

instinctively treating only members of traditional news organizations as journalists, while viewing with skepticism anyone else interested in pursuing journalistic activities. We should be suspicious of efforts to allocate preferences that do not reflect the reality that we're all capable of being journalists now.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Transformation of Journalism and the Citizen Journalists' Battle for Equality

Although courts have largely ducked, and legislatures ignored, hard questions about who is a journalist, such evasion will be difficult in the years to come. Nonprofessional journalists are sure to occupy an increasingly prominent and significant role in American life. As the number of nonprofessional journalists expands, and their initiatives become more ambitious,

there will be further challenges to laws that relegate them to second-class status compared with professional journalists and representatives of institutional media organizations. Many among the new cadre of citizen journalists will challenge and test court rulings, statutes, and regulations that deny them rights and privileges extended to professionals. They are sure to meet resistance.

With our pervasive system of press preferences we have created a journalistic caste system, in which those working for established news organizations are given priority over others sharing information and ideas with the public. Before the development of the Web we were able to hobble along, since the circumstances in which those not affiliated with traditional news organizations were actually denied privileges they sought were relatively few, limited to occasional book authors, documentary filmmakers, or freelancers. We can no longer get by with the current system—nor should we try.

Journalism is returning to its status as an activity rather than a profession. Yet the legal framework for allocating press rights and privileges is not keeping up with the pace of change. While nonprofessional journalists are multiplying in number and influence, they are often treated as if their journalistic activities are a quaint hobby rather than the exercise of a fundamental constitutional right—one that is vital to the

effectiveness of our system of self-government. This needs to change, and change soon.

The Democratization and Decentralization of Journalism

Supply creates its own demand. So goes the paraphrase of Say's Law, a principle of economics named for nineteenth-century French economist Jean-Baptiste Say. I have long thought there is much to the idea, and the relationship of the Web to citizen journalism appears to be an example of the theory in action. The Web is creating an overwhelming supply of people who want to share information and ideas with a wide audience, and there are growing numbers of people tuning in to read, and in many cases respond to, what they have to say.

But the rise of citizen journalism is not just about supply creating its own demand. Citizen journalism satisfies real needs. It is abundantly clear that traditional news organizations cannot, by themselves, provide all the information and analysis our society needs from journalism—a subject I will address further in Chapter 5. The limitations of the mainstream media are exacerbated by the fact that traditional news organizations are contracting. Virtually all newspapers are reducing their staffs. The *Los Angeles Times*, for

example, has pared down its newsroom personnel by about 50 percent over the past several years. Television networks are doing likewise, including closing many foreign bureaus. Even successful ventures are cutting back—literally. The *Wall Street Journal* recently reduced the width of its paper, and the *New York Times* plans to do so in 2008, scaling down the space they have to report news. In this deepening void, citizen journalism has emerged—in a big way.

Scarcely a decade removed from the appearance of the first blogs, hundreds of thousands of nonprofessional journalists have taken to the Web in a purposeful effort to share information and ideas with others. Although many of them may not think of themselves as journalists, a great number of them are engaged in substantially similar activities as those who publish through established news organizations.

One segment of citizen journalism is composed of people in the right (or wrong) place at the right time. In recent years, much of the video and firsthand narratives from the scenes of terrorist attacks and natural disasters, like the Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, have come from nearby observers without any preexisting plan to serve as “reporters,” who take on the role when circumstances are thrust upon them. While the scope and scale of this work is new, its essential nature is not. Consider what is perhaps the crown jewel of American citizen journalism—the

famous “Zapruder film.” This recording of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination was made by Abraham Zapruder, a manufacturer of women’s clothing, while he was standing in Dallas’s Dealey Plaza as the president’s motorcade drove by. Zapruder alone among the spectators was able to capture the president’s assassination. As a result, his unique footage became both a commercial and a cultural treasure. Initially sold to *Life* magazine, the film was later returned to the Zapruder family, and eventually “taken” by the federal government, in exchange for payment of “just compensation” of \$16 million in accordance with the “takings clause” of the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution. Today, however, the miniaturization and affordability of portable video recording equipment makes most of us potential Zapruders. Recognizing this, established news organizations actively solicit video and eyewitness accounts from citizen reporters.

Were citizen journalism confined to these activities, it would be noteworthy but not of particularly great moment. But citizen journalism is much more than home movies of a tsunami or videophone images from a terror attack. It comes in all shapes and sizes. Some of it is episodic; some consistently produced. Much of it is the work of individuals; some, the product of collaboration among groups—many of them large (including, perhaps, Wikipedia, the collabora-

tively written reference Web site created in 2001, about which there is a reasonable argument that the fewer than 2 percent of its registered contributors who account for about 70 percent of its content are engaged in a form of journalism).

Citizen journalists collectively have become a force in breaking news. This is evident from examples discussed in Chapter 1, and reinforced on a regular basis. Consider some of the headlines from October 2006, the month during which Florida congressman Mark Foley resigned after disclosures regarding his inappropriate contact with pages working at the House of Representatives. Although the story gained traction after a report on ABC News, Foley's e-mails with pages were disclosed several days before the ABC broadcast by a Web site called Stop Sex Predators. The same week Foley resigned, reports surfaced that Internet powerhouse Google was in talks to buy the immensely popular video-sharing Web site YouTube. Again, the news first broke on the Web. This time on TechCrunch, a blog dedicated to new Internet products and companies, run by a former lawyer, who said he had received an e-mail that negotiations were underway, and that the price of the deal was \$1.6 billion. Less than two weeks later the acquisition was formally announced. The price tag for YouTube: \$1.65 billion (what's \$50 million between friends?).

Nor is citizen journalism confined to one-off disclosures devoid of sustained coverage or analysis. Valuable reports about the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, have been distributed by nonprofessionals on the Web. Numerous other citizen-led investigative initiatives appear likely to rival work by traditional news organizations, or fill holes in their reporting. Among these are projects examining aspects of work by Congress largely neglected by the mainstream media, and others covering local news and issues.

Today, the majority of work by citizen journalists is done without the expectation of any compensation—and that is unlikely to change. There are substantial numbers of people willing to serve as energetic volunteers. While these volunteers may work without being paid, most are unlikely to take on citizen journalism projects that cost them money. Fortunately, the Web allows almost anyone to share information and ideas with the public at little or no cost.

Even so, some forms of journalism require financial support. For citizen journalism to extend into investigative work, and other time-consuming and potentially expensive efforts, the reporters will need money. The funding is starting to emerge from a variety of sources—including foundations, wealthy individuals, entrepreneurs. Even segments of the mainstream media are contributing to citizen jour-

nalism initiatives. Reuters, for instance, contributed \$100,000 to NewAssignment.Net, a project to encourage collaboration between professional and “amateur” journalists, launched in July 2006 by New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen, with financial support from the Sunlight Foundation and Craig Newmark. Less than four months after getting underway, NewAssignment.Net recruited Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter John McQuaid as a contributing editor.

Such collaboration between professionals and citizen journalists is a model foreseen by several journalism professors, including Jan Schaffer, executive director of the Institute for Interactive Journalism at the University of Maryland. She “envisions many tiers of journalism in the future, with citizen reporters doing ‘small j’ journalism such as meeting coverage, and professional journalists doing the ‘big j’ journalism that involves trend stories and enterprise stories based on ideas perhaps being culled from those citizen reports.”

Many citizen journalism projects have floundered, to be sure. Whether specific endeavors thrive or sputter has no bearing, however, on the phenomenon as a whole. Citizen journalism is growing, and there is no reason to think it is a passing fancy, either in the United States or elsewhere across the globe, such as in South Korea where the widely read citizen journalism

Web site OhmyNews has grown exponentially since its launch in 2000.

Perhaps we should have seen the wave of citizen journalism coming. Some of the energy propelling the movement was discernible from the success of certain types of “old media” programs, even before the advent of the Web. Consider the immense popularity of radio call-in shows, or a television program like *America's Most Wanted*, which put its audience to work, harnessing the observational power of the masses. These were signs of a pent-up desire to participate and share one's views, which now has been unleashed by the power of the Web.

Citizen journalism is also part of a broader trend in which the public determines for itself what it wants to watch, read, or listen to, and when, rather than passively taking in whatever editors or producers select. Although little of what appears on Web sites like MySpace or YouTube could be considered journalism, under any conception, their head-spinning popularity makes it clear that the Web has transformed consumers into producers—a phenomenon recognized by *Time* magazine when it declared “You” its “Person of the Year” for 2006, and proclaimed to readers: “You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world.”

Many of these heretofore unknown consumers-turned-producers will attract a sizable group of loyal

readers. Americans are rarely reluctant to shower a newcomer with attention and catapult the formerly anonymous into the limelight. This has already happened with a host of bloggers, whose Web sites are regularly visited by tens of thousands, and who play an important role in shaping debate over policies and ideas.

A Tempest Brewing

Changes ushered in by the Web, including the accompanying rise of citizen journalism, are taking their toll on established news organizations. "We're in the middle of a revolution," observed Paul Steiger, long-time managing editor of the *Wall Street Journal*. "The business models are being totally destroyed and reordered every day."

From the perspective of many within traditional news organizations, this is not simply a period of transformation, but also a time of peril. From one direction, the mainstream media perceive themselves as subject to growing hostility from government officials. This antagonism takes many forms, including public rebukes for decisions to disclose classified information, and increasing willingness to issue subpoenas to journalists and send them to jail in an effort to obtain confidential information in their

possession—a trend some journalists believe undermines their ability to acquire information from anonymous sources.

From another direction, professional journalists find themselves in a strange new world in which their work is scrutinized by thousands of instant fact-checkers and critics, some of whom are becoming their competition. The days of the mainstream media as the "voice of God" are over, declared Dean Wright, a vice president at Reuters focused on the company's online, mobile, and interactive services.

Both trends call into question the long prevalent self-image of the institutional media as occupying a privileged place in society by virtue of its representation of the people—a claim that is difficult to sustain in the face of declining popularity with the public, and given the reality that many people are "representing" themselves by engaging in journalistic activities previously reserved for traditional news organizations.

Understandably, then, not everyone in the press fraternity will welcome citizen journalists with open arms. Many traditional media organizations and other businesses will resist conferring citizen journalists with the kinds of rights and privileges extended to professionals. Occasionally, the resistance will be overt and public. Mostly, it will be subtle, quiet, and behind the scenes—like the inevitable closed-door lobbying of government officials that will occur whenever