

# Can journalism be participatory?

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Around 1995 in *Being Digital*, Nicholas Negroponte described the differences between bits and atoms. He argued then that most of the information we receive reaches as in atom form (newspapers, magazines, books), which spontaneously makes us also evaluate and measure the ways this information is carried in terms of atoms. Simple.

The arrival of the bit, which «has no colour, size or weight and travels at the speed of light and is the smallest element in the DNA of information», would be responsible for changing this way of understanding the world. What would be required would be neither more nor less than the reformulation of certain values, to change from an analogue world model to a digital one, in which we can «filter, select and handle multimedia for our own benefit». If the media were to send out a whole lot of bits, we could use computers to capture the things that interested us according to our tastes, agendas or curiosity, whatever, and make a «my diary», tailored to each person. The form that this reformulation of values has taken today - in a process that is heading in an uncertain direction - has had various consequences: from *folksonomy* to the *blogosphere*, from content syndication to web 2.0.

In July 2003, Shayne Bowman and Chris Wills published the *We Media* study, which analysed the ways in which audiences can influence the future of news and information using the Brechtian concept of «a community of

media producers». To explain how in a short time we have come not only to live with bits and make «my diaries», the story of the South Korean web site **Ohmynews.com** has already become a classic of the evolution towards an «our diary». Based on the idea of the «citizen reporter», it has an average of a million visits per day, and according to *The New York Times* it was the key medium contributing to the election of president Roh Moo Hyun in South Korea. In fact, it was the first communications medium to which the new president granted an interview. The web site works in a simple way: some 30,000 citizens also act as reporters, while around 40 journalists check the news they submit; all of this is transformed into some 200 articles per day, which is about 85 percent of the content published. Something very like DIY journalism.

The BBC has been one of the mediums to best grasp the thing about atoms and bits. Above all, it has understood that it can provide many different kinds of benefits. It thought, who better than citizens and new technologies to improve audience figures? and asked members of the public to send images of newsworthy events captured on mobiles and digital cameras. We only have to think of what happened in this sense during the Iraq war, the March 11 bombings or the *Windsor* building fire in Madrid, and, above all, the July 7 bombs in London, to prove that this proposal is proving fruitful.

The kind of participation that is not so different to the contributions traditionally made by readers to the press becomes more relevant

with the arrival of technologies and tools such as e-mail, web pages, forums, wikis, chat rooms, instant messenger programs and, in particular, personal and collaborative weblogs.

According to the *We Media* report mentioned above, what is happening in the media could be called «participatory journalism» because it involves the «act of a citizen or group of citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that democracy requires».

But in these things he who hesitates is lost, and little by little the media are realising the obvious: the sum of my readers who consume my medium know more than I do, have more information. Rather than feeling threatened, new technologies give me the opportunity to invite participation. And I still own the information, which is what I want. New sources... for free! For some time now, television channels have been filling in endless afternoon programming almost for nothing, every time a guest goes to a talk show to proudly tell viewers how to be with three women at once without dying in the attempt. Nobody would dream of charging money on top of getting to be on TV, right?

I don't think that this is the most reasonable way for citizens to use the media. And I don't think it's appropriate to define this kind of citizen journalism as a fabulous opportunity to participate in the mass media, regardless of the way. At the very least, it can be more than that. If we take the discourse about using the new technological tools within our reach and turn it around, so that instead of asking how the media can use them we reflect on how we as citizens can use them, then actions of participatory journalism may be able to influence public discourse. Every

element has to play its part: the media (as tools, not the media as companies) make themselves available to society, and society (as a community) responds by using them.

«Aznar getting away with it? They call it a day of reflection and Urdazi is working? Today, 13M at 6pm. PP headquarters c/Genova, 13. No parties. For the truth. Pass it on!».

The demand for information concentrated in ownership of the mass media, the increased conservatism of most journalistic institutions, basic rights and freedom, combined with a mobile phone, e-mail, a forum or a blog, make up a highly attractive cocktail for opening the doors to alternative sources of information and opinion that can build bridges for communicating information, comments, actions and demonstrations. It is the transformation of the citizens into consumers, producers and means of information. Somewhere in between information and opinion, an increasing number of eyes are beginning to monitor the media through blogs, forums or sms messages. And any one of us can become an observer of the media, a *mediawatcher*. This is precisely what happened in Spain after the March 11 bombings in Madrid.

In *Blogging as a form of journalism*, Joseph D. Lasica - a veteran journalist and an expert on the impact of new technologies on culture - describes the phenomenon of blogs as a «movement of people from the street who can sow the seeds for new forms of journalism, public discourse, interactivity and on-line community». In general terms, a blog is a personal page in which information is updated regularly and presented in inverse chronological order, so the most recent material published is placed at the start of the page, allowing users who visit the page to add comments. The purpose of blogs is to discuss the issues that are published, like when you meet up with your friends. And

this is where it is fundamentally different from traditional media. In the first there is the filter, and then the public. Here there is the public, and then the filter, in the same way as someone usually talks first and then the person listening takes what they want from it, adds his filters to the words, but after the fact. And this is also how credibility and respect are gradually created. The news item is not the final product, it's just a starting point, because the final purpose of each story is to start a discussion, to allow a whole lot of people to say what they think, and give them space.

As Tíscar Lara assures us in *Weblogs and participative journalism*, «with the change brought by the Internet and digital networks, the media can no longer act like privileged gatekeepers of information. They have to accept that there are forms of media available to citizens that allow them to access sources and participate in communication processes. If politics and the media continue to turn their backs on this phenomenon, they will have lost their reason for existing in society, and communities will emerge that will let them know it, through blog, forum, chat or sms messages or using any media within their reach». Society watches, society observes and learns: «By selecting news, evaluating the credibility of sources, writing headings, taking photos, developing writing styles, interrelating with readers, building an audience, weighing up ideological bias and occasionally investigating» (...) «thousands of amateurs are learning how we do our job and in the process becoming more sophisticated readers and sharper critics» (*The new amateur journalists weigh in*, Matt Welchen).

It's also true that the importance of these new amateur - or not so amateur - journalists may eventually become, in some cases, the very thing they wanted to turn away from. It may invert the process and take us back to the start. It's interesting to see how

personal blogs have become the compulsory point of reference on the web at times of immediate demand for information, such as the July 7 bombings in London. When the number of comments make it almost impossible to follow a thread, I think in a sense the idea of a blog as a conversation is distorted. Sometimes there is a very fine line between *mediawatchers* and *gatekeepers*.

### So, wasn't journalism for the media?

«If we don't do anything, Internet and cable will be monopolised by the managerial megacorporations in ten to fifteen years. People don't know that these technological instruments are in their hands instead of leaving it to big companies. Consequently, coordination is necessary among the groups that are opposed to this monopolisation, using the technology with creativity, intelligence and initiative to promote, for example, education.».

*Warning to navigators* - Noam Chomsky

Chomsky was speaking in these terms in 1998. If we take him on his word, we're late. We don't have much time to act, and stop these megacorporations - the usual suspects: Murdoch's *News Corporation*, AOL *Time Warner* (EEUU) and *Walt Disney Co.* (US) - from taking control of Internet and cable. It up to us to transform ourselves into producers of information and communication.

Chomsky's ironic article *What makes mainstream media mainstream?* talked about the idea of the ignorant and meddling outsider. «The real mass media are basically trying to divert people. Let them do something else, but don't bother us (us being the people who run the show). Let everybody be crazed about professional sports or sex scandals or the personalities and their problems or something like that. Anything, as long as it isn't serious (...) They all say (I'm partly quot-

ing) the general population is «ignorant and meddling outsiders». We have to keep them out of the public arena because they are too stupid and if they get involved they will just make trouble. Their job is to be *spectators* not *participants*. They are allowed to vote every once in a while, pick out one of us smart guys. But then they are supposed to go home and do something else like watch football or whatever it may be».

No one tells us what we should think, but they tell us what we can think about. Nice freedom, certainly very useful for some. But if we participate in public discourse as collective outsiders using participatory dynamics, we can do away with the inhibition and control imposed by the *agenda-setting* of news agencies and its amplification in the mass media. Thinking globally, acting locally, let us disseminate the media, concentrate citizen participation in small communicative actions that construct realities based on the General Intellect and collective creation.

Because what I find interesting about participatory journalism is precisely its limits. The final product is not as important as it is in traditional journalism because it is not the work of any one person. And it doesn't have to try to be neutral, but should be politically and socially involved. The participatory journalism that truly benefits citizens is found in the process, in interpersonal communication, in the construction of reality, the use of the tools, the criticism...not everything has a merely informative purpose, and this doesn't mean that we have to take away the label of participatory journalism, or any other label we want to use to define the practices we have described. And always taking into account the time and dedication limits of those who don't work as professional journalists.

To avoid failing in the multiplication economy of the Internet (to paraphrase an article by Fran Ilich), the key may be to understand

how the media work, encourage (re)literacy so that society isn't excluded from the process once again by a technological elite that ends up appropriating content. The media are ours, they are useful and we want to use them: «Don't hate the media, eat them!»

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