

Express Yourself*

By Thomas Kunkel

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“No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money.”

— Samuel Johnson

Sam, you were the original Dr. J, and your social observations were so spot-on that you occupy almost 10 pages in my “Oxford Dictionary of Quotations.” Still, were you alive today, I’ll bet you’d be blogging away at the DailyDoc or some such, and probably for no more money than the millions of other “blockheads” out there who are writing their noggins off.

As a card-carrying media professional, I empathize with my brethren and sistren fretting at the notion of all those semi-pros and amateurs traducing our heretofore exclusive right to decide What’s Important. Who let *that* happen? I mean, wasn’t somebody supposed to be guarding the door?

But, really, this must qualify as the least surprising phenomenon going. From our cave days humans have indulged a desire to let others know that we are here, that we matter. From there it’s not much of a leap to “We want to be heard,” and the Internet is proving to be the greatest megaphone ever devised.

Ironically, from a news standpoint, the rise of all-comers journalism is really just a circling back to our roots. We often forget that the very term stems from “journal,” and what are blogs and MySpace pages but contemporary journals?

As Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach reminded us in their fine book “The Elements of Journalism,” this is precisely how modern news got its start. In the coffeehouses and taverns of 17th-century England, and soon after in America, visitors often recorded the news and gossip they’d picked up in their travels, personal reports that were posted for others to read. It wasn’t long before some enterprising publican pulled these dispatches together into the first newspaper. And you

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thought OhmyNews pioneered the idea of a civilian news army! Now that same people-power fuels news sites all over the Web.

New York Times columnist Tom Friedman was here at Maryland recently, his best-seller “The World Is Flat” being our university’s first-year book. He told about 1,500 young Terps that broadband and ever-faster computers have fundamentally changed our relationship with the Web, which is to say the average consumer has gone from almost exclusively downloading material to being a vigorous uploader.

Today we post our thoughts and experiences, our videos, our feedback to movies and books, our foibles and yes, even our body parts—well, thankfully, not *all* of us are posting body parts. But Friedman’s point is apt: Media power is shifting from the institutional few—gulp—to the many. As he put it, “You happen to be around when Gutenberg invented the printing press.”

It’s a change that is frankly overdue. Media arrogance—whether reflected attitudinally (in the news pages) or institutionally (shortchanging communities in coverage)—largely gave rise to what in one sense can be interpreted as a populist backlash.

But as we are starting to figure out, the pros and the people not only can live with one another, we *need* one another. Without the reporting of mainstream journalists, what would bloggers blog about? After all, most of what we know about the public sphere is still unearched by journalists. Then again, an emerging nation of citizen journalists is covering ignored communities, reimagining what news is, keeping a skeptical eye on the accuracy and judgment of the pros. Think not? Ask Dan Rather.

In the process they enrich the information mix. Critics Stephen Hunter of the *Washington Post* and Anthony Lane of *The New Yorker* may still be my go-to guys for movies. But Rotten Tomatoes (www.rottentomatoes.com), with its wisdom of the masses, is reliable and entertaining too, albeit in a different way.

This meeting of old and new media is an uneasy one, needless to say, in part because of the battle over agenda-setting. In late October the *Post* reported on ostensible outrage over the bluer passes of Virginia Democratic Senate candidate Jim Webb’s combat novels. On the story’s jump we learned that then-Senator George Allen’s aides “have been trying to get other news organizations to write about the excerpts for weeks.” When in frustration Webb’s opponents released this “news” to Matt Drudge, it predictably prompted a talk-radio tempest, and this goofy non-story winds up on the *Post*’s front page.

I wish the paper had had the courage to cling to its original conviction. The understandable pressure it felt belied this new media mix at its worst—not so much a world without taste as a world without judgment.

But even there, a little reflection reminds us that democracy, like a good stew, is inherently messy—and on the Web anyone can cook.

A few weeks ago another national figure, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, was on our campus. Breyer was talking about “active liberty,” a phrase that, not coincidentally, is the title of his recent book. He admitted that today’s

blog-fueled partisanship gives him a headache, as the din can be as deafening as it is scary.

But then he thinks better of this anxiety, tells himself that the cacophony is in fact the sound of democracy. And as he said, “Better a high decibel level than none at all.”

Excuse me a moment while I go upload that. . . .

The Bigger Tent*

By Ann Cooper

Columbia Journalism Review, September/October 2008

In the late 1990s, the staff at the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York took note of an exciting new trend in China. With traditional Chinese media under tight state censorship, people with something critical to say about their government had seized on the Internet as a new platform to publish their views. Their actions were not unlike the samizdat dissidents of the Soviet era or the poster-makers of Beijing University during the 1989 student uprising. But now, with the Internet, Chinese writers had the potential to reach a global audience.

In 1999, China arrested six people on charges of using the Internet to spread “anti-government” or “subversive” messages. I was the executive director of GPJ at the time, and we had to decide whether to take up their cases. None was a journalist in any traditional sense; reporting wasn’t their daily job and they didn’t write for established news organizations. But they were, we reasoned, acting journalistically. They disseminated news, information, and opinion. We took up the cases.

In the years since, CPJ has defended writers in Cuba, Iran, Malaysia, and elsewhere—some traditional journalists, some not—who used the Internet to get around official censorship. In CPJ’s view, these were entrepreneurial spirits using technology to battle enemies of press freedom. The many American journalists who supported CPJ’s global work readily agreed.

Yet what U.S. journalists recognized as a press-freedom breakthrough in China and Cuba looked different here at home. Here, the Internet wasn’t a thrilling way to dodge government censors. It was a platform for new competitors who seemed to take particular glee in lambasting the gatekeepers of mainstream media. In the view of some online writers, American journalism was calcified, too self-important to correct its errors or own up to its biases, too pompous to talk with its audience, rather than at it. The newcomers soon surrounded the tent of traditional journalism, demanding fundamental, maybe revolutionary, change. Many inside the tent huffed that the online competitors were not “real” journalists. They were acerbic

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ego-trippers, publishers of opinion and unconfirmed gossip with no professional standards. They stole the hard work of mainstream reporters and rarely picked up a telephone to do their own research. Some said bloggers threatened the established order of American journalism, and maybe even American democracy.

And so it went for a few years, bloggers versus journalists; a fight over much more than semantics, a fight to see whether the big tent of American journalism would become a bigger tent to accommodate the newcomers and their new ideas. Who belongs in that tent, and who gets to decide who's in it? Put another way: Who is a journalist? It's a tantalizing question, but it's hardly worth asking anymore. *We're All Journalists Now* declared Washington lawyer Scott Gant's 2007 book, subtitled *The Transformation of the Press and Reshaping of the Law in the Internet Age*. A less sexy but perhaps more accurate title might have been, *We Can All Be Journalists, If and When We Choose to Be*. But Gant's basic point is sound; freedom of the press now belongs not just to those who own printing presses, but also to those who use cell phones, video cameras, blogging software, and other technology to deliver news and views to the world—just like those early Internet writers in China.

The expansion of the tent brings questions and challenges, of course—for institutions (who gets press passes?), for the law (how do you draft a shield bill if anyone can be a journalist?), and for journalists themselves (what are the standards of my profession?). Here's a field report—snapshots, really—on how we're all adapting to a fluid situation.

ACCESS

Soon after former radio and wire-service journalist Jim Van Dongen became a spokesman for the New Hampshire Department of Safety in 2003, he found himself confronted with press-pass applications from unpaid Internet bloggers and community-radio talk-show hosts. His first reaction: they're not "legitimate" journalists. His second reaction: we need a definition of who is.

It was Van Dongen's third reaction that was surprising. After trying out different criteria—journalists write for pay; they do original reporting, not just opinion writing—Van Dongen concluded that none of the criteria worked. In today's digital world, he says, "essentially, anybody who says he's a journalist is one." So this past January, Van Dongen's office announced that it would no longer issue press passes. "Either we must issue such ID to virtually anyone who asks for it or be placed in the position of deciding who is or is not a legitimate journalist. That is not an appropriate role for a state agency," the department said in a January 15 news advisory. Though stunning in its symbolism, the New Hampshire decision didn't have much practical effect; Safety-Department press passes were rarely needed, except for access to the state legislature floor.

Nor have other institutions rushed to copy Van Dongen's response to the credentialing dilemma. In institutional worlds such as government, politics, and busi-

ness, many in charge of press operations still cast a wary eye at requests from outside mainstream media. It's not that they're inundated with applicants; many institutions say blogger requests are still something of a novelty. But they're not at all sure what to do with someone who doesn't look like a traditional journalist. Last January for example, the retail chain Target e-mailed blogger Amy Jussel to say it wouldn't answer her questions about its ad campaigns because "Target does not participate with non-traditional media outlets." Meanwhile, the New York Civil Liberties Union went to court in February to force the release of all recent New York Police Department decisions on press-pass requests; the action is aimed at determining whether, as some independent online writers claim, the NYPD denies cards to applicants who don't work in the journalistic mainstream.

But institutional barriers are definitely crumbling. Bloggers were admitted to the 2004 and 2008 political party conventions. They had reserved seating in a spillover room at the January 2007 trial of former White House aide Scooter Libby. Doors have cracked open at the United Nations, the White House, and the congressional press galleries, which have all accredited online-only journalists. So have legislatures in California, Tennessee, and Georgia, according to Michelle Blackston, a spokeswoman for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Blackston's group counsels an inclusive press policy—urging lawmakers to leak good stories to bloggers, and to start their own blogs. "We feel strongly it's a new way for lawmakers to connect with their constituents," she says.

That is precisely why barriers will continue to erode, at least for bloggers who have credibility and an audience. If their message reaches people newsmakers want to reach, their requests for press credentials and other access will be taken as seriously as those from mainstream media.

BEYOND THE SHIELD

Few issues have united mainstream media like their effort to pass a federal shield law, which would give journalists some immunity from having to reveal confidential sources to federal courts. But the number one legal issue for traditional media—which is not expected to win final congressional approval this year—hasn't stirred a lot of passion in the blogosphere, where writers attract readers with their opinionated take on events much more than with original reporting. In fact, blog writers face a very different set of legal risks from those addressed in the shield law. Bloggers, says Robert Cox, an online writer and president of the Media Bloggers Association, "are going to be intentionally provocative. They rely on hyperbole, sometimes." Cox says that several hundred lawsuits have been filed against bloggers, most charging defamation, copyright violation, or invasion of privacy.

Mainstream journalists can avoid such charges by turning to editors or in-house lawyers for advice; company insurance also provides protection if they're sued. In the blogosphere, editors are few and far between, insurance is costly, and legal

help is usually limited to consulting a nonprofit resource—like Cox’s group, or the Citizen Media Law Project at Harvard University. “There are some simple things bloggers can do” without compromising their passionate voices, says Cox, “but they don’t know to do them.” Something as basic, for example, as using the disclaimer “alleged” when writing about a person accused but not convicted of a crime. “The more professional you are, the better your standards, the more defensible your position,” says Cox.

But that advice, like the online law course Cox’s group plans to offer to help bloggers get insurance, isn’t always well received in the fiercely independent blogosphere. “There’s an extreme sensitivity to anyone trying to tell some other blogger what to do,” Cox acknowledges.

I, JOURNALIST

“Bloggers vs. journalists is over,” declared a January 2005 post by Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University who writes prolifically about the new world of journalism at his site PressThink. “The question now isn’t whether blogs can be journalism. They can be, sometimes. It isn’t whether bloggers ‘are’ journalists. They apparently are, sometimes. We have to ask different questions now because events have moved the story forward.”

When Rosen wrote that almost four years ago, events hadn’t moved nearly far enough to convince many mainstream journalists that the debate was over. But in 2008, with old media in a financial crisis that seems to deepen by the week, resistance is evaporating. Traditional reporters and online writers are increasingly converging under one shared journalistic tent, where each side is free to borrow from the other. Thus, mainstream reporters still write news and analysis that strive for impartiality, but increasingly they also blog (at midsummer, *nytimes.com* had sixty-one news and opinion blogs; there were eighty-one at *washingtonpost.com*). Bloggers still aggregate and riff off the news reported in mainstream media, but a few are beginning to draw readers with original reporting.

These days it’s more the act of journalism that gets you entry into the tent, not whether you’re doing it every day, or doing it for pay. There are still distinctions, though. “Old” journalists are called professional, traditional, mainstream, or institutional; “new” ones are amateur, nontraditional, nonprofessional, or citizen journalists. PressThink’s Rosen promotes “pro-am” experiments, in which unpaid citizen writers like Mayhill Fowler (who broke the Obama “bittergate” story for Huffington Post) work with professional editors like Marc Cooper (a journalism professor and former contributing editor at *The Nation*) to cover the news in different ways.

Does this mean we’re one big happy family in the big new tent? Far from it. In an interview, Rosen said many bloggers still fume that they have second-class status; even when they break news, “there’s still a sense that a story hasn’t really arrived until it’s picked up by the mainstream media.” And while some traditionalists

may be enjoying the breezier writing style that blogging allows, they wonder what it's doing to journalism's hallowed standards.

SETTING THE BAR

Last December, former NBC correspondent David Hazinski unloaded his traditional-journalist concerns on *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* op-ed page. Hazinski, a journalism professor at the University of Georgia, railed against television's increasing reliance on a new form of citizen journalism—video shot by nonprofessionals, like CNN's iReports.

Calling a citizen iReporter a journalist, said Hazinski, “is like saying someone who carries a scalpel is a ‘citizen surgeon’ or someone who can read a law book is a ‘citizen lawyer.’” What distinguishes a journalist from the average citizen who records news on his or her cell phone, said Hazinski, are education, skill, and standards. “Information without journalistic standards is called gossip,” he concluded.

The blogosphere dumped a blizzard of “absolute hatred” on Hazinski. “I had death threats,” he says. Most were rejecting his suggestion that a lack of standards for citizen journalism “opens up information flow to the strong probability of fraud and abuse. The news industry should find some way to monitor and regulate this new trend.” The more irate responders reminded Hazinski that mainstream media's record on fraudulent reporting was far from unblemished, and that his vague call to “monitor and regulate” wasn't likely to be embraced even by mainstream journalists, in a country where the media tend to equate “regulation” of their industry with censorship.

Underneath Hazinski's provocative phrasing is an important point, though: let's not cast aside good journalism's goals and values simply because there are new ways to report and present the news. At the same time, let's do see if some of the rules need rethinking and adjustment to fit the new realities. That Mayhill Fowler article on Obama's “bitter” remarks sparked one fierce, and useful, ethical debate. Fowler recorded Obama at a fund raiser that she was able to attend only because she had contributed to his campaign, a move that violates the ethics codes of major U.S. news organizations. Yet even as Fowler's newsgathering strategies were being debated, her scoop—followed and amplified by the mainstream press—became an important new narrative in the election. No one denied that what she reported was important. “But if the old rules are fading away,” wrote Michael Tomasky, who edits *Guardian America*, “there have to be a few new ones to take their place. There can't just be anarchy.”

Draft ethics codes have circulated in the blogosphere, and the ideas in drafts posted at CyberJournalist.net and on the sites of bloggers such as Rebecca Blood and Tim O'Reilly would be familiar to those who've worked in major media newsrooms. It would be wrong, though, to assume that the blogosphere is likely to organize itself into mainstream-style professional groups with industry-wide stan-

dards (for that matter, mainstream media don't follow one set of standards). "The blogosphere has no organization. None. It's chaotic. That's what makes it vibrant," said Rosen.

When I asked Eric Umansky, a senior writer at the investigative journalism project ProPublica (and a CJR contributing editor) and a veteran of both old and new media, how standards of online journalism will be enforced, his answer was one that's repeated often in cyberspace: "It's going to be regulated essentially by the marketplace." That means a blog, just like a newspaper, has to build credibility; people will stop reading if it's "unreliable and unlikely to tell me anything new," he said. The marketplace solution is not particularly reassuring to many traditional journalism gatekeepers. They don't want mandatory standards, but as they open up their own thinking about the online world, they do want the blogosphere to recognize that journalism won't survive on any platform without a common belief in some principles—among them, a commitment to accuracy and to avoiding (or clearly revealing) conflicts of interest. In one of his most recent ruminations on the transitional world of journalism, Rosen described the gatekeepers as a "tribe" now migrating from the failing business model of old journalism to a new digital platform. The migration, he said, offers the opportunity to build a hybrid model with online journalists.

Rosen's hybrid notion shifts the focus from defining "who is a journalist" to "what is journalism." That's a necessary shift, and once it's made, it may be possible to build a new journalism, combining, for example, the best of traditional shoe-leather reporting with exciting new citizen-journalist teams. But a hybrid would require true collaboration between old and new practitioners who are serious about sustaining journalism and its public-service mission. Old media will have to let go of some attitudes and assumptions that are no longer relevant, and new media will need to recognize standards that can infuse credibility and trust into this new journalism. Working together will require everyone in the bigger tent to drop their animosities and check their egos. It's not about us, after all. It's about keeping watch on those in power, about ensuring an informed citizenry, about maintaining a democratic culture that is strengthened by vibrant reporting on vital institutions.

We the Media*

Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People

By Dan Gillmor

Excerpted from *We the Media*, 2004

We freeze some moments in time. Every culture has its frozen moments, events so important and personal that they transcend the normal flow of news.

Americans of a certain age, for example, know precisely where they were and what they were doing when they learned that President Franklin D. Roosevelt died. Another generation has absolute clarity on their whereabouts when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. No one who was older than a baby on September 11, 2001, will ever forget hearing about, or seeing, airplanes crashed into skyscrapers.

In 1945, people gathered around radios for the immediate news, and then they stayed with the radio to hear more about their fallen leader and about the man who took his place. Newspapers printed extra editions and filled their columns with detail for days and weeks afterward. Magazines stepped back from the breaking news and offered perspective.

Something similar happened in 1963, but with a newer medium. The immediate news of Kennedy's death came for most by way of television; I'm old enough to remember that heartbreaking moment when Walter Cronkite put on his horn-rimmed glasses to glance at a message from Dallas and then, blinking back tears, told his viewers that their leader was gone. As in the earlier time, newspapers and magazines pulled out all the stops to add detail and context.

September 11, 2001, followed a similarly grim pattern. We watched—again and again—the awful events. Consumers of news learned the *what* about the attacks, thanks to the television networks that showed the horror so graphically. Then we learned some of the *how* and *why* as print publications and thoughtful broadcasters worked to bring depth to events that defied mere words. Journalists did some of their finest work and made me proud to be one of them.

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