

Is Public Journalism Morphing into the Public's Journalism?

BY LEONARD WITT

"The State of the News Media" report for 2004, produced by the Project for Excellence in Journalism at Columbia University, says, "Journalism is in the middle of an epochal transformation, as momentous probably as the invention of the telegraph or television."¹

The transformation is being powered in part by technological advances that have reduced the cost of publishing. Today anyone with access to a computer can have the equivalent of a printing press—indeed, everyday citizens can have a multimedia publishing house with global reach, at their fingertips. Much of what public or civic journalists were struggling so hard to accomplish for more than a decade from mostly within the news media is suddenly being thrust upon the entire news media from the outside at lightning speed. Few saw it coming.

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Indeed, in early 2003 public journalism appeared, at least to some critics and even to some advocates, to be moribund. The Pew Center for Civic Journalism closed its doors that spring, and with it went organizing power and millions of dollars in funding support for public journalism projects and workshops. However, a cadre of scholars and journalists were eager to keep the movement alive.

Twenty-four of them came together at Kennesaw State University outside of Atlanta in January 2003

to form the Public Journalism Network (PJNet), a professional society for educators and journalists. The luminaries of the movement were present, among them such early advocates as Jay Rosen, Lewis Friedland, and Davis "Buzz" Merritt. Early practitioners such as Cole Campbell, Chris Peck, and Rexanna Lester, all of whom ran newspapers under the public journalism banner, were in attendance, as was Jan Schaffer, the outgoing director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism.

This was to be a strategy meeting to determine what was next for public journalism. No one quite knew. Questions even arose about the new professional society's name. Should it be the Public Journalism Network, or the Civic Journalism Network, or would it be good public relations to drop the terms *civic* and *public journalism*?² As with any reform movement, public journalism developed its set of enemies, especially in what Rosen often referred to as the "high church of journalism." Since its inception after the 1988 presidential election debacle, where spin doctors ruled and public journalists wanted to get the voices of the people heard, major news organizations such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times* had plenty of disparaging things to say about the movement.³ Michael Gartner, one of those high priests and then editor and co-owner of the Ames, Iowa, *Daily Tribune*, was giving lectures calling civic journalism a silly fad and saying things like, "Newspapers are being conned by civic journalism."⁴

There are conflicting studies on the actual impact public journalism has had on the public and on journalism. For example, research done by Lewis Friedland and Sandy Nichols at the University of

Wisconsin found, on the basis of self-reports by participating newsrooms, “evidence of a positive impact of civic journalism on public deliberation, improved civic skills, changed public policy, and the formation of new community organizations, as well as increased volunteerism.”⁵

On the other hand, Tanni Haas of Brooklyn College, from his research with Brian Massey,⁶ wrote, “We concluded that, contrary to what appears to be the conventional wisdom, public journalism has not had substantial impact on the attitudes and behaviors of journalists and citizens.”

However, he added, “Public journalism’s most important contribution may have been to ignite a discussion on the role and responsibility of journalism in a democratic society rather than to enhance citizen involvement in democratic processes.”⁷

A study done for the Pew Center and the Associated Press Managing Editors found that “forty-five percent of all editors surveyed say that their newsrooms use the tools and techniques of civic journalism. Sixty-six percent say they either embrace the label or like the philosophy and tools.” The movement was having an impact inside the journalism establishment.⁸

Nonetheless, press critics Jack Schafer at *Slate* and Alan Wolper at *Editor and Publisher* pronounced public journalism dead.⁹ Even its most ardent advocates were worried, and worry manifested itself in the summer of 2003 at another PJNet meeting in Kansas. Here Steve Smith, editor of the *Spokane Spokesman-Review* and a long-time advocate of public journalism, lamented that “in ’94 or ’95 we talked about creating cultural change, transformational change. It isn’t happening. We are struggling just to survive.”

On the upbeat side, Chris Waddle, then editor of the *Anniston (Alabama) Star*, and Ed Mullins, chair of the journalism department at the University of

Alabama, told how their two institutions were about to help turn the *Star* into a nonprofit lab for public and community journalism. Rosen, chair of the New York University Journalism Department, added a dash of optimism, calling on his colleagues to keep the flame alive to make way for innovation when the economy improves.¹⁰

Smith might have been right about the heady days of the mid-1990s, but as I would write in the *Columbia Journalism Review* in November 2003:

In truth, public journalism lives each day on the front pages of newspapers like the *Savannah Morning News*, in stories filled with the voices of real people and breakout boxes telling readers how to get involved or learn more about the issues at hand. Public journalism also lives in special projects such as “Building the New Wisconsin Economy,” in which the *Wisconsin State Journal* and some twenty other media outlets around the state made a two-year commitment to engage the public in discussions about the state’s economic development.

It lives, too, whenever an editor pushes a reporter for greater diversity in his sourcing, or to seek truths from the middle as well as the extremes. It lives whenever media outlets open channels for readers and viewers to talk back to journalists, as *The New York Times* did . . . when it announced its intention to hire an ombudsman.¹¹

At the time I was writing that, most of the charter members of the Public Journalism Network, including me, were fairly oblivious to a sea change taking place that would begin to morph public journalism into the public’s journalism. A public journalism movement—really, a participatory journalism or citizens’ media movement—was in full bloom in South Korea with the beginning of *OhmyNews* in 2000.

Its publisher declared, “Every citizen’s a reporter. Journalists aren’t some exotic species, they’re every-

one who seeks to take new developments, put them into writing, and share them with others.” With that philosophy, *OhmyNews*, the South Korean online newspaper, began publishing. Today it claims to have some thirty thousand citizen reporters writing for it.¹²

The *Japan Media Review* reports: “Citizen reporters submit about 200 articles every day, and about 1 million readers visit *OhmyNews* each day. The site mixes straight news reporting and commentary. Its influence at the grassroots level has been widely credited with helping President Roh Muh-Hyun win the popular vote last December [2002].”¹³

By 2004, it had launched a beta version of an English language international edition.¹⁴

OhmyNews was just one precursor of the many changes, most of which were technologically driven and Web-based. In the United States, Weblogs, or “blogs,” began to get the most attention. These online self-publishing tools were available for free at sites such as Blogger.com, were simple to use, and had global reach. Hundreds of thousands of citizens were tinkering with them, and some were turning them into a publishing force that demanded attention.

In hindsight and thanks to Steven Johnson’s book *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software*, one can conceptualize the changes in an almost Darwinian way. Thanks to the infusion of all the new technology, public journalism’s DNA has literally changed.¹⁵

In the old public journalism, perhaps the best tool we had was a face-to-face meeting with representative groups of citizens. They were often part of “special projects” that were expensive, time-consuming, and episodic. Too often these projects dealt with an issue and moved on. Journalists were driving the discussion. They would say, “Let’s do a story on welfare-to-work (or the environment, or traffic

problems, or the economy),” and then they would recruit a cross-section of citizens and chronicle their points of view.¹⁶ Since not all reporters and editors bought into public journalism, and some outright opposed it,¹⁷ reaching out to the people from the newsroom was never an easy task.

Public journalists have, and had, honorable goals they want to accomplish. They want to ensure that the voice of the public is heard and that not all reporting is top-down; that all communities, even marginalized ones, are listened to so that spin doctors do not control our elections; and that we hear from the middle spectrum of ideas as well as from the polar extremes.¹⁸ However, all public journalists soon learned by experience that established institutions, the media included, don’t change easily. Asking journalists to share decision-making power with the people or simply listening to everyday people was never easy. At times it looked like a losing battle.¹⁹

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Now, a year after that August 2003 PJNet meeting, thanks in large part to Weblogs, public journalism is nimble—reaching out and grabbing hold of the entire journalism community. Chris Lydon, formerly of National Public Radio, says A. J. Liebling’s observation of the modern world that “freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one” may be losing its impact because, with Weblogs, we all have our own printing press at our fingertips.²⁰

This DNA change, in a symbolic way, has seemed to move into the very soul of the public journalism movement. Schaffer, who ran the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, and Rosen, its most visible theoretician, have both gone electronic. Schaffer pro-

motes media and citizen interactive experiments through the J-Lab (the Institute for Interactive Journalism at the University of Maryland). Rosen writes and publishes *PressThink*, a Weblog devoted to media criticism.²¹ Indeed, *PressThink*, in part by critiquing the mainstream press, is helping journalists, citizens, educators, and bloggers build a theoretical construct for this new era. Perhaps one of the great ironies is that Rosen, who spent a good deal of his time in the 1990s arguing for more citizen access to the major dailies, in the spring of 2004 was considering covering the Democratic National Convention, after the convention managers hinted that citizen bloggers might be awarded press credentials.²²

Of course, much of what is being said about Weblogs is untested theory, thus opening a golden opportunity for academic researchers. Yet there are undeniable facts. Presidential hopeful Howard Dean, using Weblogs and MeetUp (an online organizing tool), was able to get some 170,000 people to sign up to join face-to-face meetings around the country.²³ In the summer of 2004, two of the Dean Website developers, now at the CivicSpace Labs and using the Dean organizing tools, were in the midst of releasing a “grassroots organizing toolkit that empowers collective action inside communities and cohesively connects remote groups of supporters.”²⁴

The Daily Kos, a site maintained by Markos Moulitsas Zúniga, claims to have 1.5 million unique visitors each month. It is interactive, and readers can post comments. One Saturday morning, about 425 people posted politically oriented comments before noon.²⁵ The authoritative Technorati.com ranked the Daily Kos, with its twenty-four hundred outside links, fourteenth on its top one hundred most-visited sites.²⁶

Read those Daily Kos posts and the comments, and you will find people have things to say. Often important, civically oriented things. Daily Kos and other sites like it—whether coming from the left, like his, or

from the right or center—are the reason a seasoned journalist such as Lydon can say, “I read the mainstream media mainly to observe its manipulations and mistakes—it has been my world for many years and I have a lot of friends there. I would miss it some, but for information and provocative reflection on what this election is about, [there’s] no question I would choose the Web, including the beloved blogs.”²⁷

At least two bloggers have turned to their readers for funds, in one case to cover the war in Iraq and in another to cover the New Hampshire primaries. The audiences responded and sent thousands of dollars.²⁸

The world of public journalism activists is expanding with bloggers such as Jeff Jarvis, an eclectic, prolific, and high-profile blogger at BuzzMachine.com. Thanks to his day job at Newhouse’s Advance.Net, he reaches a massive audience when he blogs about public journalism and what he calls “hyperlocal” journalism.²⁹ There are bloggers with much smaller audiences, such as Tim Porter at First Draft, whose Weblog focuses on critiques of the press.³⁰

The hyperlocal journalism that Jarvis envisions includes citizens reporting on events too small for a beat reporter at a newspaper or broadcast outlet, but that interest local readers. The events covered could include everything from a zoning meeting to scholastic sports. He is also talking with Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism about setting up a Citizens Media Center and has advanced on his Weblog the idea of forming the Citizens’ Media Association.³¹

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their personal biases are seeping into their reports. A prime example was the Wilgoren Watch, “Dedicated to Deconstructing *The New York Times* Coverage of Howard Dean’s Campaign for the White House,” which monitored the reporting of *New York Times* reporter Jodi Wilgoren.³²

In this case and many others, people don’t have to wait to see if their letters get published or if the ombudsman mentions their complaints. They can post their own complaints. These trends cannot be ignored.

At the 2004 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Joichi Ito, president and chief executive officer of Neoteny, a venture capital company in Japan, outlined the ecosystem of Weblogs. Here are conference notes paraphrasing what he said:

The growth of blogging has created a kind of food chain of information. At the top are the “power blogs”—a relatively small elite of well-known and highly influential sites that may attract thousands or even tens of thousands of readers per day. These account for an overwhelming share of all page views, or “hits.” Below them is a secondary group of “social network” blogs, which often follow certain topics or specific regions. Finally, at the bottom is a vast galaxy of obscure blogs that may only get a few hits a day. Increasingly, news starts at the bottom of the food chain—with a trend or event that is first noticed by a less-known blog, then amplified by a social network until it comes to the attention of a power blog. From there it may even enter the mainstream mass media. So, while power bloggers get most of the attention, the real vital force of the blogging phenomenon is at the bottom, among those who discover news and originate content.³³

An example of Weblog and Internet power was played out in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* front-page story entitled “Electronic Votes Touch off

Doubts.”³⁴ The article raised questions about the trustworthiness of electronic voting machines, including those sold to Georgia by Diebold, Inc.

This issue was being written about for months on Internet sites such as Black Box Voting, but it remained below the radar screen of the national press. Then the *New York Times* had a small story basically summarizing the high points of what was being said on the Internet. At about the same time, then-presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich posted key documents that Diebold was trying to have removed from blogger sites. *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman wrote another summary of the information that had been floating around the Web for months. In February 2004, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* published an even longer front-page story. In it the reporter writes, “Computer experts at respected universities have sounded the alarm over the potential for high-tech chicanery. Grass-roots activists, leaders of alternative political parties and others have stoked the flames, mostly via the Web.”³⁵

Of course, sharing power with citizens causes new dynamics that news institutions such as the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* must deal with.

On the other hand, maybe they won’t have to deal with it. John C. Dvorak of *PC Magazine* thinks blogging is a passing fad. He writes:

I’m reminded of the early days of personal computing, which began as a mini-revolution with all sorts of idealism. Power to the people, dude. IBM was epitomized as the antithesis of this revolution. But when IBM jumped on board in 1981 and co-opted the entire PC scene, it was cheered. Welcome, brother! . . . IBM represented affirmation about as much as Big Media is affirmation for the hopeless bloggers.

Another so-called revolution bites the dust. Big surprise.³⁶

However, Chris Willis and Shayne Bowman, coauthors of the *We Media* report written for the Media Center at the American Press Institute, think a revolution is in the making. They write:

We are at the beginning of a golden age of journalism—but it is not journalism as we have known it. Media futurists have predicted that by 2021, “citizens will produce 50 percent of the news peer-to-peer.” Mainstream news media, however, have yet to meaningfully adopt or experiment with these new forms.

Historically, journalists have been charged with informing democracy. But their future will depend not only on how well they inform but how well they encourage and enable conversations with citizens. That is the challenge.³⁷

It sounds like public or civic journalism. The *We Media* authors want to call it participatory journalism.³⁸ Fine. For public journalists, the name has never been as important as the concept.

There has been a power shift. In the past, the mainstream arguments dealing with public journalism were between people such as Rosen and the top editors at places such as the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*.

IBM's Media and Entertainment 2010, an IBM consultant's white paper, covers much of the same territory as the Media Center's *We Media*, saying, “An increasing segment of consumers will be able to compile, program, edit, create and share content; as a result, they will gain more control and become more immersed in media experiences.” It adds, “The past's closed and proprietary media and entertainment models will give way to open media strategies that will enable forward-looking companies to exploit significant opportunities for profitability within these trends.”³⁹

There has been a power shift. In the past, the mainstream arguments dealing with public journalism were between people such as Rosen and the top editors at places such as the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*.⁴⁰ Now that argument is moot, because the voices of a range of citizens are being heard loud and clear on the Internet, mostly through Weblogs. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* could dismiss the public journalism advocates but can't as easily dismiss the Markos Moulitsas Zúnigas of the world who have massive audiences. Because audience time is finite, one has to suppose bloggers are taking away audience share from the mainstream press. If one then adds the thousands of much smaller social, community, and professional network sites such as PJNet.org, the audience shift from mainstream to self-publishers is even greater. At the very least, these citizen publishers demand attention, as was exemplified by the downfall of House Speaker Trent Lott, after his racially charged comments at Strom Thurmond's birthday party. Bloggers fanned a mere smoldering cinder of a story into a national conflagration.⁴¹

Just how tenuous the old gatekeeping function is at traditional news media was played out within a few weeks in the spring of 2004. It began when a citizen took digital photos of United States soldiers' flag-draped caskets being loaded on an airplane in Iraq. In a couple of days, one of her photos was displayed on the front page of the *Seattle Times*. A couple of days later, TheMemoryHole.org displayed dozens of similar photos, which had been successfully obtained under provisions of the federal Freedom of Information Act. Soon the photos were in all the major newspapers. Again citizen action determined the news.

Shortly thereafter came the flood of the abuse photos from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. When the photos came across editor Chris Cobler's desk at the *Greeley (Colorado) Tribune*, he e-mailed his “e-board” of more than five hundred citizens to ask how they would recommend the pictures be used. In

the end, the editors would make the decision, but he read the nearly thirty citizen responses before making a decision. He was using a technique of building an audience database to improve editor and reporter interaction with citizens. It was a process that Ken Sands at the *Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, Washington, has been refining for a couple of years, and that Michael Skoler at Minnesota Public Radio was building upon under the name “Public Insight Journalism.”⁴²

Cobler’s connection with his audience was the best of public journalism at work, but will it matter? Not many days later newspaper and broadcast editors across the country—acting as gatekeepers and as arbiters of good taste—would decide how much of the Nicholas Berg beheading in Iraq should be shown. Most opted for showing less rather than more. But the public’s journalism was at work, and—for better or worse, depending on your point of view—they were making editors as gatekeepers irrelevant.

Jimmy Breslin, hardened newspaper journalist and *Newsday* columnist, expressed it best. He was giving a lecture at Columbia University about the role of journalists in society when a student turned his laptop toward Breslin to show him the terrorists holding Berg’s severed head. The *Atlanta Journal Constitution* reported that words related to the beheading topped the lists of frequently used keywords in Internet searches at the time.⁴³ Breslin later would write in his column: “We are at the end of an old way of telling the public the news of the day. . . . Here is the new news reporting. If something is too gruesome, too ominous for the newspaper editor’s taste, it matters not. The Internet will decide what you print, and if you don’t care, if you want to stay in the past, then stay there with your dead newspaper.”⁴⁴

We are in the midst of a citizen-driven media revolution, the outcome of which no one can predict. But one thing is fairly certain: public journalism has morphed into the public’s journalism. It’s all part of

an evolution that has taken public journalism theory and practice to places unanticipated. Now citizens, researchers, teachers, and journalists must appraise its positive and negative consequences. This evolution also forces an unexpected twist. The question used to be, Will public journalism become extinct, as the critics predicted? Now the question is (and it is still only a question), Will mainstream journalism, as we know it, become extinct because it refuses to adapt to a new era of communication? As Jay Rosen reminds us, “The age of the mass media is just that—an age. It doesn’t have to last forever.”⁴⁵

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