



Center for Social Media

Showcasing and analyzing media for social justice, democracy and civil society

Insights for the Future of Public Media

A Report on the Global Voices Summit

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The blogosphere¹ touched down in a strange place: the new Reuters headquarter, set amid the surreal urban space of Canary Wharf, a gleaming set of skyscrapers and shopping malls built upon what had once been known as the Isle of Dogs, a place on the outskirts of London so poor and bombed out that the shipping industry and then the poor left it behind. Today's brochures and maps of Canary Wharf studiously omit any mention of history. Its reason for being is business, banking, and information. It is quintessentially twenty-first century. No history is needed and any aura is manufactured. It is a place severed from context or roots where the mostly rich go about the business of becoming richer.

Contrast that to the community that alighted there on Saturday, December 10, 2005: a community with a history less than a year old, a community without any physical borders (though it is grappling with linguistic ones). This is a community spread across the globe of people who communicate virtually. It is the world of Global Voices <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org>, an online website that "rounds up" what's happening in the blogospheres of various parts of the mostly developing world. It is a blog² that takes visitors outward to other blogs, transports people to the conversation going on in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, Eurasia, Asia, and the Pacific.

Global Voices was conceived at a meeting in December 2004 at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet & Society. (Rebecca MacKinnon's report from that meeting can be found at <http://www.personaldemocracy.com/node/208>) That meeting brought together bloggers and scholars from around the world who began thinking about how to take a nascent, decentralized movement and harness it into a forum for creating a truly global conversation. The conversation was going on already, in bits and pieces; the website of Global Voices made it possible to connect the conversations.

Many who came to the London summit were only now connecting names with faces, though one of the members had just recently compiled a "book" of names and faces, using digital images found on the Internet to piece together a webpage that would help people introduce themselves to each other in person.

But even though they were just meeting each other in person and even though they'd been in virtual contact for just a matter of months, this was a community much more connected and real than anything evident in the surrounding buildings. In less than a year it has become one of the top 100 most linked weblogs, according to Blogpulse. It has garnered a Google ranking of 8 out of 10. (Yahoo is a nine!) It has yet to employ a full time staff person and is run mostly by volunteers. Though conceived by some very bright folks at the Harvard meeting, its growth is due to the spontaneous and ingenious efforts of people throughout the world. Its intelligence is distributed and as a result probably more powerful and resilient than that of the brightest minds at any university.

¹ "Blogosphere (alternate: BlogSphere or BloggingSphere) is the collective term encompassing all [weblogs](#) or blogs as a [community](#) or [social network](#). Many weblogs are densely interconnected; bloggers read others' blogs, link to them, reference them in their own writing, and post comments on each others' blogs. Because of this, the interconnected blogs have grown their own culture." (from Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogosphere>)

² "A blog is a [website](#) for which an individual or a group frequently generates text, [photographs](#), [video](#), [audio files](#), and/or links, typically (but not always) on a daily basis. The term is a shortened form of weblog. Authoring a blog, maintaining a blog or adding an article to an existing blog is called "blogging". Individual articles on a blog are called "blog posts," "posts," or "entries". The person who posts these entries is called a "blogger." (from Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>)

The day's topics: how in the space of less than a year a new global conversation has emerged via the meta-blog, Global Voices. What kinds of relationships there might be between conventional journalists and citizen bloggers. How these conversations can occur across different languages. Some of the topics were technical, other parts philosophical, with the day's conversation moving from translation engines to distributed networks.

THREE KEY INSIGHTS FOR PUBLIC MEDIA

Rough transcripts of the meeting can be found on the Global Voices site <http://gv2005.wordpress.com/> . Here are three insights that I took away that seem particularly important for the public media sector.

Media to create public life and give the public voice

Global Voices has primarily used one form of “social software,” the weblog format, to start hearing and capturing a global conversation. The key, social factor of a weblog is that it is usually a comment on someone else’s comment – whether on an op-ed piece in the paper, a news broadcast, or someone else’s weblog. As an utterance in the public sphere, the weblog that comments on some other utterance becomes itself a subject for comment. And so begins a conversation. What we have then is a format for a public to begin speaking and listening together without the impediments of getting down to the public meeting (if there were one). You don’t need a car or a babysitter, just (no small thing!) a computer. Or at least access to one.

Global Voices began with blogging as the quintessential social software, but others are emerging: the wiki format³, podcasting, video blogging, and no doubt other formats I haven’t even heard of yet.

Global Voices is one example – there are others – of how nonprofessional media users (that is, citizens and other regular people) are using new media to create public space and public life. Unlike some enthusiasts of new media that see technology as a way to bring about more finely tuned consumer choice, these users are seeing these media as tools for creating community and improving society.

Reporting on the 2004 meeting that spawned the Global Voices website, Rebecca MacKinnon writes,

By the end of the day, most in the room agreed that we are indeed a movement: a movement not only of bloggers, but also of wiki-builders and users of other kinds of social or peer-produced media who want to build a better global conversation. People who believe in free speech, free access to information and a fear-free internet for all people on this earth. People who believe that conversations and peer-to-peer sharing of creative works between ordinary citizens in cyberspace isn’t just “cool.” It isn’t just another business opp. It’s vital to improving the state of the world.

³ “A wiki ... is a type of [website](#) that allows users to add and edit content and is especially suited for collaborative authoring.

“The term *wiki* also sometimes refers to the [collaborative software](#) itself (wiki engine) that facilitates the operation of such a website (*see [wiki software](#)*).” (from Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>)

These are not unusual sentiments in the west and other advanced regions of the world. But in the developing world, having easy access to information, freedom and opportunity to express oneself, experiencing the right to talk and be heard, to tell one's own story are still often not at all the norm. In Africa, especially, there has been little opportunity for the continent's people to speak in their own voice. Others have long defined them and usually in terms of want, need, and deprivation. During the London summit meeting, Sokari Ekine, the GV Sub-Saharan Africa editor said that one of the most important things about the African blogosphere is that it has been "presenting a new Africa," it is "us speaking for ourselves." She described events that prompted "a conversation about the rights and wrongs" of public matters. In effect, the African blogosphere is providing a key element of democratic society: the freedom and space for members of a political community to deliberate together about matters of state and common concern.

Creating public knowledge

The Global Voices phenomenon is an example of collective-action theory in practice, a model of distributed organization.⁴ It began with just Rebecca MacKinnon and Ethan Zuckerman of Harvard's Berkman Center on Internet & Society posting content to the site. It quickly grew to a larger and larger network of contributors. "We no longer own this thing," MacKinnon said to the group, "you do." While the server resides in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the network itself has no center: it is decentralized, distributed.

Dina Mehta, an Indian blogger, made a good point about the power of these new media (blogs and wikis) as she experienced them following the tsunami. Within hours of the event she and her cohorts started a blog that anyone could post to. Within hours there were hundreds of posts, and they switched to wiki formats so that the posts wouldn't get lost in archives. They did the same after Katrina. Well-meaning observers urged them to form an NGO, but they resisted, wanting to keep the spontaneous dimension. Lesson: spontaneous, un-"organized" movements allow for more voluntary efforts, more quick reactions, for involvement and wider ownership.

As a distributed network, change and innovation can and do come from any corner. For example, the summit organizers hadn't planned on a group dinner the night before, but a dinner was quickly planned when one of the participants, a couple of weeks in advance, asked if anyone wanted to go to dinner. Someone else started a wiki page so that anyone who wanted to could sign up. Another person found a venue and made reservations. And then someone else posted a map. So then the night before the summit, dozens of participants crowded the basement dining room of a Lebanese restaurant near Paddington, getting to know each other for the first time in person. It was a Global Voices event, but not organized by any central, "official" leader.

This decentralization is also what makes such networks vulnerable and perhaps a bit disconcerting for organizations accustomed to control: change and innovation can come from any corner. While blogging has been the main format, the new emerging technology in this network and others is the "wiki" method of making websites. This is a web page that allows multiple users to go into the document, edit it, and save the changes, so that the next person who comes along reads a new version. That next person might look up the early version and reverse the changes, or she might make more of her own. A truly wiki wiki can be edited by anyone. Entering into a wiki endeavor means giving up illusions of control and

⁴ See Mancor Olson, Jr., *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Second Printing (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) and Todd Sandler *Collective action: Theory and applications*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

proprietary authorship. Wiki advocates say that the result is much better and smarter than anything that one or two people might write; the more authors, the more authoritative it might be. Yet as the LA Times recently learned after briefly opening its online editorial page to a public via a wiki, the process can also turn things upside down.⁵ This is a real challenge for media organizations that want to both harness public power and retain control over their site – and their reputation.

Getting past the blogging and journalism debates⁶

At the London summit, the conversation moved beyond recent debates about whether bloggers were usurping journalists' roles without sufficient credibility or standards. And no one argued for the other usual point of view: that bloggers were *prima facie* better at journalism than journalists. Both bloggers and journalists in the room discussed how the two needed each other.

They noted that there is no one model of this relationship. Much depends on the state of journalism and / or the state of blogging in a country. E.g., in countries where journalists are lazy, corrupt, and slipshod, bloggers end up doing their work. In countries where freedom of expression and robust journalism is under fire, bloggers defend journalistic freedom. In countries where blogging is strong, journalists sometimes crib from blogs without attribution. Still, all seemed to see the importance of strengthening both spheres and somehow relating them together. One person talked about “fusing” the spheres. Another used the term “complementary” to describe an emerging relationship. Many other journalists turned bloggers said that bloggers were another form of first-person eye-witnesses; they didn't need to be objective – what journalists need from them are their subjective experience and opinions. This was all a marked step beyond the recent worry that bloggers are being amateur journalists. But the meeting stopped short of looking further into what kind of relationship could be developed between the two spheres.

It's no accident that the meeting took place in the Reuters building and that BBC journalists were well in attendance. Both BBC and Reuters see the need for connecting with the blogosphere and learning from how it rounds up the public conversations that go on there. A Reuters officer said that his organization – which may have one of the most extensive corps of reporters around the world – said that Global Voices was doing this kind of coverage better than Reuters!

In the past year, some broadcast media have been experimenting with ways to connect with these new blogging, podcasting, emailing, etcetera, publics. In the states, Christopher Lydon's Open Source radio programming is built around a website that invites public input. Beginning just six weeks before the London summit, the BBC started a new interactive program, “World Have Your Say,” which uses the web as its first port of call for bringing in global voices. The night before the London meeting, the program's producer, Mark Sandell, brought some of the main players in Global Voices into his studio where they and the anchors were joined by the voices and emails of listeners across the globe. Sandell reports that he couldn't possibly do this program without the web, that is, without a world wide web of regular people joining into a big conversation about their world together.

Both “World Have Your Say” and “Open Source” are young programs. Other media, notably mostly public media and local newspapers, are experimenting with how traditional and new media can intersect in a way that fosters a bigger, more public conversation about matters of the day and how we in this diverse, contentious world are going to live together. The relationships between old and new media, between the broadcasters and the public are still in their infancy. Much is still to be learned about what

⁵ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikitorial> and <http://bayosphere.com/blog/dangillmor/072305/kinsley> .

⁶ See <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/webcred/> .

kind of engagements work – both for making good television and radio and for fostering and strengthening democratic publics.

CONCLUSION

In sum, some citizen use of new media can and is creating a more connected, intelligent, and robust public life. It is providing means for people in regions across the world to define who they are, to assess policies and problems, to hold power accountable, and to enter into the kind of conversations heretofore the province of an elite. Social software programs such as blogging and wikis enable these publics to enter into these conversations. They create a kind of power that is decentralized and resilient. They are a promising but not unproblematic resource for more conventional news media organizations. Much is still to be learned about how these spheres can complement each other. Innovative media organizations see the power and are already experimenting. Further inquiry is needed on how media can engage these “cyberpublics,” how these conversations can be interpreted and used journalistically, and how blogospheres throughout the world can be nourished and strengthened.