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Is Public Journalism Morphing into the Public's Journalism?

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Let's begin with a rather important quote translated from the declaration announcing the start of OhmyNews (2004). It reads:

> "Every citizen's a reporter. Journalists aren't some exotic species, they're everyone who seeks to take new developments, put them into writing, and share them with others."

With that philosophy OhmyNews, the South Korean online newspaper began publishing four years ago. Today it claims to have some 30,000 citizen reporters writing for it.

The Japan Media Review reports:

> Citizen reporters submit about 200 articles every day, and about 1 million readers visit OhmyNews each day. The site mixes straight news reporting and commentary. Its influence at the grassroots level has been widely credited with helping President Roh Muh-Hyun win the popular vote last December (2002). (Yu, Veon-Jung, 2003)

In February, 2004, it was trying a beta version of an English language international edition. (OhmyNews, 2004, Feb.27)

So when we think of public journalism morphing into the public's journalism we must think of examples like OhmyNews. However, first let's go back to January, 2003. Twenty-four well known public journalism advocates, including people like Buzz Merritt, Jan Schaffer, and Jay Rosen, came together at Kennesaw State University, outside of Atlanta, to form a new professional society for journalists and educators. After a day of deliberation the Public Journalism Network (PJNet) was formed. (Gibbs, 2003) I was there and subsequently was named the society's first president.

The morphing of public journalism into the public's journalism probably was already underway, but the 24 public journalisms advocates, practitioners and scholars were not well aware of the transition. Indeed, Chris Peck, now editor of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, held up his hands saying that public journalism was on verge of being book-ended, which was a polite way of saying it might be on the verge of extinction. (Witt, 2003)

Later a couple of press critics pronounced it dead. (Shafer, 2003) (Wolper, 2003) And this past summer at another PJNet meeting in Kansas, Steve Smith, editor of the *Spokane Spokesman-Review* and a long time advocate of public journalism, lamented that "In '94 or '95 we talked about creating cultural change, transformational change. It isn't happening. We are struggling just to survive."

On the upbeat side, Chris Waddle and Ed Mullins told us that the University of Alabama and the *Anniston Star* were about to form a nonprofit partnership that would advance both public and community journalism. Still Smith's comments were not easy to dismiss. To counter them Jay Rosen, chair of the New York University Journalism Department, added a dash of optimism saying we must keep the flame alive to make way for innovation when the economy improves. (Witt, Warhover, 2003)

I don't think any of us in that room, and this was just six months ago in August, 2003, realized that public journalism had changed dramatically. Now in hindsight and thanks to Steven Johnson's book, Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software (2002) I am able to conceptualize that change in almost a Darwinian way. Thanks to the infusion of weblogs, the online self-publishing tool, public journalism's DNA has literally changed. It appears to be morphing into the public's journalism.

The new weblog-infused DNA makes public journalism more nimble and provides it with figurative set of thumbs. It allows public journalism to grasp and do things impossible in the old public journalism, which teetered on the verge of extinction.

With the first generation, thumbless public journalism perhaps the best tool we had was face-to-face meetings with representative groups of citizens. They were often part of special projects and were expensive, took a lot of time and were episodic. Too often they dealt with an issue and moved on. Journalists were driving the discussion. They would say let's do a story on welfare-to-work, the environment, traffic problems, or the economy, then they would recruit a cross-section of citizens and get their points of view (MPR, 1996-2002). Since not all journalists bought into public journalism, and some outright opposed it (Bright, 1997), reaching out to the people from the newsroom was never an easy task.

Public journalists have, and had, honorable goals they want to accomplish. They want to ensure that the voice of the public is heard and that not all reporting is top down, that spin doctors do not control our elections and that we hear from the middle as well the extremes. (Charter Members, PJNet, 2003) However, all public journalists soon learned by experience that established institutions, the media included, don't change easily. Asking the journalists to share decision-making power with the people or simply listening to everyday people was never easy. At times it looked like a losing battle. (Hoyt, 1995)

Now six months after that August meeting, thanks to weblogs, public journalism is nimble and reaching out and grabbing hold of the entire journalism community. Chris Lydon, (2004) formerly of National Public Radio, says, "A. J. Liebling's observation of the modern world that "freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one" may be losing its impact because with weblogs, we all have our own printing presses at our fingertips.

That DNA in a symbolic way has seemed to move into the very soul of the public journalism movement. Jan Schaffer, who ran the Pew Center of Civic Journalism, and Rosen, its most visible theoretician, have both gone electronic. She in starting the J-Lab at the University of Maryland, and he in starting PressThink, the weblog devoted to

media criticism. Indeed, PressThink, in part by critiquing the mainstream press, is helping journalists, citizens, educators and bloggers build a theoretical construct for this new era. Of course, much of what is being said about weblogs is untested theory thus opening golden opportunities for academic researchers. Yet there are undeniable facts. Presidential hopeful Howard Dean through weblogs and MeetUp was able to get some 170,000 people to sign up to join face-to-face meetings around the country. (Iozzi, Bennett 2004)

The Daily Kos, a site maintained by Markos Moulitsas Zúniga, claims to have 1.5 million unique visitors each month and the authoritative Technorati.com ranked the Daily Kos, with its 2,400 outside links, 27th on its top 100 visited sites. It is interactive and readers can post comments. In its first four posts one Saturday morning approximately 425 people posted comments before noon. (Dailykos.org, 2004)

Read those Daily Kos posts (2004) and the comments and you will find people have things say. Often important things. Daily Kos and the other sites like it whether coming from the left, right or center are the reason a seasoned journalist like Lydon (2004), if given a choice between mainstream media and weblogs, says, "I read the mainstream media mainly to observe its manipulations and mistakes--it has been my world for many years and I have a lot of friends there. I would miss it some, but for information and provocative reflection on what this election is about, no question I would choose the Web, including the beloved blogs."

At least two webloggers have turned to their readers for funds to cover the war in Iraq and to cover the New Hampshire primaries. The audiences responded and sent thousands of dollars. (Witt, 2004)

The world of public journalism activists is expanding with bloggers like Jeff Jarvis (2004) an eclectic, prolific and high profile blogger at BuzzMachine.com. Thanks to his day job at Newhouse's Advance.Net, when he blogs about public journalism and what he calls hyperlocal journalism, his opinions are backed up with experience. Plus there are

bloggers, with much smaller audiences like Tim Porter at First Draft, whose weblog focuses on critiques of the press. (Porter)

The hyperlocal journalism Jarvis (2004) envisions includes citizens reporting events too small for beat reporters at newspapers and broadcast outlets, but which interest local readers. The events covered could include everything from zoning meetings to scholastic sports.

Citizen watchdog bloggers are monitoring individual reporters to see if they get the story right or if their personal biases are seeping into the story. A prime example was The Wilgoren Watch (2004), "Dedicated to Deconstructing the New York Times Coverage of Howard Dean's Campaign for the White House," which monitored the reporting of New York Times reporter Jodi Wilgoren. (Rosen, 2004)

Did it influence Wilgoren's reporting? No one knows, but Wilgoren did monitor this weblog, which was hosted by Blogger.com, a free service for anyone who wants to start his or her own weblog.

In this case and many others, the public doesn't have to wait to see if their letters get published or if the ombudsman mentions their complaints. They can post their own complaints and if they have something powerful to say, they have a much better chance of finding an audience than waiting for a letters editor to decide who is worthy and who is not. These trends cannot be ignored.

At the 2004 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Joichi Ito, President and Chief Executive Officer of Neoteny, a venture capital company in Japan, outlined the ecosystem of weblogs. Here are conference notes paraphrasing what he said:

> "The growth of blogging has created a kind of food chain of information. At the top are the 'power blogs' – a relatively small elite of well-known and highly influential sites that may attract thousands or even tens of thousands of readers per day. These account for an overwhelming share of all page views, or 'hits.'

Below them is a secondary group of 'social network' blogs, which often follow certain topics or specific regions. Finally, at the bottom is a vast galaxy of obscure blogs that may only get a few hits a day. Increasingly news starts at the bottom of the food chain – with a trend or event that is first noticed by a less-known blog, then amplified by a social network until it comes to the attention of a power blog. From there it may even enter the mainstream mass media. So, while power bloggers get most of the attention, the real vital force of the blogging phenomenon is at the bottom, among those who discover news and originate content." (Ito, 2004)

An example of Weblog and Internet power was played out on the Atlanta Journal Constitution front-page story entitled "Electronic votes touch off doubts" (2003, Dec. 6). The article raises questions about the trustworthiness of electronic voting machines, including those sold to Georgia by Diebold Inc.

This story was being written about for months on Internet sites like Black Box Voting, but it remained below the radar screen of the national press. Then the New York Times had a small story basically summarizing the high points of what was being said on the Web. At about the same time, presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich posted key documents that Diebold was trying to have removed from blogger sites. Then New York Times columnist Paul Krugman wrote another summary of the information that has been floating around the Web for months. Then again in February, 2004, the Atlanta Journal Constitution published an even longer front page story. In it the reporter (2004, Campos) writes, "Computer experts at respected universities have sounded the alarm over the potential for high-tech chicanery. Grass-roots activists, leaders of alternative political parties and others have stoked the flames, mostly via the Web. "

But again the story was mostly a retelling of what the web had been saying for months rather than a pure investigation.

When asked about the lack of investigation Mike King, the Atlanta Journal Constitution's public editor, responded in writing, "It seems that you're asking for an investigative series to DISPROVE the conspiracy theories and voter fraud connected to e-voting. I suppose we could do that, but we have a hard enough time finding the resources to cover public fraud that we already have ample evidence exists." (Witt, 2004, Feb. 16)

Meanwhile at Black Box Voting David Allen (2004) wrote, "*Sigh* How many times do I have to explain to these people that the major danger with these machines is that if done right, there will be NO evidence of tampering."

Of course, sharing power with citizens causes new dynamics that news institutions like the Atlanta Journal Constitution have to deal with.

On the other hand, maybe they won't have to deal with it. John C. Dvorak (2003) of PC Magazine thinks blogging is a passing fade. He writes:

> "I'm reminded of the early days of personal computing, which began as a mini-revolution with all sorts of idealism. Power to the people, dude. IBM was epitomized as the antithesis of this revolution. But when IBM jumped on board in 1981 and co-opted the entire PC scene, it was cheered. Welcome, brother! Apple even took out a semiflippant full-page national newspaper ad welcoming IBM. Actually, the ad reflected Apple's neediness and low self-esteem. IBM represented affirmation about as much as Big Media is affirmation for the hopeless bloggers.

> "Another so-called revolution bites the dust. Big surprise."

However, the authors of the We Media report written for the Media Center at the American Press Institute think a revolution is in the making. They write: "We are at the beginning of a golden age of journalism — but it is not journalism as we have known it. Media futurists have predicted that by 2021, 'citizens will produce 50 percent of the news

peer-to-peer.' Mainstream news media, however, have yet to meaningfully adopt or experiment with these new forms.

"Historically, journalists have been charged with informing democracy. But their future will depend not only on how well they inform but how well they encourage and enable conversations with citizens. That is the challenge." (Bowman, Willis, 2003)

It sounds like public or civic journalism. The We Media authors want to call it participatory journalism. Fine, the name, for public journalists, has never been as important as the concept. (Bowman, Willis p. 7-14) Whatever it is called top editors from around the country will be paying about $2,000 each to attend an API retreat in March, 2004, entitled: MediaMorphosis (20040 that deals, in part, with We Media issues.

There has been a power shift. In the past, the mainstream arguments dealing with public journalism were between people like Rosen and the top editors at places like the New York Times or Washington Post. (Rosen, 1996) Now, that argument is moot, because the voices of a wide range of citizens are being heard loud and clear on the Internet mostly through weblogs. The New York Times and Washington Post could dismiss the public journalism advocates, but can't as easily dismiss the Markos Moulitsas Zúnigas of the world who have massive audiences and since audience time is finite one has to suppose bloggers are taking away audience share from the mainstream press. And then if one adds the thousands of much smaller social, community and professional network sites like the PJNet, the audience shift from mainstream to self-publishers is even greater.

Public journalism, civic journalism, participatory journalism, the public's journalism: It's all part of an evolution that has taken public journalism theory to practice, which must make all of us--citizens, researchers, teachers and journalists--reappraise what we do and how we do it. Indeed, the greater question, and at this point it is only a question, is not if public journalism will become extinct, as the critics said, but will mainstream journalism, as we know it, become extinct because it refuses to adapt to a new era of communication.

Afterall as Rosen (2004, Jan. 22) reminds us, "The age of the mass media is just that – an age. It doesn't have to last forever."

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