

There's More to Being a Journalist Than Hitting the 'Publish' Button

For better or worse, the Internet is 'biased to the amateur and to the immediate.'

BY DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF

First they came for the musicians, and I did not speak out—because I am not a musician. Then they came for the filmmakers, and I did not speak out—because I am not a filmmaker. Then they came for the journalists, and there was no one left to speak out for us.

In a media universe that for so many decades, even centuries, seemed stacked against the amateur, the Internet has made a revolutionary impact. Previously, the only law of physics that seemed to apply to the top-down, corporate-driven media space was that of gravity. King George II, William Randolph Hearst, or even Rupert Murdoch would decide what the public should believe and then print that version of reality. And inventions from the printing press to radio, which once seemed to be returning media to the people's hands, were quickly monopolized by the powers that be. Renaissance kings burned unauthorized printing shops, and the Federal Communications Commission tilted the radio spectrum to corporate control. Our mainstream media seemed permanently biased toward those in power as well as toward whatever version of history they wished to record for posterity.

But at least at first glance the Internet seems to be different. It is a biased medium, to be sure, but biased to the amateur and to the immediate—as if to change some essential balance of power. Indeed, the Web so overwhelmingly tilts toward the immediate as to render notions of historicity and permanence obsolete. Even Google is rapidly converting to live search—a little list of not the most significant, but the most recent results for any query term. Likewise, our blog posts and tweets are increasingly biased not

just toward brevity but immediacy—a constant flow, as if it is just humanity expressing itself.

And this notion of writing and thoughts just pouring out of us is also the premise for the new amateur journalism. It is nonprofessional in both intent and content—as close to what its writers believe is an unfiltered, pure gestalt of observation and self-expression. As if the time taken to actually reflect or consider is itself a drawback—or at the very least a disadvantage to whoever wants to be credited with starting a Twitter thread (as if anyone keeps track). Of course writing—whether considered or not—is most definitely never a direct feed from the heart or soul but rather the use of an abstract symbol system, highly processed by the brain and no more gestalt than solving a math equation.

The real difference between the Net and traditional writing is the barrier to entry. Before computers, journalists had to use typewriters—with no cut/copy/paste functionality. Typewritten articles and manuscripts couldn't be corrected—they had to be rewritten from scratch. Almost no one enjoyed this process, which actively discouraged all but the truly dedicated from attempting to write professionally. Now not only is writing much easier, but distribution is automatic. Writing something in an online environment means being distributed from the moment one hits "publish." It's not a matter of how many people actually read the piece; it's a matter of how many could.

Which gets to the heart of the misconception leading to the demise of professional journalism: People believe their blog posts and tweets may as well be interchangeable with those of the professional journalists

with whom they are now competing for attention. Dozens of times now I have fielded these same questions after my lectures—What makes some newspaper columnist's writing any more important than their blog? With cameras and keyboards in phones these days, why do we even need reporters? Won't someone see and report?

What Makes a Journalist?

What these honest questions don't take into account is that a professional journalist isn't just someone who has access to the newswires, or at least it shouldn't be. A professional newsperson is someone who is not only trained to pursue a story and deconstruct propaganda, but someone who has been paid to spend the time and energy required to do so effectively. Corporations and governments alike spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year on their public relations and communications strategies. They hire professionals to tell or, more often, obfuscate their stories. Without a crew of equally qualified—if not equally funded—professionals to analyze and challenge these agencies' fictions, we are defenseless against them.

And thus, we end up in the same place we were before—only worse, because now we believe we own and control the media that has actually owned and controlled us all along.

First off, our misguided media revolutionaries are mistaking access to the tools for competency with the skills. Just because a kid now enjoys the typing skill and distribution network once exclusive to a professional journalist doesn't mean he knows how to research, report or write. It's as if a teenager who has played Guitar Hero got his hands on a real Strato-

caster—and thinks he's ready for an arena show.

Worse than the enthusiastic amateurization of writing and journalism is that the very same kinds of companies are making the same money off this writing—simply by different means. Value is still being extracted from everyone who writes for free—whether it's me writing this piece or a blogger writing his. It's simply not being passed down anymore. Google still profits off the ads accompanying every search for this article. Likewise, every “free” video by an amateur requires that amateur to buy a camera, a video-capable laptop, editing software, and a broadband connection through which to upload the completed piece onto

Google-owned YouTube, along with certain rights.

Value is still being extracted from the work—it's just being taken from a different place in the production cycle and not passed down to the writers or journalists themselves. Those of us who do write for a living are told the free labor will garner us exposure necessary to get paid for something else we do—like talks or television. Of course the people hiring us to do those appearances believe they should get us for free as well since they're publicizing our writing.

Worst of all, those of us still in a position to say something about any of this are labeled elitists or Luddites—as if we are the ones attempting to repress

the natural evolution of culture. Rather, it's the same old spectacle working its magic through a now-decentralized media space. The results—ignorance, anger, and anti-elitism—are the same.

The pen may be a mightier tool than the sword, but not when we're using it to lobotomize ourselves. ■

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Categorizing What Works—So We Can Apply Those Lessons to Future Endeavors

As journalism heads into digital territory, an exploration of online news sites reveals 100 that offer promising pathways.

BY MICHELE McLELLAN

“[The] death of a huge tree is not the death of a forest ... The ecosystem will continue and if any gaps exist, people will move in to fill them.”

Eric Newton, who is now vice president for the journalism program at the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, said these words more than a decade ago when the sale of the Examiner foretold its demise. What he said is apt today as we watch tall trees of old growth journalism wither and even die.

As this happens, it is crucial that we mark what is at risk and find ways to support them, such as labor-intensive watchdog journalism and long-form narrative, each of which binds us across differences.

But it is equally important for us, as journalists, to mark the shortcomings of late 20th century journalism: our

lack of inclusiveness, the banality of a lot of what we produced, our significant loss of credibility and relevance. We failed to engage our communities, and as long as the ad dollars flowed we didn't feel much pressure to do so.

The Web changes what we do—and our relationships. We can now interact locally and globally in ways we never could in old growth newsrooms. Given these possibilities, I am turning more of my attention from tall tree newsrooms, where I spent nearly 30 years, to the emerging news organizations I fondly call the “sprouts.” These sprouts are part of our chaotic, dynamic news ecosystem today. Many won't survive, but some will. Most won't be very impressive, at least at first, as Clay Shirky observed in the 2009 commentary he published on the Web, “Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable”:

Nothing will work, but everything might. Now is the time for experiments, lots and lots of experiments, each of which will seem as minor at launch as Craigslist did, as Wikipedia did, as octavo volumes did.

There is no telling which sprouts will flourish and which will die. But it's probably far too pessimistic to say flatly that none of today's sprouts will ever replace any of our trees. I've been spending quite a bit of time with the sprouts. I advise and coach community news startups for the Knight Foundation's Community Information Challenge. At Knight Digital Media Center, I develop training programs for news leaders—broadly defined to include fledgling entrepreneurs and small nonprofits along with newsroom and corporate executives.