

The News Paper

Reflection on the media shift in today's culture

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American citizens no longer watch the evening news to get information; instead, they involve themselves in media that connects with their colleagues, learning style, political views, and general esthetic tastes. Through careful examination of the evolution of such media, various media outlets and the destruction of mass media trustworthiness, we can validate the shift in American society from dependency on mainstream media venues to a focus on grassroots and citizen journalism.

Comparing the Information Reformation

To preface this paper, this paper will compare the modern day information transition to the information transition of the early sixteenth century. In 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the Castle Church of Wittenberg¹. This 'scrap of paper,' as Luther referred to it as, set ablaze a revolution in Europe. The 95 Theses started a movement that would take power from the church, and eventually empower the people, in a way they had never been empowered before. The information reformation that is upon us today is very similar.

We are in the middle of an information revolution. Our culture is taking power from overbearing mainstream media and empowering citizens utilizing a form that has never been available before – the Internet. In addition, citizens have witnessed this

¹ Lane, "The Lion Concise Book of Christian Thought." It's an interesting note that while the church – an accurate representation for mainstream media – was proven wrong by Luther, eventually he was excommunicated for his movements against the church. Furthermore, it is possible that history may repeat itself as it has many times before, if we see mainstream media metaphorically excommunicate the citizen journalism. I speak of such topics near the end of this paper, under the heading, "Tune in Next Week: Where is Citizen Journalism Headed." I will also touch on this subject in my conclusion, "Current Thoughts."

information transition, and are taking part in it, by shifting their focus onto blogs, websites, forums, and other various forms of culturally significant media.

History of Text: Looking Back to Look Forward

The history of text can be traced back thousands of years to the first known use of writing - the Bronze Age². A round shaped stylus was pressed into soft clay as a method of recording numbers. The Egyptians perfected the use of the hieroglyph, using pictures and symbols as a writing system. Then followed the Greeks with the Greek alphabet around the 9th century BC. This was the first alphabet with a separate symbol for each letter. The Greek alphabet gave way to what eventually became the current day Latin alphabet. By 1450, Johannes Gutenberg had invented moveable type (by using his printing press), which impacted everyone from scientists to peasants, clergy to authors. The availability of printed materials led to higher literacy rates, which led for a general desire to gain knowledge and an education revolution. The telegraph was patented in 1840³, followed by the invention of radio (not radio stations) in 1894⁴. Television as we know it today, was invented by Philo Taylor Farnsworth in 1934⁵. Finally, the evolution of the Internet began with the use of ARPANET in the 1970's.

Why cover television and radio in a history of text? They aren't text, right? Wrong. Both radio and television are text, and very much so. The thoughts, feelings, emotion, and knowledge beneath these mediums lay in scripts, which are as filled with text as this

² Hewitt, "Blog"

³ Morse Papers: Timeline

⁴ United States Patent #645,576

⁵ United States Patent #01,773,980

paper. Those who write the scripts control the power, and therefore have the say on what topics are chosen to report on and what spin gets put on those topics. Both mediums are static information, which although can be discussed among people, have a very hard time conversing with their audience.

Mainstream Media: What is Mainstream Media?

Perhaps Mark Crispin Miller, a journalist for The Nation, puts it best when he writes, “under AOL Time Warner, GE, Viacom et al., the news is, with few exceptions, yet another version of the entertainment that the [media] cartel also vends nonstop.”⁶

Mainstream media is exactly that – a monster company devoted to one thing – sharing its agenda in the most mediums possible, whenever possible. In mainstream media many monster companies own parts of similar smaller companies that specialize in various media fields.

The polar opposite of mainstream media is citizen journalism. Individual people, instead of corporate conglomerates, direct information into the hands of media-consumers. Grass roots reporters, photographers, editors, and journalists share information with other ‘citizen journalists’ via a variety of mediums, including but certainly not limited to: blogs, forums and bulletin boards. Shayne Bowman puts citizen journalism in a concrete definition. “ [Citizen journalism] is the act of citizens playing

⁶ Miller, Mark C., “What’s Wrong With This Picture?”

an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information.”⁷

Since the split of ABC and NBC in 1926, the kings of media have been very fluid. Corporate conglomeration has long been the power owner in the media world. Clear Channel Communications, a media conglomerate has been attacked for its monopolistic ways, would promise play listing – getting an artist’s songs on the air – if the artist would play in their venues. By owning radio stations, media outlets, and adding prominent venues to their holdings, they can apply pressure and create a bargaining advantage.

There are ten major companies that control mass media worldwide, but that list of major players in the media market is constantly changing⁸. Each of these companies controls magazines, movies, sports teams, music, major websites, television networks, radio stations, and/or a slew of other smaller companies and retail stores. A single television network could be owned by more than one of these major conglomerates. The WB⁹, for example, in 2001, was owned by AT&T (17%), AOL-Time Warner (50%), The Tribune Company (22%), and the original WB company owned 11% of their own company.

The Degradation of Mass Media Authenticity

⁷ Bowman, Shayne, “We Media.”

⁸ Rushkoff, “Media Virus”

⁹ The WB is a television channel

The State of News Media is a yearly comprehensive report that looks at the state of American journalism¹⁰. In their 2006 report, they cite that “since the 1980s Americans have come to view the news media as less professional, less accurate, less caring, and less moral.” They also cite that it would be an ‘overstatement’ to say that ‘public confidence is on a worsening downward spiral.’ Understand, mainstream media is not dying, and may never die, but the authenticity of mainstream media is dying. Without mainstream media, citizen journalism would never survive. However, it is the nature of citizen journalism to combat (and sometimes negate) the truth that mainstream media claims to have.

A huge breakdown in mainstream media authenticity (and coincidentally a huge step for citizen journalism) was the Killian documents scandal, more commonly referred to as Rathergate¹¹. On September 8th, 2004, Dan Rather, backed by the media giant CBS, offered documents critical of George W. Bush’s tenure with the National Guard in a segment entitled “For the Record.” Within hours after his special aired on *60 Minutes*, the blogosphere – a term used to describe the world of blogging - had picked up on the story and was debating whether or not the documents presented were indeed authentic. Due to the typesetting of these documents, bloggers were able to substantiate their claims that the documents Rather said were written between 1972 and 1973 by Lt. Col. Bill Burkett were indeed not. Rather and CBS backed their documents for two weeks while a media onslaught, both by citizens (blogs and forums) and mass media giants picked up on the story. Over the next month, the position of CBS changed drastically.

¹⁰ “State of News Media”

¹¹ Hewitt, “Blog”

CBS released a statement on September 10, 2004 saying they were “convinced of their authenticity” of the documents and they had acquired them from an “unimpeachable source.” On September 20, 2006, only 12 days after the documents were originally presented, Rather released a statement saying that he “no longer has the confidence in these documents that would allow us to continue vouching for them journalistically.”¹²

It is possible that without the initial challenges from citizens (via forums and blogs) the documents presented by Rather would have gone unchallenged and (possibly) led to a different outcome of the 2004 elections. However, citizens were able to keep the mainstream media in check by forcing a review of the documents and eventually wrestling CBS into saying “[they] cannot prove the documents are authentic, which is the only acceptable journalistic standard to justify them in the report. We [CBS] should not have used them. That was a mistake, which we [CBS] deeply regret.” RATHERGATE was a step back for mainstream media, but more importantly, it was a step forward for citizen journalism.

The Beginning of Blogging & Citizen Journalism

The history of blogging can be traced back to 1994.¹³ Most technologists cite Justin Hall, a student from Swarthmore College, as the first blogger. When blogging started, most blogs were simple static web pages that were updated manually, offering a recollection of the happenings of the user. A blog was basically an online diary. That was the blog of yesterday.

¹² Dan Rather, “Statement on Memos”

¹³ Hewitt, “Blog.”

Eventually blogging evolved into a competitor to mainstream media. With the evolution of technology came software that allowed for anyone to create their own online journal. Websites like Livejournal and Xanga, paired with open-source applications such as WordPress and Moveable Type, allow for users to start, maintain and modify their web space even if they have a limited technological background.

There are many advantages to online citizen journalism. The public eye is attracted to blogs, forums, web-space for a variety of reasons: the information on these sources is dynamic, the information is cheap, the information is timely, and the information is relevant.

The information on blogs is dynamic. Comments drive grass roots media. The ability for a writer to publish his or her thoughts, and then have their audience publish comments in return has revolutionized the static text of mainstream media into a dynamic conversational text of today's grassroots news. While both texts represent users' direct thoughts, dynamic text can be compared to a conversation, and static text can be compared to a billboard.

The information on blogs is timely. Bloggers can update their website minutes after an event occurs. Traditional, old media, could take 24 hours, or up to a week to get current information to it's audience. With the advent of RSS (Really Simple Syndication), an author can experience an event, have their thoughts online the next minute, and have their users bookmarks updated automatically soon thereafter. And the speed of the

information trickle will only get faster, with the evolution of mobile media and the continuation of the digital revolution.

The information on blogs is cheap. For pennies a day ("free," sometimes) anyone can start their own blog. Starting a traditional newspaper or magazine could cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. The overhead to profit margin of a blog is exceptional, and the turnaround time from startup to production is literally minutes.

The information on blogs is relevant. Blog readers can choose who they listen to. With 4.1 million blogs (in 2004), there is surely a blog for everyone. Political? Personal? Technical? Creative? All are available in the ever-growing blogosphere. The ability for the audience to choose who they listen to gives the blogosphere a huge step-up on the traditional mass media giants.

The Rise of Citizen Journalism through Blogging

In 2001, themeparkinsider.com became the first online publication to win a major journalism award for a feature completely written by readers, instead of an editorial written by journalists¹⁴. Furthermore, both political parties issued press credentials to citizen bloggers covering the national convention in the 2004 presidential election¹⁵.

These two wins for the citizen journalism arena paired with three stories show the rise of citizen journalism in American culture.

¹⁴ Hewitt, "Blog"

¹⁵ Lee, "Web Diarists are Now Official Members of Convention Press Corps."

In his book, *Blog*, Hugh Hewitt claims three stories as the pillars for building a case for blogging over mainstream media.¹⁶ Christmas-in-Cambodia was a story broken into by bloggers, and a for a long time, overlooked by mainstream media. Jayson Blair, a writer for the New York Times, also caused some controversy when he was caught plagiarizing – blogs broke this story wide open. Finally, Trent Lott drew the blogosphere’s attention. These three stories discounted mainstream media’s authenticity and gave great lead way to citizen journalism.

The 2004 Presidential election was one of many controversies. From Florida ballot counting to exit polling inconsistencies, the media was on the election warpath. Perhaps the most influential controversy, however, was the Christmas in Cambodia cover up.

John Kerry, an ex-naval officer, was running for president against the incumbent, George Bush. Some controversy came up when Kerry claimed that he spent Christmas of 1968 in Cambodia, running a swift boat with five other navy officers. Eventually, ads by the “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” and a book titled “Unfit for Command” put the nails in Kerry’s presidential coffin. However, it was a group of blogs that pushed the story into an oblivious, reluctant mainstream media.

Stories from Vietnam veterans, Swift boat veterans, and various POWs banded together to form a grassroots push to challenge Kerry’s credibility. When the publisher of “Unfit for Command” allowed for the “Christmas in Cambodia” chapter to be downloaded, bloggers (those who write blogs) began to research the facts behind the writing. Two

¹⁶ Hewitt, “Blog”

days after the chapter became available for download, one blogger had taken a photograph of the Congressional Record that had part of Kerry's original speech (where he claimed to spend Christmas in Cambodia.) Over the next 11 days blogs, forums, and talk radio covered the "Christmas in Cambodia" story almost religiously.

In comparison, before August 16th, mass media giants (ABC, CBS, and NBC) had covered the Swift Boat Veterans just nine times.¹⁷ Major newspapers, such as the New York Times and the Washington Post had only reported them eight times. After August 19th, when Kerry started a counterassault on convicting media, the number of mainstream media stories soared to over seventy-five. This surely shows the effect citizen journalism is having on mainstream media.

Another stumbling block for mass media authenticity involved the New York Times, one of America's foremost newspapers. When Jayson Blair, an African American reporter for the Times, was caught plagiarizing a story, the blogosphere quickly picked up the story. Within days, other stories about Blair were circulating and the credibility of the Times was crumbling. TimesWatch, a blog, cited that the New York Times had run 50 corrections on Blair's stories. That's an average of one correction for every 14 stories that Blair wrote. They were set to prove that "the editorial desk had overlooked the warning signs that not all Blair's work was fit to print."¹⁸

¹⁷ Hewitt, "Blog."

¹⁸ "Jayson Blair," Timeswatch

Within days the blogosphere had become an outlet for Times employees to vent their anger. Eventually, Howell Raines was forced to call an emergency all staff meeting at the Times. Hugh Hewitt, author of "BLOG" states that "the proceedings might as well have been broadcast on CSPAN, for the blogosphere quickly obtained and distributed accounts from the staff."¹⁹

The focus of the story was no longer on Jayson Blair, but a topic that his plagiarized work had started. The blogosphere was waging a war on Howell Raines, the executive editor. This metaphoric war had three fronts. Firstly, the blogosphere was questioning Raines' negligent oversight of Jayson Blair's continued failures. Secondly, pressure was falling on Raines' arrogant management style. Finally, many suspected that Raines' gave preferential treatment to Jayson Blair because of his race. The blogosphere had taken an original controversy and discovered a controversy behind it.

After the controversy about controversy seceded, on June 5, 2003, Howell Raines and his second in command, Gerald Boyd resigned. Tim Rutten of the Los Angeles Times observed, "In the end, it was the new world of websites, blogs, online editions and e-mails, not Raines, that set the place of his exit." This was certainly a huge win for citizen journalism.²⁰

Breaking News: What Americans Value Today

Young Americans are following the news, and politics, less than ever before.

¹⁹ Hewitt, "Blog"

²⁰ Hewitt, "Blog."

Young Americans are not following politics like they were 10 years ago. Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, argues, "As usage of the Internet expanded in the second half of the 1990s, usage of it to follow public affairs became relatively less important."²¹

David Mindich, author of *Tuned Out*, says, "The internet, more than any other medium allows users to self-select. Whether you're interested in the early works of J.D. Salinger, the clothing of the Masai, or Israeli research on the intelligence of dolphins, there is a place for you on the web."²² These two quotes push forward that Americans are less concerned with politics and more concerned with information that is constantly around them, and how they can get involved with media related projects, instead of devoting time and resources to a mainstream conglomeration.

Young Americans are following new media more than ever. Mindich found in his research that while young people use the Internet far more than their elders do, they lag far behind in their general news knowledge. Mindich cites that twenty-four million votes were cast in the conclusion of American Idol in 2003. In comparison, young people (age 18-24) only cast four million in the 1998 Presidential Elections.²³ This statistic is bewildering, but shows that young people are turning to new media – including television shows – to get involved with today's culture.

Social networking websites are becoming very popular with young Americans today. Projects like MySpace and Facebook have weaseled their way into the top visited

²¹ Putnam, "Bowling Alone"

²² Mindich, "Tuned Out"

²³ Mindich, "Tuned Out"

websites in America (#3 and #10, respectively.²⁴) The online social networking niche is only expected to explode more, similar to the email explosion in the 1990's.

Complete, a web stats company, found three interesting facts when they sampled 2 million US people in 2006. Firstly, they found that two out of every three Americans online have visited a social networking website. Secondly, since January 2004, the number of people visiting one of the top social networks has grown by 109%. Thirdly, they cited that traffic on social networking sites are now closing in on the top two websites, Yahoo! and Google²⁵. These three statistics show that young Americans are turning to social networking websites for their news, information, and media outlets instead of hitting prehistoric media giants.

Projects where citizens can take control of news reporting have also become very popular. YouTube, a website that offers free video hosting, is ranked as the seventh most visited website in America.²⁶ At the end of August 2006, Lee Gomes of The Wall Street Journal did some research on YouTube. He noted that in a single month the total number of YouTube videos raised from 5.1 million to 6.1 million (about 20%). When he did this data scrape, total views of videos were surpassing 1.73 billion. After some mathematic calculations, he discovered that the total time people have spent watching YouTube since it started is over 9,305 years.²⁷ Americans are finding that websites, like

²⁴ Alexa, "Top 500"

²⁵ Complete Web stats

²⁶ Alexa, "Top 500"

²⁷ Gomes, "Will All of Us Get Our 15 Minutes on a YouTube Video?"

YouTube, which offer free media outlets are useful tools for expressing ideas and sharing information without using mainstream media.

Tune in Next Week: What's in the Future for American Media?

The blogosphere requires mainstream media. Without the media giants, the blogosphere loses its food, its clinch, and its brute. Only with mainstream media will citizen journalism ever be able to survive. Although citizen journalism will often negate mainstream media, without it, citizen journalism would simply die.

Without mainstream media, citizen journalism loses its food. Mainstream media feeds grassroots movements in that mainstream media. The cycle of journalism flows two ways. The first being when a story starts in mainstream media, then the blogosphere picks the story up and develops it further. This is the most common cycle. The second cycle, most apparent during the Rothergate scandal, is where a story starts in the blogosphere and then is forced into mainstream media.

Mainstream media is the clinch of citizen journalism. Without mainstream media, citizen journalism has no one to keep accountable. Grassroots movements have become a system of checks and balances for the mainstream media. If mainstream media does make a faux-paux, the blogosphere is there to catch them and make them pay a very heavy price – compromising their authenticity.

Mainstream media is the brawn and brute of citizen journalism. Without mainstream media, citizen journalism has no push in the political world. Citizen journalism is gaining strength in political areas, however, it is not able to stand alone. If citizen journalism can push a story onto mainstream media, mainstream media can in turn push the story into the political world, causing change in our nation's framework.

Current Thoughts

The evolution of media from mainstream media to citizen journalism is not only good for American culture – it is necessary for its survival. By uncovering the authenticity – or lack thereof - of big news, we can find new sources to trust. Furthermore, we can match our tastes and belief system to sources of information that are similar.

Is mass media indefinitely bad? I argue that mass media isn't certainly bad. Without mass media, we don't have the financial backing or credentials to cover major events or have a broad market for general news. However, it is the specialization and broad areas of coverage that attract the American market to other news sources.

To reflect (and elaborate) on the footnote in the preface,²⁸ our current media reformation is very similar to the media reformation during the early sixteenth century. During this time the Catholic church was controlling the views of the masses. By maintaining control of the Scripture, the church forced its interpretation of biblical texts onto the popular culture of that time. That is, until two men entered the scene.

²⁸ Footnote 1 on page 2

The evolution of technology can be metaphorically represented by the invention of moveable type by Johannes Gutenberg. The degradation of controlling media, therefore, can be metaphorically represented by Martin Luther's 95 theses. The combination of these two things led to a new way of thinking, a new way of information processing, and eventually a new way of life for the citizens of the sixteenth century.

This is similar to the reformation of today in that peoples' views are being changed in a way that we have never seen before. With the introduction of blogs (a new technology) and the degradation of controlling media (see, *The Degradation of Mass Media Authenticity*) it seems that history may very well repeat itself, as it has many times before. This is a very interesting metaphor, and it only becomes more true as we continue to compare the circumstances.

Today, nearly 600 years after the information led by Luther and Guttenberg, the Church is still standing and still very much in power. However, it's power structure is very different than the power that the Church had in the sixteenth century. I think that this reformation of information is upon us again. I think that mainstream media, similar to the post-modern Church will lose it's power. Slowly but surely, citizen journalism will degrade the authenticity of mainstream media until it's an unbelievable source. Mainstream media will become the media for those who wish to be entertained.

In effect, the Church of the sixteenth century had a grasp on everything that happened in the culture. By controlling scripture and the interpretation thereof, they controlled people's belief structure. If you control their belief structure you fundamentally control

the choices they make, and in turn control their lives. This is a very powerful position for the church to take, and when the power structure crashed in the early sixteenth century, entire cultures were changed.

The culture in America is changing rapidly. By having other sources of news and media, citizens can choose who they listen to and why they listen to that source. With developments in technology – specifically, the internet - information is becoming more relevant and available more quickly than ever before. Thus, the battle rages between citizen journalism and mainstream media.

Isn't citizen journalism shooting itself in the foot by attacking mainstream media? Hardly. While it is true that citizen journalism needs mainstream media to acquire stories and have actual strength in political arenas, it is imperative that citizen journalism continues to attack mainstream media. Without these constant "attacks" on mainstream, big business news, citizen journalism cannot rightfully earn a place as a competitor on the global news scale.

There is a third possibility – the birth of a new media class. As it stands, we have two extremes. There is the super-media – the mainstream multinational conglomerates. Then, in the other corner of the media ring, we have the underdog, citizen journalism. Could the two meet in the middle and form some type of media sub-class? Could there be a grey area of media that holds sources that become bigger than citizen journalism, but are certainly not conglomerates? These are all interesting questions, that provoke

thought of many mediae analysts. History holds itself against this theory, but it's a plausible set of circumstances.

Conclusion

It is with this information, the comparison of mainstream media and citizen journalism, along with a look at how the information reformation of sixteenth century pairs with the information at stake now – that we can decide if we should, and how we can, become involved with media that connects with our colleagues, learning style, political views, and general esthetic tastes.

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