

“CITIZEN JOURNALISM” AND THE MYTH OF REDEMPTIVE TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to present a debate on the so called “citizen” journalism or “participatory journalism” and to demonstrate, among other points, the mistaken view of simply presenting a confrontation between “us” (citizens anxious to exercise freedom of expression) versus “them” (journalists trying hard to preserve their “privileged” role of informants). In this manner, I hope to contribute by offering a new approach to this acclaimed revolution in journalism. If all of us could take on the role of journalists, journalism itself would be “naturalized”, or dissolved into daily errands. However, if we imagine a new scenario with the potential to change all of us into sources of news coverage, we might see that journalism has actually become more complex. Consequently, there is a demand for applying more rigorous criteria when selecting news stories. This concept, in turn, contradicts the current logic of “real time” journalism. However, that is a topic for an alto-gether different discussion.

KEY-WORDS

Technology, blogosphere, participatory journalism

New communication technologies have been responsible for, among many things, the prophetic end of journalism as such. Anyone with a mobile phone camera and a personal blog on the Internet could become a reporter. However, if we stop to reflect, we would be able to see past the hype of this new theoretically democratizing – or, more precisely, libertarian – movement. This movement presents an idealized concept of power distributed to “everyone” while hiding or downplaying the power mechanisms of the hegemonic group. Similarly, it does not take into consideration the specific nature of journalistic mediation, which would demolish this prophecy. This mediation is what gives legitimacy to this kind of information and, therefore, imposes criteria of credibility.

The first criticism of all this technology hype is access. According to the Internet World Stats survey, updated on September 18, 2006, there is a total of 16,7% Internet users around the world, with a predictable majority (69.1%) located in North America. However, if we consider these results irrelevant due to the increase in the overall number of Internet users (200.9% with relation to 2000), we could question the reinforced notion that this medium offers the general public redemption.

A historical overview of radio broadcasting will shed some light on the discussion. From the late 1920's to the early 1930's, Brecht, a great enthusiast of the new medium, wrote his "radio theory". At that time, he foresaw the powerful potential of radio broadcasting which had, then, the same subjective and interactive perspective as the Internet has today. That is, the public would not only be a receiver, but would also take on the role of broadcaster. The German playwright placed his thesis within a historical context that visualized the perspective of human development in the direction of socialism. However, succeeding events such as Franco's victory in the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War and the consolidation of the Soviet Block within the context of the Cold War stopped this idealized potential in its tracks. It was suspended due to the defeat of "real socialism" following collapse of the Berlin Wall and due to the lack of real alternatives to the preexisting models or to those that had been demolished.

To give greater importance to the empowering nature of technology is not a new concept. As of 1909 Marinetti, who would later support fascism, already placed a high value on machines and their potential in his "Futurism Manifesto". In the 1960's, McLuhan became the icon of an admirable new communication world, going against the leftward movement of that time. Today, it is even easier to fall back on this discourse, taking into consideration emerging social movements without a sound basis. It is appropriate for the "network" that the Internet represents: they are ideally suited to each other.

The mistake, therefore, lies in not realizing that technology cannot by itself alter social relationships. On the contrary, history determines social relationships, politics, conflicts and contradictions, and these are the elements responsible for instilling a new way of using technology. This means that new technological environments are responsible for reproducing power plays of society. Radio broadcasting is an excellent example of this phenomenon: leaving aside ideals of socialism, the revolutionary potential of this new medium of communication was confined to peripheral revolutionary movements. New technologies, therefore, followed the standards and footsteps of the mass media industry boom of that time. The same holds true for the Internet: its potential depends on the support of new policies,

which have up to now been limited to slogans related to the emphasis of multiculturalism with no defined or central organization and to the preaching of “an alternate world” in a distant future with no perspective of confronting the power of capital. Besides, capital per se promotes decentralization for its own benefit, in an era of “flexible accumulation” (HARVEY, 1993; CASTELLS, 1999), by reintroducing *laissez-faire* at a time radically different from that of primordial industrial capitalism.

In the field of communication, the “Wiki Movement” is the best example of this trend: freelance contributors come together in a collaborative effort to produce and disseminate information in several languages. Thanks to the Internet’s speed, collaborators can edit documents in hypertext. As a result, there would not be any need for reviewing the content of articles before posting them on the net. Therefore, a natural selection due to brainstorming would serve as an antidote against errors or fraud. Thus, various authors would take on the role of quality gatekeepers.

The project’s main criticism was not with regard to credibility, as one would imagine¹, but regarding a deeper issue: the theory that, in economics and other areas, open market competition will render the best possible results. Malheiros (2005) points out the mistake: one cannot apply the general democratic idea of universal suffrage to daily tasks. No one in his right mind would choose a medical treatment based on a neighborhood survey. Every field of knowledge has specific requirements that must be respected.

“Publish, then filter”?

This disclaimer, which reflects the criticism of post-modernism, is absent from the “wiki spirit” initiatives. In this manner, it includes *We Media*, online publication of The Media Center in which Bowman and Willis (2003) try to show “how audiences are shaping the future of news and information”. The authors state that this approach offers us the opportunity to break the hegemony of the “venerable profession of journalism” as gatekeeper, with the audiences taking on a new role, by being able to create and disseminate news and information. This would be responsible for nothing less than “altering the nature of journalism” in this new century, as Dan Guillmor states in his preface (BOWMAN & WILLIS, 2003: vi). Guillmor (2000) is well-known as one of the greatest proponents of “grassroots journalism by the people, for the people”.

The first example illustrating this point involves the events in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack: many of the largest news sites buckled under the huge demand, so users searched for alternate sources

of information (e-mails, blogs and virtual forums), which, according to the authors, would stimulate the propagation of “do-it-yourself journalism”. Blogs, therefore, would represent the most structured form of this “phenomenon that shows the markings of a revolution – *giving anyone with the right talent and energy the ability to be heard far and wide on the Web.*” (BOWMAN & WILLIS, 2003: 8).

I have italicized the last phrase to reinforce an important detail: the condition to be heard or to influence the destiny of news would no longer come, as should be obvious, from “the reputation achieved outside the blogosphere, such as politicians, commentators and columnists” (MOREIRA, 2005); instead, the most important attribute would be the individual’s skills and level of performance. Thus, the mysteries inherent in this type of communication would be as confusing as the mysteries of certain religions, such as the miracles evangelical ministers preach in exchange for faith and donations. If the audience has not achieved a state of grace, it is because their faith was not earnest, or they did not offer a sufficiently large donation.

Bowman and Willis (2003: 9) define participatory journalism as “the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information, in order to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires”. Credibility, thus, would be an almost natural attribute of a citizen-journalist, since, “eyewitness reporting comes in large part from people’s desire to share their stories and publish the truth”².

It is that simple. “Let Truth and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?”, John Milton asked, three centuries before Goebbels and the marketing empire of (tele)politics.

Without taking into consideration this argument, proponents of “participatory journalism” focus solely on the confrontation between journalists (limited to strict guidelines and proud of their “privilege” as information-holders) and the public (that is, the audience), disinterested, anxious to find the truth and now empowered with the means to reveal it. Gillmor (2004) reinforces this view by supporting the thesis – already subjected to criticism on many occasions – of the public’s passive role under the traditional model of broadcasting (one-to-many), which would be replaced by the “thinking network” (many-to-many) model characteristic of blogs and other Internet movements. This is where the concept of “pro-sumers”, a hybrid of consumer and producer, rises again.

The chief scientist of Xerox Corp, John Seely Brown, mentions it in Kovach and Rosenstiel (2003: 41), and Bowman and Willis (2003: 9) quote it as well. In 1980, Alvin Toffler, in his best-seller *The Third Wave*, developed this concept further as the hype of oracle sciences attempting to explain the impact of the “technological revolution”. Nonetheless, only those that have never been introduced to dialectics could be impressed by the above-mentioned discourse.

Since criticism is directed at the “power” of journalists – and never at the power of capital –, reversing basic steps for publishing news would not represent a problem anymore: “The order of things in broadcasting is ‘filter, then publish’. The order in communities is ‘publish, then filter’”, say Shirky (*apud* BOWMAN & WILLIS, 2003: 12). The exchange of information between those active citizens would reflect the logic of self-correction: “Writers submit their stories in advance to be edited or rejected before the public ever sees them. Participants in a community, by contrast, say what they have to say, and the good is sorted from the mediocre *after the fact.*” (SHIRKY, *in idem*. The italics are mine). Within the framework of the most elemental deontological rules of journalism, this “publish, then filter” approach would be considered, at the very least, absurd, because it would expose the public to any type of rumor and hoax, and cause negative repercussions that are well-known. Still, we can measure the merit of this kind of statement by Shirky’s own comparative analysis: “If you go to a dinner party, you don’t submit your potential comments to the hosts, so that they can tell you which ones are good enough to air before the group, but this is how broadcasting works every day”.

“Publish, then filter” is actually the conjecture of “open source journalism”, in which engaged citizens collaborate in gathering information, and complementing or correcting it according to the “wiki method”. As Deuze indicates (*apud* BOWMAN & WILLIS, 2003: 35), we are talking about a type of journalism that is more feasible for “specialized niche markets”. It would certainly be the case of substituting one adverb for another by stating, instead, that this kind of journalism would be feasible *only* under these conditions. But, in this case, the participatory target audience’s level of qualification and outreach would limit the performance of this modality.

Therefore, it is useless to generalize by stating: “My readers know more than I do. This has become almost a mantra in my work. It is by definition the reality for every journalist, *no matter what is his or her beat.*” (GILLMOR, *in* BOWMAN & WILLIS, 2003: vi. The italics are mine). This supposedly humble statement is the basis for the argument in favor

of this new wave of journalism (from “lecture” to “conversation”), but would not be justifiable under any conditions: if readers know more than journalists, what would they need them for? In any case, readers of a specialized column – as Guillmor’s column itself, in the *San Jose Mercury News* – could indeed know more than columnists: sources are also newspaper readers and, as experts, know more than journalists – that is why they are sources. However, the general public is usually uninformed, so if it wishes to be up-to-date it needs to seek reliable media.

It should be self-evident: journalists are professionals who are authorized to have access to information and to places unavailable to the general public, and therefore should have the right to access sources from which they can gather relevant information for society at large. This is nothing more than the status given to journalists by the old concept of the “fourth power”. This represents a dilemma since they may use the general public as an excuse to support their own hidden agenda. However, the fourth power status grants journalists social recognition and the role of mediator.

“Filter, then publish”, of course...

The theory of “publish, then filter” is not, and could never be, adopted by those who are aware of the responsibilities of journalism. By the way, two very different television networks which established guidelines for “user-generated content” have shown that: Current TV, whose Chairman is the former American Vice President, Al Gore, and the traditional broadcasting corporation, BBC.

Current TV (2006) was launched in August 2005 and since September 2006 has been associated with the site Yahoo Video. It adopts the same discourse as participatory journalism: “Current is a cable and satellite network which is transforming television into a conversation. It’s about what is going on, stories from the real world told by real people”. Would “real journalists” not tell “stories from the real world” nor be “real people”? Apparently, not exactly: “Today the business of journalism is dominated by mega-corporations all following a common agenda. You change the channel but you get the same story”, says actor, director and producer Sean Penn³ in the video of the “producer training” for citizen-journalists. In this program he was introduced as a citizen-journalist himself: as someone “who has traveled to Iraq and Iran to see things firsthand and report back.” It is with this same simplified view – it would be worthwhile to ask “real journalists” what it means to work on news coverage like the

conflict in Iraq – that public participation is proposed: to go against the system, “do-it-yourself”, because “all you need is a smart pair of eyes with an honest point of view.”

At least this so-called “real journalism” points out that “it’s not enough that you tell a good story or capture beautiful images”, because what makes that journalism different is “the standards”, like “honesty, accuracy, fairness and integrity”. Those standards are summarized in the Code of Ethics⁴, which includes, among other requirements, rules for verifying the source of stories sent in by the audience. Going against the tide, Sean Penn points out that “as a Current Journalist, your work will be measured by a higher standard.” So it is really not for everyone.

The conclusion is somewhat elementary: with rare exceptions, only professional journalists are qualified to meet the “higher standard”. It represents, therefore, an alternative source for freelance journalists, considering the payment scale for “pods” (short videos from one to eight minutes): US\$ 500 for the first and second place, US\$ 750 for third and US\$ 1,000 for fourth place and beyond. It also represents a good alternative for the audience, even if this alternative is still wrapped in the myth concerning the “citizen-reporter”.

The BBC’s position on the topic is obviously very different. An internationally recognized model of journalism should not operate based on a “viewer-created content”, and only in certain cases the network considers paying for material received⁵. It is true that the venerable British institution does not resist the marketing appeal to attract the general public by stimulating the audience to send in photos and videos. “News can happen anywhere at any time. We want you to be our eyes” (BBC, 2006b). This is, of course, an inversion of the traditional “fourth power” argument – journalism as the public’s “eyes and ears”. But at the same time there are clear and strict rules for controlling the quality of material sent in by collaborators and that is noteworthy. In Editorial Policy Newsletter nº 2, the BBC (2006a) recognizes that “audiences have provided invaluable material in the immediate aftermath of very important news events” – such as the July 7, 2005 bomb attacks in London. However, it highlights the need to follow the standards in the guideline in order to “ensure that all third party contributions are subject to appropriate editorial scrutiny, that requests for contributions are made responsibly and that where relevant we have obtained appropriate consents”. One of its main concerns is “not to encourage the audiences to risk their personal safety or that of others in order to gather material for submission to the BBC”. This concern includes a critique of the definition of “citizen-reporter”:

Some commentators describe members of the public who send in video, audio or still contributions as “citizen journalists”. This may not necessarily be helpful because these contributors are not professional journalists. Most do not feel comfortable describing themselves as such. In particular, we should discourage people from referring to themselves as “BBC journalists” or as “working for BBC News” or “gathering material for BBC News”. *This could lead to confusion in the field and could expose them and our own crews to additional risks* (BBC, 2006a. The italics are mine).

The BBC also states that it will not use material that has been gathered through illegal means and does not support the use of micro cameras and micro tape recorders – regardless of their dissemination – as it insists on respecting the right to privacy. The BBC also highlights the importance of verifying the source of material received:

Our starting point is that we should aim to apply the same approach to pictures, audio and video supplied by members of the public, as we do to any other material we handle as journalists.

We should not automatically assume that the material is accurate and should take reasonable steps where necessary to seek verification. As digital manipulation tools become more accessible, we also need to be on our guard against photo manipulation and hoaxing.

Special care must be taken if we suspect that material has been supplied by a member of a lobby group or organization with a vested interest in the story, rather than a disinterested bystander (BBC, 2006a. The italics are in the original text.)

“Participatory journalism”: business as usual

One of the best examples of “participatory journalism” is the Korean newspaper *OhmyNews*. An analysis of this enterprise can serve to dissolve some myths surrounding the subject. Under the command of Oh Yeon-Ho (2004), a former reporter of alternative magazines in South Korea and who was then studying for a PhD in Journalism, *OhmyNews* was launched in 2000 with the overt objective of “not just reforming the culture of the Korean media” but “drawing a new line in the history of the world press” by “changing the world press’ basic understanding of how the news is made”. The military language of the manifesto starts from the title – “The revolt of 727 news guerillas – a revolution in news production and consumption” – and is used in the rest of the text. The main “weapon” of this “guerilla” is the proposition that “every citizen is a reporter”. This could simply be a mistaken assumption if we observe *OhmyNews*’ ambitious enterprise and contrast it to Yeon-Ho’s broad

definition of a reporter: “everyone who seeks to take new developments, put them into writing, and share them with others”. Therefore, anything could be newsworthy. Naturally, everyone would be absolutely interested in gathering and publishing accurate and fair information, since what they want is “to share their stories and publish the truth”...

However, it does not really work that way. The newspaper corporation establishes a code of ethics and a “citizen reporter agreement”. Both are summarized versions that list the main traditional press principles and implicitly condemn the common practice of “investigative journalism” by stating that the collaborator must “plainly identify himself as a citizen reporter while covering stories and use legitimate methods to gather information, and clearly inform his sources of the intention to cover a story”. Nonetheless, this disclaimer can only be done verbally, because, at the same time, the collaborator should promise not to “produce name cards stating that he or she is a citizen reporter of *OhmyNews*”. Therefore, this precaution is intended to avoid any legal ties to the corporation since “legal responsibility for acts of plagiarism or unauthorized use of material [and] legal responsibility for defamation in articles lies entirely with the citizen reporter”. At the same time, no care is taken to explain to the collaborator what constitutes a legal infraction or to stop him from obtaining information if he or third parties are under risk, in accordance with the BBC recommendations (2006a).

Given this scenario, it might be correct to state that this “revolution in the history of the world press” represents a good slogan for business interested mainly in taking advantage of new user-friendly technologies. Meanwhile, the corporation stimulates the public to send in their projects in exchange for money and granting them the status of “reporter”, even if not a “professional” one. After all – despite what the BBC says –, journalism is one of the activities that fascinate the imagination of the common man. In a sense, “Superman” does not allow us to lie. The hypothesis that this revolution is in fact nothing but a marketing strategy can be analyzed on two levels. First, the call for audiences-cum-collaborators to participate is explicit in the international section of the newspaper: “welcome to the revolution in the culture of news production, distribution and consumption”. The audience-collaborator is stimulated to “say goodbye to the backward newspaper culture of the 20th century”. However, at the same time, on the right side of the page, there is a link to articles of an advocate of that old-fashioned, outdated type of press, the *International Herald Tribune*. Furthermore, the argument used to launch the project suggests that the objective of the newspaper company is

to go against the mainstream: “In the 20th century, a presidential press conference was news, and tears shed by one’s lover the night before were not. We will now be restoring that lost half of the news”. This is obviously a false argument. Yeon-Ho surely does not ignore the fact that journalism – business-dominated journalism – has been aimed at the masses, since the middle of 19th century. And as such, it not only invests heavily in the dramatization of daily life but also applies the same technique to political issues.

As a business project, there is no doubt of its success. In six years of operation, the “727 news guerillas” reached 40 thousand and the newsroom, still in its initial phase, expanded to a staff of 35 professionals. The international version (in English) has been published since 2004, with around 1,300 citizen-reporters in approximately 100 countries. In August 2006, Oh Yeon-Ho launched OhmyNews Japan, using half of the US\$ 10 million received from Softbank for this project. Approximately 1,000 citizen-reporters joined *OhmyNews* Japan in the beginning, and the plan was to recruit 5,000 citizens by the end of 2006 and 40,000 within two years⁶.

Business, as usual – or maybe it is more appropriate to say, paraphrasing an expression that became famous during Clinton’s victorious 1992 campaign, “it’s business, stupid”. That is why we should not allow ourselves to be deluded by this “free” perspective which places every citizen at the same level of qualification (at least regarding the responsibilities required to gather and disseminate information) and, at the same time, maintains and increases a professional crew. Thus, we are now forced to face the permanent nature of this abominable division of tasks, in which some gather information and write while others edit. Still, Yeon-Ho states that we are all reporters, not editors, so may be the contradiction is not as great as was initially thought.

“Naturalizing” journalism: common sense as a source of “truth”

The art of transforming every citizen into a journalist is not a new ambition even though it does represent a new concept. It is hard to pinpoint when we first started getting confused between practicing journalism and defending freedom of expression. Furthermore, as early as in the 1970’s Tuchman (in *TRAQUINA*, 1993: 88) stated, “as journalists are not surrounded by a ‘technical myth’, we are left with the impression that anyone can do their job. After all, almost everyone is a snoop”. In the era of networks, of decentralization and pulverized power, it is even easier

to adhere to the slogan “do-it-yourself” and to “as-you-like” journalism. Consequently, Gillmor (2004) could present two contradictory epigraphs in his book: as a counterargument to the traditional view of A.J. Liebling (“freedom of the press is limited to those who own one”), Wes “Scoop” Nisker, writer, journalist and alternative radiobroadcaster, invites us to exercise our freedom of expression by participating (“If you don’t like the news... go out and make some of your own”).

It is needless to remind ourselves that news is not a question of good or bad taste, but is indeed a question of necessity. We should, however, be aware of the mistaken view of automatically attributing a positive value to the actions of common citizens on the lookout for newsworthy material. This is especially so if we take into consideration the increasing appeal – due to user-friendly digital technology – of commercializing images on the web. If “almost everyone is a snoop”, the proliferation of “citizen-paparazzi” is foreseeable, all of them willing to go the extra mile to earn extra “*money, money, money now!*”⁷.

Therefore, it’s relevant to present the concept of the “surprising obvious” (MORETZSOHN, 2003) within the context of the naturalization of journalism, now one of the citizen’s daily chores.

First, the incentive to “go out and make some [news] of your own” ignores the evidence that “people” – as Gillmor refers to the public – need to work to earn a living. And, in the current difficult times, “people” are trying to survive as best as they can and still have to find time for their daily errands and chores. Surely they have no time left to go out hunting for material for news stories⁸.

There is a basic concept that may help us undo the confusion between the trade of journalism and the constitutional right to freedom of expression and communication. Journalism is a profession that implies responsible gathering and dissemination of news and is a trade that grants professionals access to the area of conflict in which many interested parties fight for media space. We should support freedom of expression for all. This freedom of expression has grown thanks to new user-friendly technologies. When we reinforce the professional nature of the journalistic career – and, therefore, deny the so-called-naturalization of this activity into daily errands – we are not defending the corporation or “market reserve” which tends to be the main object of criticism. Instead, we aim to reinforce the role of the journalist as a mediator. This implies recovering the referential of the “fourth power” by demystifying it to show the political nature of mediation. If we abandon the above-mentioned reference of credibility, we would open the door to all kinds of

rumors in a field where we could not demand good quality or guarantee the identity of the informant.

Other topics are not so simple. For example, the contempt for journalists (arrogant, privileged, and elitist) means rejecting the press itself as an institution and as a benchmark of credibility. Furthermore, the illusion that we can eliminate the journalist's role as a mediator actually reflects two main points. First, and more self-evident, is the view based on the hypothesis that we forget that discourse implies mediation. Second, the false assumption that once we give people a "voice", they will speak using their "own" voice. Explicit in these arguments is another issue: lack of knowledge of the mechanisms of common sense. Generally speaking, we tend to repeat the formulas we learn through the media, so that the incentive to "do-it-yourself" becomes, in fact, something like "do as Globo does"⁹.

Therefore, the attraction of this kind of direct action lies in the naïve belief in a return to common sense as a source of "truth". This view breaks with the dialectical perspective of interaction that could transform common sense into a critical sense, as Gramsci's well-known statement: any "external" influence is seen as an unbearable attempt to dominate and to suffocate a "naturally" authentic expression.

The "digital" citizen: still a source

Now let us go back to the main question, which, as usual, boils down to a power struggle.

The first issue is the admirable participatory world of blogs and their influence on the supposedly changing nature of journalism, from a lecture to a conversation. It would be possible, maybe, to imagine this type of dialogue regarding our common daily activities. Even so, what kind of "conversation" would we have with the decision-makers? What kind of "conversation" would we have with Bush?

A similar event, which occurred on the other side of the Atlantic, may shed some light on the discussion. On December 22, 2005, Loïc de Meur (2005), one of the most famous French bloggers, interviewed Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, soon after the public demonstration of young descendents of Arab immigrants in the suburbs of Paris. People criticized his interview saying he was too friendly and for having given an ipod and one of his books as a gift – which would have breached the code of ethics. Actually, he had boasted that he was the first blogueur to meet a Minister of State. In his

self-defense, le Meur answered: “I’m not a journalist and I never introduced myself as one”, so the interview supposedly did not need to follow the guidelines of “any pseudo-deontological rules of journalism”. He adds: “This is my blog and as such I’ll say and discuss what I please with whomever I want. I don’t try to pass myself off as anyone else but myself. I’m a blogger but I’m also a businessman, and I have both right-wing and left-wing clients. This probably explains why some people expected more polemical issues (...). I asked questions according to my own expectations and (...) I don’t see why I should act assertively when a Minister of State honored me with an interview, especially since I’m neither a politician nor a journalist”. As for the presents, le Meur defends himself by saying he is not responsible for how others interpreted his actions. He adds that he was transparent “unlike many others, including certain journalists that offer different types of gifts to get what they want without stating as much.”

A good example of the intrinsic contradiction in the expression “citizen journalism” is precisely this one: le Meur argued simply that he is not a journalist. How then can the concept of journalism be applied to bloggers? Or should they be considered “journalists” solely when it is convenient, that is, only in terms of rights but not responsibilities?

This question leads us to another one of equal political importance: even if we consider positive the hypothesis of a Minister of State granting an interview to “the common man” – no ulterior motives intended, especially during a time of presidential elections in which this Minister is a potential candidate, and despite the important role of this Minister in the recent social conflict in France – we would be forced to also ask about the criteria for selection of a random citizen for such an honor.

Another important question arises when we recall A.J. Liebling’s statement: “freedom of the press is limited to those who own one”. “Now, millions do”, say Bowan and Willis (2003: 47). Millions do, except journalists themselves, if we take into consideration the Borjesson (2002) case studies, which reveal the “myth of a free press”. This project was the result of a group effort by the book collaborators that needed to face the “risk [of] losing their jobs and being blacklisted in the business”.

On the other hand, the participation of millions (or billions) of newspaper readers may not always be welcome. All we need to do is to observe how the political forces fighting against institutionalized power use the Internet. For example, a group of Islamic fundamentalists filmed the decapitation of their prisoners and showed these images on the net or published threatening manifestos. No one recalled the concept of “participatory journalism” during the Beslan massacre. This incident led the main television networks to think

that live transmissions would not always be appropriate, and to take some precautions not only to protect the audience from being exposed to potentially shocking footage but also to protect the TV station against terrorists using the power of live images on TV to make their demands before a perplexed audience¹⁰.

The guidelines implemented by TV networks show an attempt to control the dissemination of information although they are not always successful. The Monica Lewinski case is a prime example. Matt Druge, a blogger, definitely knew very well what he was doing when he broke that story. It is somewhat revealing. But this does not necessarily mean that any and every piece of information that is posted on the web will have similar repercussions: it will depend on whether the political forces in question consider it worthwhile to disseminate or not.

Therefore, the messages that broadcasting corporations send to the “citizen-reporter” possess undoubtedly this sense of mysticism by suggesting that “people” should speak up (participate) even if they are not capable of editing. Furthermore, the audience represents cheap labor for the broadcasting corporations to obtain raw material. On the other hand, people are moved by their increased importance and thus reciprocate by being a devoted audience.

This leads us to two conclusions. First, citizens who are experts at using digital technology can offer relevant testimony – so they can be relevant sources of information, which needs to be accurately verified. This, of course, represents a huge challenge, in view of the large volume of contributions. Second, journalism “as you like it” – that is, the naturalization of journalism – tends to fit in well into Soler’s imagined allegory (*apud* PINTO, 2005):

(...) let’s go back to the fascinating persona of the citizen-reporter. Let us assume that he is quite popular and that very soon he will be the main information-holder. This means anyone who encounters a possible newsworthy incident can decide to spontaneously take a photo, or write down his impressions and post it on his blog. Now, let us take it a step further with the enthusiasm of a novel writer (...). Let us imagine that every citizen decides to practice his right to become a citizen-reporter and thus leaves home every day armed with his mobile camera, ready to hunt down the news of the day. Let us continue to imagine that this journalistic craze extends to the entire population of a city. What happens to the dissemination of information when everyone gathers information but no one is on the receiving end? And once this fad spreads, citizen-reporters will go out and take photos of every single piece of information, anything, because anything can be newsworthy... an open drain hole, a man that limps, a limp flower, every single detail of the day

can be assigned real time, until the plot reaches a point in which step by step, 24 hours a day are recorded in real time, at the same time as things happen during the day.

Thus, Pinto (2005) states: “what Soler would like us to reflect on is not so much the question of gathering information in real time, but whether or not it is useful information.” And he concludes by paraphrasing a famous short story by Borges: “what would be the use of a map if it were printed in a scale that makes it as large as the territory?”

NOTES

- 1 According to an article in Nature, December 15, 2005, Wikipedia, the “free” encyclopedia and main Project, has the same margin of error as the traditional Encyclopedia Britannica.
- 2 John Hiler, co-founder of WebCrimson, a consulting Software Company based in Manhattan, and Xanga.com, one of the greatest sites that hosts blog communities (BOWMAN & WILLIS, 2003: 33-34.)
- 3 <http://www.current.tv/make/training/section=journalism>.
- 4 <http://www.current.tv/make/resources/cj/ethics>.
- 5 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/advice/videoaudioandstills/paymentformater.shtml>
- 6 “OhmyNews Japan Debuts” (28 ago. 2006), in http://English.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?menu=A11100&no=313808&rel_no=1&back_url=.
- 7 This is Mr. Paparazzi’s (www.mrpaparazzi.com) invitation. It stimulates the public to send photos and videos of celebrities, artists, soccer players and Big Brother participants in flagranti. The advertising is obviously identified in the pop-ups: “get rich quick”, “become a millionaire”, “make a bloody fortune” “make loads of money with your celebrity snaps” and so on). It is not a journalism site, of course, but it borders on sensationalist journalism. As we have seen, newspaper agencies that promote high standards of journalism adopt the exact opposite approach.

- 8 Journalist and Professor Manuel Pinto shared his opinion with me in an e-mail exchange on September 12, 2005. He is a professor of the Universidade do Minho (Minho University, Portugal). As such, he is far more than the “typical citi-zen”, given his qualifications and therefore his ability to discuss the topic of media. (For information on blogs check “Jornalismo e Comunicação”, www.webjornal.blogspot.com). On the topic of blogs and who is responsible he states: “It’s a difficult job given the huge variety of sources that I track on a regular basis that could allow me to broaden and systematize my job if... if... that were all I had to do, if I had nothing else to do. I am well aware that what distinguishes professional journalism from this type of job (following leads) is precisely not having time to do what should be done. Not only in terms of researching and editing information, but also when analyzing and writing. Aside from the time factor, we face limited resources. From the point of view of the trade of journalism, it is necessary not only to gather and comment on the information produced by others but actually to hunt for stories, verify them, confront sources etc. Obviously, considering 10 years of experience as a professional journalist and editor, I follow the guide-lines for professional journalists.”
- 9 Reference to Brazil’s largest television network, Rede Globo, known for using their slogans to create an intimate rap-port with the audience, such as “Globo, we’ll see you around”.
- 10 On September 1, 2004, a school holiday in which the “Day of Knowledge” is celebrated in Russia, an armed Chechen Separatist Group invaded a school in Beslan where they had previously left explosives. They held 1,300 people as hostages, including children, parents and teachers. The siege of the school by the authorities lasted 3 days and resulted in hundreds of casualties, most of whom were children. The intense competition of the TV networks to get coverage and exclusive footage of the blood and gore led the editors to reflect on previously-acclaimed “real time” transmission. In June 2005, the BBC published, among other guidelines (such as not to “interview a perpetrator live on air” and not to “broadcast any video and/or audio provided by a perpetrator live on air), the need to “install a delay when broadcasting live material of sensitive stories, for example a siege of a school or a plane hijacking. This is particularly important when the outcome is unpredictable and we may record distressing material that is unsuitable for broadcast without care-ful editing” (cf. BBC, Editorial Guidelines, section 11, “War, Terror and Emergencies”, item “Hijacking, Kidnapping, hostage-taking & sieges in www.bbbc.co.uk/gindelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/war/hijackingkidnap.shtml). They do not state, however, what the delay time should be. One month after the massacre, however, an article published

in the *Jornal de Notícias* (Portugal) stated that Sky TV proposed a delay of 20 seconds, without investigating whether 20 seconds is enough time for “excellent journalists (...) to make the necessary decisions on what to let through or not.” (“Sky News analysis delay of images”, *Jornal de Notícias*, October 24, 2004).

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