



Emerging Media Reshape Global Society

DALE PESKIN AND ANDREW NACHISON

The relationship between traditional media and the public is changing, a trend these information professionals call “We Media.” This emergent journalistic process allows the Web’s social network to produce, analyze, and disseminate news and information to technologically interconnected publics unbounded by geography.

Dale Peskin and Andrew Nachison are co-director and director of The Media Center in Reston, Virginia. The center is a nonprofit media think tank committed to building a better-informed society in an interconnected world. It is a division of the American Press Institute.

Photo montage: Information technologies allow people to connect with each other like never before in trends that span generations and cultures. Participants in the “We Media” revolution use cell phones to record and distribute photographs and video; employ powerful search engines to retrieve information tailored to their particular needs; play sophisticated games with networks of other players; and view satellite channels, such as al-Jazeera, that reach a global audience. From preschool to college, the technologies are tools in basic education, channels to unlimited information, and opportunities to learn the skills of the future.
(All photographs from AP/Wide World Photos)

Innovation in information technologies has thrust humankind into an era of democratic media in which almost everyone can have immediate access to news and information, and become creators and contributors in the journalistic enterprise. As a result, news now moves in unconventional ways with unpredictable consequences.

How does a shared experience of digital media affect what we know and how we know it? How do the creators and keepers of stories behave when anyone can be a journalist, a publisher, or an archivist? What are the implications for our global society?

These questions are at the heart of “We Media,” a phrase The Media Center coined four years ago to describe the emerging phenomenon of global access to content from infinite sources, content that empowers participation and civic engagement in the news and information that affect society.

Google is one expression. The Internet search engine, whose mission is no less than to organize the world's information, enables individuals to take control of their worlds. They become empowered to seek and find information that reflects their personal preferences and take action. Individual access to news and information is no longer determined by powerful institutions with the authority or wealth to dominate distribution.

Blogs are another expression. These online journals create and connect individuals and their ideas throughout the world. Sites such as *Global Voices* [<http://www.globalvoicesonline.org>] aggregate stories and perspectives from everyday people: citizen storytellers with authentic voices from unique circumstances and cultures. So compelling is their power that Internet sites such as <http://www.technorati.com> have been created to track more than 25 million blogs—about one-fourth of the e-journals in the blogosphere.

A third expression is the rise of international satellite channels. The democratization of media has opened the airwaves to cultures everywhere. Using low-cost digital technologies and satellite distribution, more than 70 international channels cross borders to reach the edges of the planet with news for every point of view. The government-funded BBC has created a new kind of British empire, with hundreds of channels and Internet sites, reaching 100 million people worldwide, translated into 43 languages. Al-Jazeera defends media freedom and influences Arab thought in a volatile and turbulent region. Al-Jazeera seeks to expand its influence later in 2006 with the launch of an around-the-clock, English-language newscast.

We Media also encompasses the ubiquity of personal media devices, stimulating the most powerful media connection—word of mouth. At the end of 2005, more than 2 billion people—almost one-third of the world's population—had a cell phone. Nearly 800 million new cell phones are sold each year throughout the world. By

2008, an estimated 600 million people will be able to capture events with sophisticated digital cameras, many as a capability of their cell phones. These devices create a “global content generation” that has the unprecedented power to create, produce, share, and participate in life as it happens. Global networks allow people to post news, thoughts, ideas, and images anywhere, anytime.

What emerges is the most powerful expression of We Media—participation. Everyone is part of the story. Everyone exerts influence.

We Media is marked by the changing relationship between traditional institutions. We Media is a bottom-up, emergent process in which little or no editorial

oversight or formal journalistic workflow dictates the decisions of a staff. Instead, it is the result of many simultaneous, distributed conversations that either blossom or quickly atrophy in the Web's social network.

The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing a role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating news and information rivals edited institutions and the journalists who work for them. But the intent may be the same: providing independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging, and relevant information that a democracy requires.

Once at the fringes of traditional journalism, We Media has become a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. Communities, businesses, government agencies, pundits, stand-alone journalists, columnists, journalism schools, and, yes, even news organizations, are getting into the act. Projects have sprouted throughout mainstream media. They derive from the surprising experience of *Oh My News* [<http://english.ohmynews.com/>] in South Korea, which organized tens of thousands of citizen reporters in



Photo montage: While communications giants like Yahoo!, MSN, and Google provide citizens access to information resources, in today's connected society, the diversity of media prevents any one institution from controlling the flow of news and ideas. (All photographs from AP/Wide World Photos)

a tech-savvy nation where a single issue often dominates the political discourse. Three years after its launch, *Oh My News* is credited with toppling a government and eroding the power of Korea's media barons.

The venerable profession of journalism finds itself at a rare moment in history, when for the first time its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by new technology and competitors and by the audience it serves.

The trends have sparked considerable debate about journalism's key values. Clearly, journalism is in the process of redefining itself, adjusting to disruptive forces. At the center of the debate are the critical issues of control, credibility, and profitability.

Can every citizen be a reporter? Many traditional journalists are dismissive of participatory journalists, particularly bloggers, characterizing them as self-interested, unskilled amateurs who don't subscribe to institutional standards of fact checking, fairness, balance, and objectivity. Conversely, many bloggers look upon mainstream media as an arrogant, exclusive club that puts its own version of self-interest and economic survival above the societal responsibility of a free press.

What most traditional journalists fail to understand is that, despite a participant's lack of skill or journalistic training, the Internet itself acts as an editing mechanism. The difference is that editorial judgment is applied at the edges, frequently after the fact, not in advance. In this information ecosystem, citizens rely on each other to report, distribute, and correct a story as it goes. A story is no longer fixed by deadlines or distribution schedules. Rather it is organic, spiraling through multiple forms of media, changing as it goes. The story belongs to no one save the audience.

The fluidity of this approach puts more emphasis on publishing information than filtering. Conversations happen in the community for all to see. In contrast, traditional news organizations are set up to filter information before they publish it. Editors and reporters collaborate, but the debates are not open to public scrutiny or involvement.

The most obvious differences between participatory journalism and traditional journalism are the structures and organizations that produce them. Traditional media are created by hierarchal organizations that are built for commerce. Their business models focus on profits derived from advertising. They value rigorous workflow, profitability, and integrity. Networked communities that value conversation, collaboration, and egalitarianism over profitability create participatory journalism. Participatory journalism does not show evidence of requiring a classically trained journalist to be mediator or facilitator. Many weblogs, forums, and online communities function effectively without one.

Some view digital media's disruption of traditional information consumption and distribution patterns as little more than an economic shakeout reaping short-term havoc on media companies and creating new business opportunities for the next generation of communications giants. Under this scenario, companies like Google, MSN, and Yahoo! displace local newspapers, television, radio, and magazine publishers as the dominant gatekeepers of our media experiences.

But the notion of dominance is obsolete in the connected society. Individuals exert unprecedented power over how and when they access information and with whom they share it. In this sense, digital media is profoundly disruptive to the interests of any institution premised on power and control. What we know, the information we could access, once depended on where we lived. In the connected society of global nomads, our social capital can expand through vast personal networks spanning the globe.

We Media is a force that will soon exceed the influence of institutions that control news and information. It suggests that voice—the authentic, cultural expression of the individual—is resurgent in the craftwork of our media. ■

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