

# **Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy**

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## **Journalism without Journalists: Vision or Caricature?**

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## Introduction

In the past seven years, I founded two newspapers. The first, *Netzeitung*, was a newspaper without paper, to date the only newspaper in Germany published solely on the Web. The model originated in Norway, where Knut Ivar Skeid, a former business journalist, and Odd Harald Hauge, a former stockbroker (and extreme athlete who regularly makes excursions to the North Pole) founded *Nettavisen* in 1996.

My second paper, *Readers Edition*, was launched in 2006 as a subsidiary of *Netzeitung*. This time, I wanted to create a newspaper without journalists. Why would I want to do such a thing? After all, the journalists at *Netzeitung* had done a marvellous job and had helped it succeed. But my experience with *Netzeitung* taught me that journalists are basically very conservative; they can give up some habits, but not all of them. The journalists with whom I worked at *Netzeitung* did not miss the physical paper, but they surely missed admiring their bylines in the paper over morning coffee.

When *Netzeitung* opened for business in 2000, we were determined to abolish bylines, or at least the sort of bylines that had pumped journalists' egos for so many decades. Following the example of the Internet edition of the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, each article would be signed "edited for the Web by ...". We wanted to introduce a notion of modesty, which seemed to us part of the genuine culture of the Internet. Instead of stressing the journalist's authority through his byline right at the top of each article, we suggested that this was a collaborative undertaking. In addition to our own sources, we would use content from various websites and news agencies—and, we hoped, from readers. At the end of each article, a link led the reader directly to the journalist who edited the piece.

It didn't work—not because of the readers, but because of the journalists. The Internet's heightened time pressures did not bother them; on the contrary, they soon defined speed as the major virtue of Internet journalism. But it dispirited the journalists to sign-off with the simple words "edited for the Web by ..." even for articles that had been published in world-record speed. They either wanted to see their name in italics at the beginning of each text or they did not want to see it at all. After some long and tiring discussions we silently buried the Danish innovation (as did the Danes themselves!).

At worst, you could say this was a triumph of the journalistic ego. At best, though, you could recognize that the byline battle was an expression of the noble way that journalists see

themselves. They feel a vocation for what they do, a mission. They want to be—and often are—the high priests of society: watchdogs, protesters, critics. Journalists are proud of their responsibilities, and frequently suggest that fulfilling these responsibilities constitutes a sacrifice. They are, in general, not paid as well as, say, doctors or lawyers; professional pride is almost a tangible part of their income. Recently, as *The Wall Street Journal* was about to be sold to Rupert Murdoch, the paper's journalists presented its owners, the Bancroft family, with a choice: money or values. "We understand that for the Bancrofts this is a choice between getting much richer, and holding onto something because they believe in it," a reporter was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying. "What they may not realize is that many of us in the newsroom have made the same choice. There are a lot of people here who could be traders or lawyers, people with M.B.A.s, who could be making a lot more money. To us, this is not an abstract choice." But in making their career choices they had decided to place values before wealth.

Inevitably, though, this is the sort of attitude that breeds arrogance. One of my motivations in founding *Readers Edition* came from realizing that most journalists would rather work the whole day summarizing various angles of a story gleaned from different news agencies than follow up on a comment or tip from a single reader. Professional arrogance has always led journalists to look down on their readers to some degree—we're the experts, after all—but the Internet has increased this condescension. Readers now can publish on their own? Outrageous! That's why *Readers Edition* quickly became the unloved stepchild of *Netzeitung*. And, up to a certain point, I can understand the journalists' unwillingness to integrate the readers in a direct and dignified way, especially to grant them equal rights: They fear for their jobs.

When I founded *Readers Edition*, the term "citizen journalist" was not yet as confusingly common and widespread as it is today. Too many media organizations had hastily recruited readers as cheap contributors, promoting these "citizen journalists" as a great innovation, when in fact their goal was cost savings. With *Readers Edition* we saw the readers' role differently; we really wanted to give them a voice. I was curious to learn what readers were really interested in, as opposed to what journalists think is important for their readers to know, or as opposed to what topics the marketing department pushes (I sometimes think that if the marketers had their way, papers would consist solely of car, cosmetic, and watch sections.). I had two different editions of the same paper in mind: one produced by journalists, the other by readers. What would be alike,

what would differ? What rules should be established? Would it work at all? What if none of the readers was willing to write?

The more I thought about this, the clearer it became that my traditional knowledge of journalism wasn't enough to lead me to the right answer. On leaving *Netzeitung* in 2006 after it had been sold to the Scandinavian media company Orkla Media, I bought *Readers Edition* from the new owners and integrated it into my own company, Blogform Publishing. It would have been impossible for a delicate little plant like *Readers Edition* to thrive in the environment of a big media house.

*Netzeitung* had exemplified a novel way of presentation, but the content it presented, prepared by professionals and drawn from other professional sources, was entirely traditional. Citizen journalism, however you might define it, was something completely new and different. To be honest, I did not know myself what exactly "citizen journalism" meant. Even with my Internet experience and a general interest in new forms, I could not help but imagine an ugly, many-headed beast which would allow nasty bloggers to rummage through my personal data and present it to a hostile audience in the form of obscene YouTube videos, while laughing scornfully. Taming this monster would require an expertise I did not have. I was lucky: a fellowship at the Shorenstein Center at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government offered me the opportunity to look for answers to these fundamental questions.

### **Citizen Journalism**

In my time at the Shorenstein Center I had the opportunity to look into various forms of citizen journalism that had developed in recent years. The most prominent example took place at *The Los Angeles Times* in 2005, when its readers were invited to comment, critique, and expand on the articles that appeared on the paper's op-ed page, following the model that had been successfully established by Wikipedia. This project received a lot of instant attention from other media, but hardly for admirable reasons. When, at the very beginning of the experiment, unfiltered pornographic spam and rude texts started to flood in, those responsible for the well intentioned project panicked and killed Wikitorial after just two days. Michael Kinsley, at the time the paper's editorial page editor and the man who had conceived the project, summarized the reason for the failure: "We had too much confidence in the people, and we didn't expect our readers to be such stinkers."

Readers as stinkers? That the Internet is full of porn and spam was a pretty well known fact when the *Times* launched their project. Wikitorial had crashed not because of the character of readers, but because there had been a lack of control of reader input. Additionally, skepticism was rampant among the *Times* staff; few people supported the project. But neither of these is a sufficient explanation for what went wrong. Kinsley and his team simply hadn't done their homework. According to the principle established by the founders and managers of Wikipedia, no editorial content can be improved unless *like-minded contributors are purposefully being gathered to do it*. The wisdom of the crowd will only surpass individual contribution if the members of the crowd share a common goal—in the case of Wikipedia, accuracy.

Altogether, *The Los Angeles Times*' Wikitorial project might have been successful if its proponents had prepared themselves for a long and joint learning-process rather than emphasizing the cheap showmanship of a quick and flashy launch. It was Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales himself who blessed the inauguration of the site—but what is god without his angels? Wikipedia's long-lasting success is based not on anarchy, but rather on a rigorous hierarchy. Every article is strictly scrutinized before it is published and ultimately revised by the “last editor,” who resides at the top of the hierarchy. Contributors have to qualify over a certain period of time, and individual pages can be blocked if something goes wrong. Technology plays only a minor role in the process; it's the community that controls. As Angela Beesley, chair of the advisory board of the Wikimedia Foundation, the nonprofit organisation responsible for, among others, Wikipedia, stressed in an e-mail to me: “The technology that allowed Wikipedia to be created also allows people to manipulate the content for reasons of their own agenda rather than for the good of the encyclopedia. By having a community vigilant against those sorts of edits, they are, for the most part, kept in check.”<sup>1</sup>

The failure to integrate the Wikipedia model in the *L.A. Times* project acted as a deterrent for many papers in the U.S. Those who regard the Internet as nothing more than a giant gathering of maniacal grumblers felt their prejudice confirmed. Those who simply wanted to keep the readers outside used it as a convenient argument against reader participation. Newspapers have become “closed shops” to some extent. Says Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York

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<sup>1</sup> This is a real threat for Wikipedia. In August 2007, the young Californian programmer Virgil Griffith released software that enables the user to identify those who abuse the entries. Among the disclosed manipulators were the pharmaceutical company Astra Zeneca, the oil giant Chevron Texaco, the retailer Wal-Mart and—surprisingly!—the Vatican. Bad news? Only for the naïve. Good news? Yes—because there are people like Griffith, who by delivering smart technology contribute to a constant improvement of the project.

University whose latest project teams up professional journalists with citizen journalists, “Try to talk to an editor without having a formal appointment and you won’t get further than the doorman.”

Former *San Jose Mercury-News* columnist Dan Gillmor wrote *We the Media*, a book describing how ordinary people will take on an important role in journalism. Unfortunately, he has not yet succeeded in proving out his theories. In 2005 he set out to create a new form of metro reporting in the San Francisco Bay area, working with non-journalists. The “Bayosphere” experiment failed soon afterwards, for reasons which are trivial: instead of concentrating on local affairs, which had been declared the main goal of the project, the citizen journalists wrote elaborate essays about complicated international or scientific matters. They simply missed their target group. Naturally, the interests of those who financed the project (to reach a lot of people to garner quick advertising revenue) differed dramatically from the interests of those who contributed. The articles did not meet the readers' expectations, and vice versa.

Many contributions were well-intended, but failed to meet a basic requirement of good journalism—that authors write about things readers care about and in a way that readers find compelling. (It did, after all, take well over one hundred years to develop a toolbox for good journalism.) One further reason, though, seems to have been a lack of collaboration between the amateurs and the professionals. After the project faded, some contributors complained about their feelings of being left alone during their “work.” Inevitably, the citizens felt unappreciated by the professional journalists.

I had a similar experience with *Readers Edition*. Sometimes, when a very long, self-loving text about some bizarre topic arrived, I considered renaming the paper *Writer’s Edition*. People write what they like. They write about “things *they* care about, in *their* own voice and in the formats *they* think are best fit for *them*,” as German media-scientist Stefan Büffel puts it. Readers who write hardly think about other readers. They are driven by self-realization.

Clearly, a longterm process of education has to take place if citizen journalism is to succeed. Bill Kovach, the former Washington bureau chief of *The New York Times*, former editor-in-chief of the *Atlanta Journal–Constitution*, former curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, and founder of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, enthusiastically supports the idea of letting readers participate in journalism. Maybe his high regard for the readers is rooted in his own background and the experience of many journalists of his generation,

few of whom trained in journalism schools. Kovach himself had studied marine biology before becoming a journalist. If today's journalists stopped considering themselves superior to others, he told me, they could become their readers' teachers and thus bring a new and enriching quality to journalism.

Together with the Reynolds Institute of the University of Missouri Journalism School, Kovach is working on a project in which journalists and readers collaborate. One of the project's goals is opening the newsroom for readers' contributions, breaking down the barriers between professionals and amateurs. The project includes training in how to engage citizens and in how to use verification data more effectively. Participants are also given advice on managing the kinds of change required in newsroom structure and on researching the impact these changes may have on the audience. Each of the news organizations involved in the project uses a different technique to engage citizens more directly in their work: Engagement through interactive databases; interactive engagement in conceiving stories, providing expert input and advising on sources of data; and engaging in direct conversation with the audience in blogs as part of the reporting on a series of stories. In all these cases the citizens are exposed to a website module designed to help the verification process. The model is being tried out in the newsrooms of the *Milwaukee Journal*, Minnesota Public Radio, and WHO-TV in Des Moines, Iowa.

### **Network Publishing**

TV journalist Steve Safran was a pioneer when he integrated viewer-made videos into the programming of New England Cable News in 2005. At the time, this was unheard of. "Anyone can adapt to the basic rules of journalism," Safran told me in an e-mail message. "They are not hard. Be fair, get both sides of the story, be aggressive, and do what you can to tell the complete story. It's more a matter of knowing the rules and the desire to stick with them." Readers greatly appreciate a "helping hand," as media-scientist Büffel calls it, when doing what Safran describes. Anyone who has worked on a journalism project that involves a large degree of reader participation will agree.

There are a lot of these projects out there these days. In order to better understand how grassroots media function, I searched the Web with the help of four efficient research assistants from the John F. Kennedy School of Government. Presuming that connection to a specific issue would likely produce a community with a common goal, we decided to look specifically at

reader-involved websites that deal in one way or another with the crisis in the environment. We concentrated on websites run mainly by non-journalists who have chosen to follow certain journalistic rules. It should be stated that most of the sites we examined are somewhat biased in favor of environmental protection.

All the individual phenomena and forms of expression represented in these sites could be encompassed under the term “Network Publishing” (NP), as networking with those who share a common goal appears to be crucial for those without journalistic training who wish to post journalistic work on the Web. These networks can set goals and take on the burdens of publishing, e.g., circulation, content, marketing, and legal affairs.

All Network Publishers have a precise agenda. Unlike YouTube, Facebook or MySpace, where users want to have fun and have no intention of being publishers, those involved in NP are always on a quasi-journalistic mission. Take Ethan Zuckerman, the founder of Global Voices Online, a website born out of frustration with the lack of international coverage in traditional print media. The developing countries in Africa and Asia practically disappeared from the news in the U.S., Zuckerman believes, because readers are allegedly not interested in reports about them. Laments Zuckerman, “The last time *The New York Times* ran a story on Congo was seven months ago.” That’s why Global Voices seeks out so-called bridge bloggers: people who have both a blog and some basic journalistic knowledge. For a small monthly fee, these bridge bloggers summarize topics they find in blogs from all over the world. The Reuters news agency cooperates with Global Voices and circulates these compilations. Because of the large number of blogs on the Web, it's impossible for an average Internet user to identify the relevant voices, but these bridge bloggers presumably can.

Worldchanging.com, another project in which Zuckerman is involved, is a kind of virtual, national environmental newspaper. Worldchanging.com eschews analysis, instead offering practical advice on what readers can do to save the environment. Articles are written in a mode which is quite similar to collaborative blogging. Is this journalism? In the sense that it informs in an engaging way—yes. It attracts more than a million readers per month.

Even more readers—1.6 million per month—visit Treehugger.com. This site is clearly driven by commercial interest: appealing design, lots of ads, professionally presented content. Editor-in-chief Michael Graham Richard refuses to reveal any numbers, but, he admits “we are profitable.” In August 2007 the site was purchased by Discovery Communications. His success,



he thinks, is based on the non-journalistic expertise of its contributors: “Our writers are probably a lot more diverse as a group than traditional journalists because they almost all have day jobs that aren’t journalism (some are scientists, engineers, designers, architects, etc). They don’t just report on what an expert told them, often *they* are the experts.”

Any NP project thrives on the appeal of spreading somewhat unprocessed news. Readers enjoy the thrill of learning something firsthand. Of course, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between journalism and the expert’s personal agenda. But readers can make up their own minds by clicking from original quote to original quote and deciding who and what they want to believe. For example, I am very intrigued by the website of the Union of Concerned Scientists, which sharply criticizes the Bush administration position on climate change. But I am equally fascinated by co2science.org, which claims that the issue of global warming is based on hysteria. Neither site is, by definition, journalism. But they both provide valuable content that can be picked up by any journalistic platform.

Strategic networking—sharing not just a common interest but a very specific common goal—is of great value for NP. Environmental activists have proven several times that they actually have the power to change things. The initiative StopTXU, for example, forced Texan energy giant TXU to build a new plant in an ecofriendly way. A key element of their strategy was a highly informative website. The effort even caught the attention of *The New York Times*’ Thomas Friedman, who praised it as a prime example of the journalistic achievements ordinary people can make on the Web.

“Save Wye” in England had a similar success. This initiative tackled a giant building project that endangered a nature reserve. The local newspaper was indifferent to it. But clever and intensive networking on the Web finally stopped the project from moving ahead.

In Ontario, computer professor Ric Holt became a well known enemy of the gravel industry when he raised public consciousness about the industry on his website Gravelwatch. The industry then put pressure on Holt by stirring up opposition at his university. Holt moved his site from the university server to a neutral platform—and survived a type of attempted intimidation that is quite common in conventional journalism.

Apart from NP efforts centered on a common concern, a growing number of sites are concentrating on the shared interests of a geographic community—in other words, local news by local citizens. A recent study at Harvard’s Joan Shorenstein Center found that local newspapers

have lost many more young readers than have the national papers. Local NP sites, such as the Chi-Town Daily News in Chicago and the Twin City Daily Planet, may eventually replace local papers for the next generation of readers. Both of these are high quality operations run by professionals (the Chi-Town Daily News' board is led by Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Stephen Doig, who spent nineteen years as a reporter and editor at *The Miami Herald*). Journalists at *The Washington Post* complain that they are not able to reach the so-called hyper-local readers in their region, in spite of the fact that the paper put a lot of effort in staying in touch with the local issues. Through the Internet, people have started to run their own very local websites—they simply don't need the brand of the *Post* to inform themselves about what's going on in their neighborhood.

Jeff Jarvis, a pioneer of citizen journalism and now associate professor of journalism at the City University of New York, believes that home-grown local sites might prosper as they improve in quality. Says Jarvis, “Small operations can make money, such as Debra Galant’s New Jersey-based blog, baristanet.com, which now has started selling local ads for small businesses which never could afford an ad . . . in the local newspaper.” Jarvis hopes that, soon enough, networks of local bloggers will get the support of advertisers and thus will lead to a boom for the local news sites.

The collaborative NP model has made itself felt on a national scale as well. Clay Shirky, a blog-provocateur from New York, points out that two years ago, the most popular blogs were run by individuals with strong opinions. Today, the ten most popular blogs are all collaborative. The *Huffington Post* is an outstanding example, bringing together the voices not only of its regular contributors, many of whom are experienced journalists, but also of individuals who are themselves news subjects. When presidential adviser Karl Rove had an argument with two Hollywood celebrities during a fundraising dinner, the two women reported first-hand to the *Huffington Post*.

Internationally, the most noteworthy development in online, non-professional journalism is, perhaps, the potential to help circumvent government censorship. In September 2006, when the Thai military launched a coup against the president, all newspapers and broadcast outlets were shut down immediately. No reporting could leave Thailand—except live coverage from an ordinary shopping blog with the very unjournalistic-sounding name, “Oh! See What the Cat Drags In!” run by “gnarlykitty.” There, a Thai citizen posted the first photos from the coup. She

just happened to see what was going on, posted the headline “Military Coup!!!” and turned her blog—which usually ran recommendations for shopping items and cultural events —into a one-woman newswire about the coup. By what one might call virtual word-of-mouth, her blog became a source for media organizations all over the world. After the crisis was over, the shopping lady returned to recommending items for consumers. She didn’t want to be a political or journalistic blogger, but for one historical moment, she made an inestimably high contribution to international journalism.

Naturally, any blogger would revel in this kind of instant fame, but it is far from being the blogger’s goal. That, at least, is what my research assistants and I found when we conducted a survey, per e-mail, of approximately 300 political bloggers worldwide in April 2007 (almost one third answered our questions; multiple answers were allowed). A minority (37 percent) saw themselves as “journalists.” They preferred to define themselves as “commentators” (72 percent) or “analysts” (67 percent). Most of them wrote from their individual experience—77 percent name “personal experience” as the basis of their postings, while investigation and research played minor roles.

Our survey also contradicts another predominant prejudice, namely, that bloggers want to destroy the old media. Only a tiny fraction (7 percent) thought that blogging was going to “replace old media,” and 4 percent saw no interaction between blogging and the old media at all. The overwhelming majority (83 percent) saw blogging as “complementary to old media.” Nor do they feel they really threaten the media: 26 percent saw themselves as a threat, but 74 percent thought that they “add value to the old media.” Of course, they want to be unique: 78 percent say that they are “covering what old media misses.”

“Blogs and media live in a symbiosis,” says blogger Clay Shirky. But many in the old media would define the relationship as parasitic, with the notorious blogger, in his pajamas, working from the basement of his home, taking the news produced by the old media and passing it through his own distorting system.

I would definitely consider bloggers—who dedicated themselves to unconditional freedom early on—to be outside the media. And I hope they are able to stay there, so that their minds can remain open and their speech remain truly free. Several attempts have been made to integrate bloggers into old institutions in order to inject fresh air, but it was not the traditional media that changed through these efforts. Rather, the bloggers lost their spicy language and

became tame to please their old-news bosses. The blog as a truly independent, stand-alone format should be kept alive in all its uniqueness.

Bloggers are descendants of the European “*Pamphletistes*” who in the Age of Enlightenment wrote excessive and unrestrained polemics. The old media would be wise to encourage bloggers to stay independent, but building some kind of connection may be beneficial—the anarchy and irreverence of the blog world invigorates journalism tremendously.

## **Conclusion**

All the aforementioned projects are evolving. They will need time, patience and, possibly, a lowering of expectations. Did the very first publisher of *The Boston Globe* think of all the glory and Pulitzer Prizes to come when he watched the first edition of the paper come off the press? Surely not. The *Globe* at that time very much looked like a blog. Same with the new initiatives on the Web: despite the accompanying excitement, things are pretty mundane.

The big question is one of money. Where does it come from and, more important, who does it leave behind? Every day we hear the latest reports of sinking profits for newspapers. Traditional media are trying to remain profitable largely by cutting costs. New journalistic projects are—either willingly or unwillingly—nonprofit. (We just saw the rise of Pro Publica, a privately funded, nonprofit organization for investigative journalism, with the former WSJ-journalist Paul Steiger as journalistic frontrunner.) We don’t know yet whether there is a future for journalism as a profitable business at all. Appearing before a House of Lords communication committee on news media ownership, Alan Rusbridger, editor-in-chief of the British *Guardian*, recently said that Internet services are heavily eroding newspaper classified advertising revenues, presenting newspapers with an “urgent problem.” With admirable frankness Rusbridger continued, “For at least ten years we are going to have to have an act of faith and pump money into digital markets without significant return (...), and we will do it with the expectation that these things will change....” Faith, of all things, may act as the last authority for a business that used to be spoiled by success.

Some argue that, for NP, the nonprofit model may be the most practical route. I would imagine that foundations will want to support initiatives that provide a larger spectrum of opinion and information through the Web. But commercial sites are more dynamic than others. Treehugger, for instance, has had significantly faster growth than has the nonprofit site

Worldchanging. Maybe the pressure of having to make money will make NP gain momentum; whoever employs people (in order to make more money) must make sure that the product is attractive (in order to secure ads). The enormous pressure of the market encourages compromise, and I truly hope that NP's experimental character can be saved from that. A clear focus on the reader is key to a lasting success.

The economic threat that is hitting the traditional media hardest these days may endanger NP as well. But when I look at the progress of *Readers Edition* during the past few months I am pleasantly surprised. Up to 100,000 unique visitors now come to the site each month. Every day about ten articles are written by members of the general public. A team of some ten moderators carefully edits and motivates the writers. Some topics attract significant attention, such as a recent and controversial article about climate change "hysteria," written by a well known German scientist. One well known feminist author, Sybille Berg, regularly writes her columns for *Readers Edition* because she likes the free and inspired publishing environment. New formats, too, have emerged: one writer draws on the work of Global Voices to produce a daily international overview that German readers would never find in a traditional newspaper. Another has started to look for the best articles in the local blogs that we aggregate. In doing so, we encourage the local community to come up with interesting material.

Old media would do well to take all these new approaches as sources of inspiration, and even collaboration. Some sites run by citizen journalists can cooperate very well with traditional media. Reuters has already set an example in its joint efforts with Global Voices; AP has teamed up with the news aggregation site NowPublic.com. Maybe most of the NP projects are not destined to last long but will merge into larger units. Websites like *Slate*, the Norwegian paper *Nettavisen*, or my own paper, *Netzeitung*, have all been taken over by old media.

Ultimately, it won't be the angry bloggers or the clueless citizen journalists, not the crazy kids from YouTube or the dark forces behind MySpace who will decide the fate of journalism. Ultimately, readers and advertisers will show what they are willing to pay for. Network Publishing is the natural ally of traditional media. Even in a completely new media world, together, they can help ensure that society gets the kind of journalism it deserves.