

NEWS, GLOBAL COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND EDUCATION

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Good afternoon, my comments will go in a very different direction, dealing with public knowledge as conveyed by the media in the form of facts, analysis and opinions, all with the idea you might say, of educating the public by adding to their inventory of public knowledge. Why is this important? Because obviously a viable democracy requires a public that can be trusted to act knowledgeably and thus wisely. This is of great concern in America which actually began with an attitude of scepticism of trusting the people despite the opening phrase in one of our founding documents, that is, 'we the people'. Many believed then and believe today that the people lack key ingredients, such as education and information or the sensitivity necessary to become an informed public. In journalism, this is translated to what one media sociologist called the trustee model. Journalistic professionals decided what the citizenry should know and what they would teach in their role of public educators. They would be the ones to speak truth to power without concern for where the cards may fall or whom it may embarrass or even how few readers pay attention.

In this sense the citizenry, preoccupied and distracted as it is, entrusted a measure of their individual sovereignty to journalists. But whatever trust we journalists assume we have been granted from a distracted public is clearly eroding. For the press to be a representative of the public requires that the public believe that the press is its authentic representative in a fiduciary relationship with it and not in cahoots with the state or powerful interest groups, but one that is capable of rendering an unbiased factual account of the world, independent of their own political ideology. In this respect, the press has been found wanting. They have lost credibility and respect and are no longer believed but are distrusted by much of the public: (a) because of their perceived bias; and (b) because the world recognis-

es that the role of the press is that of an observer and many in the press have never been involved in trying to manage the real world, or as they say, writing about being kicked by a mule is different from being kicked by a mule. What the public feels is that journalists are convinced that they know how the world ought to work and on this, they take second place to no-one. So their own political values penetrate their reporting as a political ideology and that is why the public, certainly in America, often sees journalists as a hindrance to rather than as an avenue to political understanding with only about 40% trusting the press.

There is a factual basis however to the concern in the press about what the public knows. An impressive amount of research demonstrates how little individuals know about anything political from the names of officials at every level of government including their own local government to how the government works or what issues are all about. Indeed, the most elementary political facts are unknown by the public at large. Public knowledge then is in short supply. The great American educator John Dewey once described the ideal world where the ordinary people and the experts interact and work together to create knowledge that neither possesses alone, or as he put it, the one whose foot is pinched by the shoe should work with the cobbler who knows shoe repair. Dewey rejected the idea that technical knowledge or any other form of expertise trumps the experience-based knowledge of ordinary people. But if public knowledge is defined as a knowledge that helps the public resolve public issues, it is clearly necessary to make elite knowledge more accessible to ordinary citizens. The cobbler's knowledge must be put more immediately at the disposal of the person pinched by the shoe, not to speak of the fact that we must have the means by which the public can learn more directly from the pinched person. It is not enough that people get involved periodically in national elections. We must seek a way to democratise public education and public knowledge. This means giving citizens daily access to the most reliable and democratic means of knowing, in other words, a system for citizens, scholars and practitioners to think and talk together in daily explanations of what is happening in the world.

This will take me into the evolution of the media made possible by changing technology. For literally many many years and decades, even centuries, newspapers have had a great run. I speak to you as a publisher of a major metropolitan newspaper but humbled by the comment of the great American writer, Mark Twain, who once wrote, 'How often we recall with regret that Napoleon once shot at a magazine editor, missed him and killed

the publisher. But, we remember with charity that his intentions were good'. Now, the Daily News which is the newspaper I publish in New York, at the end of World War II, had a Sunday circulation of 4.2 million and a daily circulation of 2.4 million, and it was one of thirteen major newspapers in New York City. Today, under the influence of both radio and TV which have been whittling away market share, there are only three newspapers in New York City, and the Daily News which is still the largest has a daily circulation of 715,000 and a Sunday circulation of 815,000, a dramatic reduction of almost two-thirds. Now, this is undoubtedly going to continue because the next generation of people accessing news and information have a different set of expectations about the kinds of news they will get, when they will get it and how it works for them. Here are some statistics, in general. In 1964 four out of five Americans read a newspaper regularly, in 2004 only 50% of Americans did so. Amongst the younger readers who are the most valuable advertising demographics of 18-34 year olds, only 19% turned to a newspaper on a daily basis compared to 44% who rely on the web for news. The future course of news is being dominated by technology, savvy young people who are no longer wedded to traditional news outlets or even accessing news in traditional ways. Internet portals are becoming their favourite destinations for news. They do not want to rely on the morning newspapers for up-to-date information, they want news on demand, when it works for them, how it works for them, and they want to be able to control where they get it and who they get it from. The attitudes of the young towards newspapers are very distressing. Only 9% describe newspapers as trustworthy, 8% find them useful and only 4% think that we are entertaining according to the Pew Research Center. It is not that they do not want news as much as their predecessors, they want a lot of it, just faster, of a different kind, delivered in a different way, particularly in ways that enable them to enjoy their gadgets and technology.

When TV emerged, that became the dominant news media but that world too has become a free for all. Network broadcasters now have to battle the cable chattering classes. In the United States, CBS, NBC and ABC have lost 50% of their audience and the median age of their viewership is 60. Once upon a time, when television broadcasting first hit its stride with Walter Cronkite on CBS and his counterparts on ABC and NBC, their assessment of what constituted news and of how to present it in a fair and balanced way was quite similar. But the era of choice began for viewers in 1980 when CNN and its all day newscast arrived on the scene. Then more cable news stations joined the fray, expanding choices and more and more

people lost confidence in the major news outlets. Only 44% of Americans say they are very or fairly confident of the major media's accuracy. Republicans question media credibility much more than Democrats do, believing that the major national media were dominated by Liberals.

Many have given up on the mainstream media and they are segregating themselves into news media, especially cable news networks like Fox and CNN that reinforce what they already believe. People now see the news they want to see and hear the news they wish to hear. And it is true that the T.V. news pictures themselves have limitations. Back in 1986, I was a part of a delegation sent to monitor the election in the Philippines. We were twenty people, we broke up into ten groups of two each and drove around the Philippines or flew around the Philippines for the day before the election and the day of the election looking for violence, we could not see it. When at the end of the day we all got together at the Embassy, we all agreed that we had not been able to find any violence and when we went to our various residences that night and called back to the United States, everyone of us experienced the sensation from the people on the other side of the phone whose belief it was that the Philippines were in flames and they were concerned about our safety. Why? Because television put together the ten and twenty second pictures of the 92 precincts out of 91,000 where there was some modest degree of violence. They showed that violence as a dramatic picture and that was what was conveyed in the way of the news about the Philippines indicating how television could distort the presentation of the news.

Back to cable. Today many find it difficult to draw a distinction between news and talk shows. In effect opinions are masquerading as journalism with news coming out with a political bent. The result is a fragmentation of the mass audience in America which is a huge cultural story in America. As public life has become more fragmented and divided, people have mobilised around smaller special interests and distance themselves from the search for the common good. Fragmentation of news sources and its political colouration raises concern that much of what holds the nation together will continue to dissolve with the mass media no longer able to provide a kind of cultural glue.

Now, we have the emergence however of a major new phenomenon which is the real purpose of this talk, to wit the blogosphere which is turning America's media diet into an all day media buffet. Blogs essentially are personal web journals that increase the ability of people to share ideas and information immediately and on a worldwide basis. Web blogs allow mil-

lions of people to easily publish their ideas and millions more to comment on them. They are a fluent and dynamic medium, varying from the recitation of individual opinions and analysis to the aggregators that essentially point readers to other blogs, websites and other sources. The estimates are that there are roughly eight to ten million blogs in the United States up from only 50 in 1999, and we are creating an estimated 100,000 new blogs every day. 27% of the internet users in the USA say they read blogs.

The blogs have now developed into a food chain of information. At the top there are the power blogs, the relatively small, elitist, well-known and highly influential sites that can attract hundreds of thousands of readers everyday, they account for the overwhelming share of all page views and hits. These are not just personal journals, they also report news, provide interpretation and commentary and in many ways confront and upstage the mainstream media. Then there is a secondary group of social network blogs which often follow certain specific topics or specific regions. At the bottom of the food chain of blogs, there is a vast galaxy of obscure blogs that often get only a few hits a day but are increasingly the source of news, where a trend or event is first noticed by a lesser known blog, amplified by a social network blog until it comes to the attention of a power blog and then often enters the mainstream mass media. This is the new age of journalism.

Media futurists have predicted that in fifteen years, citizens themselves on their blogs will produce 50% of the news for these new forms are relatively inexpensive, easy to use, to set up and to maintain. They are unedited, unfiltered and have an alternative credibility to official pronouncement and to the traditional mainstream media as they collect and organise fresh insights and opinions. Some may include links to other blogs and websites providing readers with a quick easy means of pursuing additional information. They also have the capacity to swarm, that is, to focus on a subject by sharing and spreading information quickly. This is a part of a process that we are now experiencing for their numbers are huge and they foster both knowledge and information sharing to an extraordinary degree. And they have an unusual advantage. If you look at Google and other services that do share these presentations, they operate with impunity towards government sanctions, for they are protected from any liability posted on the blogs they host. This raises the danger that the combination of massive reach and legal invulnerability make character assassination and distortion of the issues easy to carry out.

Nevertheless, there we are, millions of on-line diarists are bloggers, share their opinions with the global audience, incorporate the contents of

the international media and the worldwide web into an elaborate network that has the capacity to set agendas on issues ranging from human rights in China to the US occupation of Iraq. The global has become the local, the external has become the internal as the internet makes it possible to keep up with events beyond the immediate environment. This is a new medium that is changing the landscape for journalists and policy makers alike. Now, what we have to do is to find a way to translate expert knowledge for the non-experts and these new technologies offer this opportunity, especially websites that are increasingly devoted not only to what is really happening and what we can do about it but one in which news and information generated by the news media is supplemented with content supplied by citizens, community activists and educators. I will give you an example. The Alaska national wildlife preserve and whether or not oil drilling should take place there. On various websites you can get all the relevant documents and statements from governmental, corporate and environmental bodies. There are contributions about abatement, risks and costs from specialists. Other Alaskans have shared their experience with oil drilling on the North Slope and their hopes and concerns for the State's economy as well as for the environment. Then individuals are in a position to read the various trade-offs that are assessed among the desired objectives. This is a new kind of journalism which would not simply interrogate officials but would also ask citizens about their concerns and experiences, and turn to other sources of expert knowledge to expand the ability of the public to assess a wider range of policy options, in effect a dramatic expansion in the ability to educate the public about public issues. This is not the trustee model of journalism. It recognises that citizens are the keepers of important knowledge, that combined with expert knowledge can create a public knowledge that makes it possible for the people to act as a much more informed public. This is a public knowledge that is more interactive, more collaborative, more reflective and more engaged at the local level. Even now the voices of a whole range of citizens are being heard loud and clear through web blogs. It is a shift from the mainstream media to the self-publisher.

Here are some examples of how they have set the agenda. In the Spring of 2004, a citizen took digital photos of US soldiers in flag-draped caskets being loaded on a plane in Iraq, and another blog displayed dozens of similar photos. Contrary to the government restrictions on these photos, these photos were soon in every major newspaper based on citizen action or public journalists. Then there is the story of Salam Pax, the so-called Baghdad

blogger, a 29 year-old architect whose on-line diary about life in Iraq in wartime transformed him into a cult figure, his readership grew to millions and his accounts were quoted in all the major media. So, if the First Gulf War introduced the world to the CNN effect, the Second Gulf War was the coming out party for blogging. They provide on-line commentary with minimal or no external editing, through postings where individual entries of news and commentary by journalists and non-journalists who wrote about what they were thinking in real time around the clock. This means people can actually write an opinion and refer something to something through a hyperlink that joins them up with many other sources of content.

They are already influencing US politics. The five top political blogs together attract almost a million visitors a day. Look at the story of Trent Lott, the US Senate majority leader who found out about this when he was forced to resign in the wake of inflammatory comments he made at Senator Strom Thurmond's hundredth birthday party. His remarks received little attention in the mainstream media, but was the subject of intense on-line commentary that ultimately converted his gaff into a full-blown scandal on the mainstream media and forced his resignation. The blogs are basically a real time collective response to breaking news. It is a virtual public opinion barometer. They often focus on something new, neglected and have ignited national debates on such topics as racial profiling at airports, a scandal involving the exposure of a CIA agent's identity, bribery allegations at the UN, and an informed commentary such as what went on in Iraq. There is a very interesting story about the time when there was a report of 170,000 priceless antiques and treasures that had been ostensibly looted from the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad in April of 2003. It created a firestorm of attacks on the US Defence Department for failing to protect these treasures, an art historian named David Nishimura who was there, who knew about it, concluded that the 170,000 number was a total exaggeration, that the actual losses of serious were dramatically smaller and that Museum officials played the largest role in the looting. In any event the blogs have become a fifth estate, they watch over the mainstream media. They often compel them to correct errors in their own reporting as you may have seen when Dan Rather's famous acknowledgement that he could not authenticate documents he had used in a story about President George Bush's national guard service, that bloggers had identified as forgeries.

It is important to note they are particularly useful in countries where there are few other outlets for political expression, for they are an alterna-

tive source of news and commentary where the traditional media are under the thumb of the state. That is why they may be the most explosive outbreak in the information world since the internet itself, capable of serving as an information sharing collaborative process and providing a heat map about what a growing part of the world is thinking about minute by minute. So, we are literally at the end of the old ways of telling the public the news of the day. This is going to be the new platform for public education and public knowledge. Thank you.