issues that we are uniquely well-positioned to cover. Narrowing our focus may help us strengthen our brand and make our purpose more clear to audiences and partners. Setting goals around topic coverage will allow us to better see the effects of our work. We have a good chance of getting financial support for editorial projects with defined topic areas and plans; funders are eager to support well-defined projects.
Cons	We might lose our "serendipity function" — the way stories sometimes emerge unexpectedly — that has long been part of our culture. We might lose some contributors. For some GVers, the freedom and flexibility to write about almost anything is a great virtue. We might be less unique; we would need to be careful to maintain our distinctive editorial culture and voice.

Rights and Access

We narrow our focus to subject areas where we have proven expertise and skills. Advox and Rising Voices have clearly defined topics and goals, and we are recognized leaders and innovators in the fields of digital rights, online freedom of expression, access and skills development, and network building among diverse, under-represented communities.

Description	We narrow our focus to subject areas where we already have the most expertise and skills in the community, Advox and Rising Voices.
Role of Authors	**Authors** write and contribute research for collaborative posts on topics in the fields of digital rights and access to technology and media in underrepresented communities.
Role of Editors	**Editors** develop stronger specialization in these areas and edit these stories and collaborative posts.
Pros	We could focus our energies and resources on specific issues that we are uniquely well-positioned to cover. We could create new opportunities for community members and teams to achieve impact on issues that we care about. We could strengthen our brand and make our purpose more clear to audiences and partners. We could attract new contributors with specialized skills (multimedia, technical research, data analysis and visualization) in our areas of focus.
Cons	We would likely lose those community members not interested in these topics. Narrowing focus decreases serendipity and surprise - stories that originate as one topic sometimes *become* stories about access or rights. We wouldn't have tracked them if we hadn't first focused on them through a different lens. We could further entangle advocacy and reporting, in ways that could be hard to manage. We might write fewer stories, diminishing our overall online presence. A very narrow focus may not attract the interest of a large community of translators. We may face direct competition in these fields.

Hybrid

We maintain an open editorial process that encourages contributors to work on many topics and build processes that promote more collaboration and collective production. In this way, we expand how people can participate in the GV community to include research, sharing tips, ideas, leads, etc. Contributions might end up in a pool of story ideas, as part of dedicated newsletters (similar to the Netizen Report), or social media feeds. We then integrate individuals' contributions into story categories, topics and campaigns, written by more experienced authors.

Description	We create an open editorial space for all contributors, who participate by sharing tips and ideas for stories. These could be published on a new section of our site, or be part of a pre-publication space for collaboration. We design a process to narrow the focus of those contributions, and turn them into a range of media products: stories, research papers, campaigns, collaborative series, and so on.
Role of Authors	**Contributors** share ideas, story topics and leads in a variety of contexts, languages and sub-communities. **Authors** become a smaller group who are dedicated to turning these tips and ideas into stories or newsletter-style posts.
Role of Editors	**Editors** scan and evaluate tips and ideas and work with authors to develop a select set of these ideas into stories, series, or reports.
Pros	We maintain openness to new ideas and serendipity, while building stronger narratives around compelling stories that we choose to prioritize We maintain space for new people and a growing community We offer a path for growth and learning within the community and staff that leads to more dedicated participants joining writing/editing/producing teams
Cons	We create a more complicated system that takes more resources, staff, and technology to manage, and uncertain prospects for funding that system We don't know whether contributors would be ok sharing just tips, story ideas and short posts. Many contributors join because they want to write long stories Work flows around translation become more complicated and confusing

Next Steps

In addition to these five 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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