# Where is social media going?

By Vincent Maher                                                                    3 May 2007

I have been thinking about this issue since I was at the New Media Lab at Rhodes and sometimes have been critical of the aggressive stance the citizen journalism pundits have taken towards the traditional media. I still hold the same position, that citizen journalism is over-hyped.



Vincent Maher, pic courtesy of Gregor Rohrig

It will never replace traditional media because it is different and complimentary rather than a viable alternative. This is why most of the strong citizen journalism is happening on sites operated by the digital arms of traditonal media.

Maybe I should explain my definition of citizen journalism because it quite narrow: I see citizen journalism as the kind of thing you see on OhMyNews, not arbitrary videos uploaded on YouTube. In other words, the end product resembles quite closely the formats produced by journalists. Everything else is social media and this is a completely different kettle of fish.

## Recreates considered decisions

The social media world is highly fragmented, in terms of both content and format, and also tends to be filtered around clusters of special interests or communities. For instance, the collective intelligence that emerges on sites like Digg and Reddit ultimately recreates the considered decisions made by editors but the process is very different and, ultimately, harder to fix.

If an editor begins to display a consistent bias that negatively affects the publication, the editor can be fired and replaced, quickly. On the other hand, the wide-spread ideological bias of the readership of a site like Digg (and perhaps the influence of an elite of power users) is much harder to eradicate.

Of course, it comes down to the institutional role the publication or website is intended to play in society. Most serious newspapers are consciously intended to provide "objective" information that can be used to enhance the level of awareness

a society has about its own functioning, or that of its government. It is not surprising that the media get it wrong; they are also human. The big question is whether a Digg-like system will be better at filtering out nefarious content. Or, perhaps more pertinently, will such a site include content that runs contrary to the ideological position of the majority of its members?

I would argue that, in cases where there is a wide-spread bias among its readership, such a site would not be capable of making a decision to include content that is ideologically subversive (in relation to whatever the dominant ideology is) because the power elites and a large chunk of the rest of the audience would vote it off quickly.

## Exposure to contradictory viewpoints

Something that is very often overlooked when discussing the difference between social and traditional media is the traditional media imperative to expose its audience to points of view that contradict their own (both of the audience and of the paper), because tolerance and an understanding of the arguments behind those positions is, in fact, the cornerstone of a rational democracy.

Social media sites tend to become increasingly narrow ideologically because those who find an ideological home there tend to stay and those who don't move on. What this does is increase the levels of fundamentalism in society and by this I am referring to all types of fundamentalism. For instance the core of the open-source philosophy is as fundamentalist as any religious movement, and as dangerous to society because it breeds intolerance.

But it will also become much clearer, in years to come, how dramatic the development of culture has been over the past seven years. The blogosphere is the single biggest explosion of the written word in human history. When people lament how young people don't read anymore, I generally reply that at least they are writing.

## Private sphere issues

The blogosphere is, predominantly, concerned with private sphere issues that do not make any positive contribution to society on a structural or organisational level, but I think this is certainly a consequence of the end of modernity. Is it not ironic that we meet and discuss private sphere issues (work is included in that) and we read about and discuss governance and politics in the home, in small groups?

Anyone familiar with Habermas will understand how far we are, really, from the conditions he was describing for deliberative democracy. To the extent, I think, that those ideas no longer can have any traction and should be permanently abandoned in exchange for a normative theory of the media that is based on actual conditions and takes into account social media. A lot of this type of work is being done in schools of cultural studies but a normative outcome is literally impossible now under the weight of post-structuralist scepticism about frameworks in general.

It is a strategy to avoid moral responsibility: the message is becoming hyperlocal as the medium becomes increasingly global.

## ABOUT VINCENT MAHER

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