

wrote in a blog post that the *Democrat* reprinted. "At least take a moment to consider the city's line of thought."

It wasn't the first time Getz had urged readers to calmly consider the pluses of urban development. But this time she was asking them to give a fair shake to a former client. According to the website of CoreMessage, the PR firm she works for, the young executive led an "award-winning legislative, grassroots and media campaign" for the big-box corporation in 2005, spearheading an effort to repeal Florida's fuel-price controls so that Wal-Mart could undercut local gas-station prices. Neither she nor the *Democrat* disclosed this. Getz still sees no conflict of interest. "We're kind of off and on with them," she told me of her firm's relationship with the chain. When she blogged about the downtown plan, "at that point, we weren't working with Wal-Mart, and I wasn't being paid to talk about them or put them in a positive light."

As newspapers' circulation numbers and ad revenues free-fall, their executives have decided that publications must go "hyper-local" and online, and they've enlisted the help of amateurs such as Getz to do it. But as her Wal-Mart plug shows, the newspaper industry's embrace of "citizen journalism" has a downside. Reader-submitted content rarely gets vetted by editors. In the same month as Getz's Wal-Mart post, the *Democrat* published a story by a retirement home's development director about the complex's great new golf course—without disclosing her job—and a woman wrote an article about a boy who'd organized a cancer charity event without noting that she's his mom. This may sound like small-time stuff, but it exemplifies the self-defeating side effects of newspapers' new strategy for survival.

Call it the second phase of the *USA Today*-ification of the press; after all, the media empire that gave us the McPaper is now setting newspapers' online agenda. "Gannett is about local, local content," declared Chairman Craig Dubow shortly after taking control of *USA Today*'s parent company in 2006. The company's 85 dailies have since doubled the amount of local news in their pages. Content has become "platform agnostic"—making print and online versions interchangeable. The chain's newsrooms were rechristened "information centers" and reporters became "mojos"—mobile journalists who shoot their own photos and

## As the World Learns

In 1977, the Mexican soap opera *Acompañame* (Come With Me) introduced viewers to three sisters growing up in Mexico City amid all the hallmarks of a classic telenovela—infidelity, histrionics, and lurid plot twists. But its characters also tussled with grittier problems such as birth control. The show, which lasted just nine months, was credited with triggering a 23 percent jump in contraceptive sales and encouraging more than 500,000 women to visit family-planning clinics. The melodrama with a message was born, inspiring other socially conscious tearjerkers around the globe:



**La Decisión (The Decision)** "Fotonovela" in the New York subway, 1989-2001

**PLOT:** Julio refuses to wear a condom, so his girlfriend Marisol dumps him. But when people around him contract HIV, he sees the light.

**IMPACT:** The city health department's most successful ad campaign ever. More than 2,000 people wrote in to ask for more information or suggest story ideas.

**Bai Xing (Ordinary People)** TV soap, China, 1998-2006

**PLOT:** Following a car crash, four people are accidentally exposed to HIV-infected blood.

**IMPACT:** Its unusually frank treatment of HIV drew 11 million viewers in its first season.

**Changing Tides** Radio soap; Guam, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Palau, 2002-present

**PLOT:** Between a plane crash and a bout with cancer, a tour guide named Joe tries to prevent a rapacious developer from building a luxury hotel on his beloved mangroves.

**IMPACT:** Nearly one-third of listeners stopped eating turtle eggs.

**Gugar Goge (Tell It to Me Straight)** Radio soap, Nigeria, 2006-2007

**PLOT:** 12-year-old Kande's evil stepmother takes her out of school and marries her off to an older man. She gets pregnant, her baby dies, and she develops an obstetric fistula.

**IMPACT:** Surveys at health clinics found that a third of reproductive health patients and more than half of fistula patients said the show convinced them to seek treatment.

**Ashreat Al Amal (Sails of Hope)** Radio soap, Sudan, 2004-2006

**PLOT:** Al Shoul, a midwife who performs female genital mutilation, loses her own daughter during a botched cutting ceremony. She goes crazy and drowns herself.

**IMPACT:** Opposition to FGM doubled after the series aired.

**No Smoking** Bollywood thriller, released October 2007

**PLOT:** When narcissistic businessman K's wife walks out in disgust at his cigarette habit, he checks into rehab. Features a show-stopping song-and-dance number with the chorus, "As the cigarette is burning, I am too!"

**IMPACT:** Leading man John Abraham and director Anurag Kashyap—both chain-smokers—hope viewers will kick the habit. —Ben Whitford

videos (badly, it turns out) and post them to the web without editing. Long-form and investigative stories were replaced by short, searchable bursts of information.

The corollary of the shorter-faster-more plan was crowdsourcing: enlisting unpaid citizen journalists like Getz to fill the local-content hole. The *Tallahassee Democrat*'s website now features reader-written blogs on

topics ranging from Florida State football rumors to "trashology"—ruminations on poor, white, rural living authored by one "Miss Trashahassee." The print edition now includes a smorgasbord of reader-submitted content such as "HomeRoom," a page of school news generated by parents and school administrators. Rather than freeing up time for reporters to cover important stories, the