

## WHO IS A JOURNALIST, WHEN ANYONE CAN PUBLISH?

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### **Abstract**

*The paper examines the positive and negative effects of the change that is associated with new media trends like online publishing and the issue of the confusion about who is a journalist since anyone can publish today with the new media allowing everyone to be a source of news. It also focuses on how internet organizing allows thousands of individual efforts, however small, to be rapidly combined into a powerful collective forces. Subsequently the importance of digital literacy education is highlighted and the hypothesis whether it strengthens the bridge between new media activity and civic and political engagement is looked into. The near future of online journalism and the social media is also examined and comments are made on the expectation that vast numbers of new users will appear, bringing about with an immediate rise in opportunities for users to learn.*

**Key words:** traditional journalism, new media, online publishing, social media, digital media literacy, civic and political participation

"To learn without thinking brings confusion, to think without learning leads to danger."

Confucius

### ***Online publishing and quality of information***

The best quality news produced can and usually is found in print journalism. And this is mainly due to the length of articles allowed in this traditional form of the media which in its turn allows the reader to acquire the detailed information he/she seeks. Moreover, the reader can repeatedly look at the information and clarify points that cannot be fully understood at a first glance.

With online publishing, is the quality of information under threat then?

### ***Positive and negative effects of the new media trends***

Kendyl Salcito (2009), argues on the positive and negative effects of the "far reaching change" as he names it, with new media trends like online publishing, naming the following as positive effects of change: a) interactivity, i.e. the increased ability of the public to actively search for their own information and to interact online with news web sites, b) the increased public access to different forms and types of media which means an access to a greater diversity of content c) the reduced "gatekeeping" powers of major news organizations; less power to set the news agenda or manipulate the public's understanding of events d) the new and powerful story-telling methods through multi-media technology and e) the convergence in news which may mean more resources to probe issues, and as negative effects of change: a) the rise in "journalism of assertion": unsubstantiated opinion and rumor which harms journalistic credibility; lack of restraint among online writers, b) the pressure to lower ethical standards and sensationalize stories, c) the public complaints about how "ubiquitous" media violate personal privacy, d) the confusion about who is a journalist, when anyone can publish and e) the ethical "vertigo" regarding news values, newsworthiness and credibility.

What standards are appropriate for this new "mixed media"?

### ***Confusion about who is a journalist when anyone can publish***

The issue of the confusion about who is a journalist is worth looking into, when anyone can publish today with the new media allowing everyone to be a source of news. Moreover, it is both useful and interesting to look at the future of the media and how they can influence social movements and societies to help them become better.

How does social technology help in organizing protests around the world and send personal messages to large audiences? What is the impact of the acceptance of such messages by large audiences? Does it make any difference in combating inequality and injustice? Does it play its role in promoting change in the way key individuals act around the world?

Confucius said that 'to learn without thinking brings confusion, to think without learning leads to danger'. Today, when everyone can be a journalist, this statement should be seriously taken into account. Expressing opinions on the web on information often acquired from only one source which can be reliable but at the same time it can also be unreliable and as a result addressing them to the wide public without crosschecking the original information i.e. without triangulating them, indeed leads to serious danger. It means thinking and expressing oneself on information acquired sloppily, without really learning the true facts from many sources. And the situation is aggravated by the enormous speed with which ideas and action not based on triangulated facts can spread through the internet.

We find a lucid example of this on a course blog of Cornell University and it is the fake Martin Luther King Jr. quote which went viral after Facebook user named Ms Dovy posted on her wall the following:

I will mourn the loss of thousands of precious lives, but I will not rejoice in the death of one, not even an enemy. 'Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that'. MLK Jr.

The quotation marks start after the first sentence. However, someone copied and pasted the entire post and for some reason removed the quotations. As a result, the first sentence became part of the MLK Jr.'s quote. Eventually, the fake quote was re-tweeted by Penn Jillette to his 1.6 million followers on Facebook. As a result, the quote went viral on Twitter.

Information waterfalls such as the above are dramatically increased by social networking, as with the click of a button information is posted and constantly reposted.

Brian Jung, commenting on the negative effects of the social media on society and individuals argues that the immediacy provided by social media is available not only to friends but to predators as well. He focuses on the vulnerability of children to the practice of cyber-bullying in which 'the perpetrators, anonymously or even posing as people their victims trust, terrorize individuals in front of their peers'. He argues that the devastation of these online attacks can leave deep mental scars and he also mentions that in several cases which were systematically publicized, victims have even been driven to suicide. 'The anonymity afforded online can bring out dark impulses that might otherwise be suppressed', he adds. 'Cyber-bullying has spread widely among youth, with 42% reporting that they have been victims, according to a 2010 CBS News report'.

Content posted on social media pages may also be dangerous to people's careers. It can be used for not recruiting people, not promoting people or even firing them.

Individuals have to bear in mind that the amount of information they publish on the internet through available social media pages, affects them in the real world. As a result, nobody should publish online any information that he/she would not wish to disclose to other people than relatives or very close friends.

### ***Positive effects of everyone writing publicly***

However the positive effects of everyone writing publicly today cannot be ignored. The revolution of the social media has allowed people to stay in touch with others, make new friends and gain new interests. The social media are even used by some people eager to connect new relationships.

Lance Bennet, Professor at the University of Washington, holds the view that the future of the media depends on 'who you are and where you are' as he told the Cyprus Weekly newspaper during a visit to Cyprus in the framework of the conference: 'Art and Social Justice-The Media Connection' that took place in November 2011 at the University of Nicosia.

He argued that 'if someone is generally over 30 and particularly living in one of the northern industrial democracies like Germany, the media looks like it did 30 years ago, with high quality journalism. However, if one is under 30 and still lives in such countries but is not watching the news or reading newspapers but gets accidentally informed by social networks, he usually gets low quality information, although there are examples of good quality information like Wikipedia'. Indeed new media practices are youth directed and young people prefer them so the future of the media allows for the quick spreading of information and the effect this has on social movements.

Digital media technologies are undoubtedly an essential tool of political and civic life today. For example, Arab Spring was made known mostly with people being there and reporting their own views and experience of it. Bennet raises a crucial question on popular faith in government stating: 'if you think about the protests around the world today, they're against governments who are not responding to young people. So they do not expect to see information in newspaper and TV news coming from the government that they are going to believe', referring of course to the arm's length principle at this point. 'So how do you restore popular faith in government?'

New media practices can change the world and a good example is the action of the Avaaz organization, launched in 2007 with a simple democratic mission: 'to organize citizens of all nations to close the gap between the world we have and the world most people everywhere want'. 'Avaaz' means 'voice' in several European, Middle Eastern and Asian languages and indeed the voice of those signing its petitions is heard in many cases. Avaaz empowers millions of people from all walks of life to take action on pressing global, regional and national issues, from corruption and poverty to conflict and climate change.

As they say, 'our model of internet organizing allows thousands of individual efforts, however small, to be rapidly combined into a powerful collective force'.

They campaign in 15 languages, served by a core team on 6 continents and thousands of volunteers. They take action by signing petitions, funding media campaigns and direct actions, e-mailing, calling and lobbying governments, and organizing "offline" protests and events to ensure that the views and values of the world's people inform the decisions that affect us all.

We read in *The Guardian* about Avaaz: 'Avaaz is only five years old, but has exploded to become the globe's largest and most powerful online activist network'.

An example of a successful campaign undertaken by Avaaz, is the avoidance of the eviction of the Maasai community from its native land. For 20 years, the Tanzanian government had been trying to evict a Maasai community from its traditional lands to make room for a big game hunting company to bring in tourists to shoot wildlife. A year ago, Avvaz launched a campaign calling on the Tanzanian President to stop the evictions and finally they won.

The petition was signed by 1.7 million people. With the Maasai, the international media were rallied, getting CNN and Al Jazeera to visit the area and break the story to the world. Then Avaaz members funded hard-hitting adverts in local papers calling out the government. When news of an impending eviction surfaced, a Maasai march on the capital was supported by Avaaz, their traditional leaders camped outside the Prime Minister's office for three weeks, forcing him to listen to their case. The pressure was building and, in late September, the Tanzanian Prime Minister visited the area and told the Maasai that the President had confirmed that they would not be evicted.

### ***Digital literacy education's role in relation to new media activity and civic and political engagement***

Moving on to the practice of educating youth to use the new media which is taking place in the states, another relevant question raised by Kahne, Feezell and Lee (2012) is whether digital literacy education strengthens the bridge between new media activity and civic and political engagement. In other words, what is the effectiveness of media literacy education as regards the participation of youth in social and political activity? The writers argue that not much has been done in the States on research on the matter, they refer to just one study by Mihailidis (2009), who, looking at civic learning outcomes among undergraduates at the University of Maryland found that students that took a media literacy course increased their ability to comprehend, evaluate and analyze media messages but at the same time found that such courses often promoted negativity and cynicism about the news media and that more could be done to promote active citizenship.

Kahne, Feezell and Lee (2012) were mostly concerned about the frequency of digital media education in schools, whether it can foster online political participation, whether it can promote exposure to diverse viewpoints and if there is a possibility of promoting more or less equitable political engagement.

On the frequency of digital media education they argue that there are no nationally representative studies so one can determine it. On the issue of online political participation they argue that young people indeed are urged to seek information and engage in dialogues when educated on media literacy. Additionally they increase their level of civic acts such as raising charity money or volunteering as well as political acts such as voting or attending political speeches.

Kahne, Feezell and Lee (2012) also commented on the issue of exposure to diverse viewpoints by engaging in online discussions and argued that usually young people prefer to enter conversations with others sharing common views, a fact that leads to a deeper and more coherent understanding of one's perspective as Mutz, (2006) and Jamieson and Cappela (2008) support. However, political theory outlines the benefits of exposure to different views as Habermas (1989), Mill (1956) and Arendt (1968) support. On the last point, the one of the possibility of promoting more or less equitable political engagement, Kahne, Feezell and Lee (2012) argued that levels of civic and political participation are 'alarmingly unequal'. They mention the examples of young people with more education who are more likely to vote than less educated people and people with degrees who are more likely to do community work than those who did not go to college.

Summing up, Kahne, Feezell and Lee (2012) argue that 'if the provision of digital literacy education is inequitably distributed, it might reinforce existing inequalities' and point to the fact that one must examine whether those who engage in civic and political issues receive more opportunities to get digital literacy education.

### ***The near future of online journalism***

However regarding the near future, social media are expected to gain vast numbers of new users rapidly so in parallel to this, opportunities for users to learn are expected to rise.

These vast numbers of new users shall in turn post vast numbers of information. As a result, online publications will also do more with the online available data. That is, the data, the vast numbers of information available to anyone can be used by journalists to write stories based on 'what people are saying on social media and how they are saying it'. Also, journalism is also already expanding and getting enriched not only by available data but also with new additions, such as photographs. The appearance of Instagram, for example, has enhanced the relationship between photography and the social media. Images are today crucial for a strong social media presence. In parallel to that, reporters are also often asked to add mobile video clips to sites. While they are on scene, they send short mobile clips for sites. In other words they send live updates for websites, not just coverage of facts.

Thane Ryland, who joined Nokia as Head of Global Social Media Insights in January 2013, in an interview by Houghton Street online, the online magazine of LSE, on the issue of the management and development of social media evolving over the next few years argues that 'It will no longer be thought of as social media, but just media...There will be lots of focus on the developing regions as handset manufacturers, social media and networks collaborate on getting another billion people online. Those billions will transform how we communicate as diaspora, as colleagues, as families, as consumers and as citizens'.

### ***Information from different individuals from a psychological types' perspective***

I would also like to stand on another fact, that each individual has his/her own history in relation to the rest of the world, so billions of life patterns, experiences and ideas shall be presented or expressed online, providing the opportunity to the vast online community to get huge amounts of information from so different individuals from a psychological types' perspective and on all sorts of issues and participate in dialogues. Leona Tyler (1978) argues that 'psychology abounds with every type of individual difference measures – in traits, values, motives, attitudes, cognitive styles and so on'. Tyler goes on to argue that patterns of human individuality arise from consistent patterns of transaction between the individual and his/her environment. The choices we make determine the events we live through and these events influence our future choices. Carl Jung, also believed that human individuality develops through transactions with the social environment that develop one function over another.

David Kolb (1984) gives a table with Jung's psychological types, including four pairs of adaptive orientations:

Mode of relation to the world	E Extrovert Type (Oriented toward external world of other people and things)	I Introvert Type (Oriented toward inner world of ideas and feelings)
Mode of decision making	J Judging Type (Emphasis on order through reaching decision and resolving issues)	P Perceiving Type (Emphasis on gathering information and obtaining as much data as possible)
Mode of perceiving	S Sensing Type (Emphasis on sense perception, on facts, details and concrete events)	N Intuition Type (Emphasis on possibilities, imagination, meaning and seeing things as a whole)
4. Mode of judging	T Thinking Type (Emphasis on analysis, using logic and rationality)	F Feeling Type (Emphasis on human values, establishing personal friendships, decisions made mainly on beliefs and likes)

Imagine billions of individuals belonging to such diverse psychological types interacting online. However, apart from getting informed, the vast online community with its members belonging to the diverse psychological types also provides information. The provision of information in its turn by an uneven group of individuals as regards knowledge, education level and diverse psychology brings a fundamental transformation in communication which inevitably raises the rest of the negative effects mentioned at the beginning of this paper, not only the confusion about who is a journalist. Such information raises rumor, which harms journalistic credibility; it also raises the lack of discipline among online writers; it enhances the pressure to lower ethical standards; it raises public complaints about how the omnipresent media violate personal privacy; additionally it raises issues of ethics regarding news values, newsworthiness and credibility.

### **Conclusion**

One may argue that we cannot stop the transformation in communication with the billions of people interacting and reacting online, billions of people enjoying the freedom of expression and the joy of engagement in dialogues in scales that they had not even dreamt about some years ago. The question is whether the traditional media forms shall continue to exist. Ensuring quality information through the traditional media (of course we cannot disregard the fact that often we do not enjoy quality in information even when it is offered by the traditional media forms due to practices such as the arm's length principle or the commercial model of information but it is not the aim of this discussion to analyze such instances), surely acts as a safeguard against the negative effects of the online media. The moment when the traditional media shall cease to exist, new safeguards will have to be established like ethical codes, the presence of editors etc. And perhaps new issues shall rise that we are not in the position to even think of today.

Time will show the ultimate effects of the media going online and whether there will be a balance between negative and positive effects. What is certain is that a lot changes are taking place in the field and that technology always moves forward. Let us stay focused and watch how the vast area of communication develops.

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