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Social Structure, New Communication Technology and Citizen Journalism

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This paper summarizes major conclusions from a larger study about how news blogs and citizen journalism are affecting not only the reporting of news but also the stability and legitimacy of dominant media outlets and governing elites. The study focuses primarily on Asia but looks at other regions as well. It is based on comments gathered through journalistic-style e-mail interviews of bloggers as well as by data from relevant websites and news services. Due to space considerations only a summary can be presented here.

Bloggging's popularity raises severe challenges for traditional outlets

The information obtained through this process indicates that in many societies in Asia and elsewhere bloggers have become an important source of news outside as well as along side of traditional mainstream media. Citizen journalism and volunteer news co-creation activities are increasingly prominent in both Western and non-Western countries. Blogging has clearly become an ordinary part of news reporting that now accompanies the activities of the "old media." Or to put it differently, online ancillaries generally exist for magazines, television news programs and especially newspapers. Given the often Western-centric view of blogging, it may be useful to note that Indonesia and Malaysia are among the leading countries in terms of bloggers. By the same token, a worldwide trend is that information and communication technologies are reconfiguring the traditional balance between the creators and consumers of news and the journalistic reporting profession. Internet blogs and mobile phones, among other technologies, have made new information and perspectives available concerning local events; they have also added important and often oppositional interpretations of the significance and meaning of those events.

The blogs and citizen journalists also constitute an economic threat to traditional journalism publications. This is because those with online access (including mobile phones so equipped) can readily access content, which can be an important convenience and which translates into reduced readership for the traditional outlets. (Of course those without online access will not be able to enjoy such convenience.) Even more consequential, in economic terms, is the fact that blogs and citizen journalist content is usually free, whereas traditional journalistic outlets typically charge for their content. Over the long run, it is difficult to charge people for goods and services that are freely and more conveniently available elsewhere.

A Pew-sponsored study casts the situation in stark light:

. . . it appears the fundamental issue for the future of journalism is not audiences splintering away to citizen media, corporate PR and other non-news venues. In many ways the audience for news—and for what traditional newsrooms produce—appears to be growing. Nor are journalists failing to adapt. There are more signs in 2008 than ever that news people embrace the new technology and want to innovate.

The problem, it is increasingly clear, is a broken economic model—the decoupling of advertising and news. Advertisers are not migrating to news websites with audiences, and online, news sites are already falling financially behind other kinds of web destinations (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008).

These changes at the organizational, usability and financial levels pose critical problems for the continuing viability and impact of traditional old media, and most especially for the news-gathering and dissemination function that print journalism has traditionally played. Thus on both professional and economic grounds, the New Media are reducing the relative prominence of traditional news outlets as well as stature of professional journalists.

Among the clearest consequences of these new voices seem to be to add competing narratives to official viewpoints and to bring previously undisclosed information to light. This in turn introduces new rationales for social change, and also encourages the entrance of new personalities onto the public stage to advocate those rationales. As a result, the policy arena may over the short-run experience increased disharmony and social unrest. However, the longer-term impact of these activities may be the opposite, namely that they may lead to an overall lower degree of intense unrest and social disharmony. That is, in keeping with the social change theory of Dahrendorf (1959) and others, the moderate (although sometimes severe) disharmony precipitated by these voices may actually allow for sufficient social mobility and redistribution of resources. This in turn would circumvent far more negative consequences that would otherwise result from revolutionary change precipitated in order to relieve the pressure of extreme social cleavages.

At the level of professional journalism, the situation reinforces notions of Schumpeter's (1962) view of "creative destruction" and dialectical processes. New structures are arising to address the functional and affective needs of the public and individual (McCaw, 2007) typified by the movement known as volunteer citizen journalists. By its very nature, this movement represents a challenge to official and semi-official organs of news, no less than their sponsoring governments and media conglomerates. Citizen journalists often interrogate generally accepted and sanctioned interpretations of events through the presentation of alternative facts, speculations and opinions. Yet among these groups of citizen journalists there is seldom a leader per se, but rather their work is carried forward by a decentralized, flexible system of various levels of participation with collaborative decision-making and analysis. Using the example of bloggers in his country, citizen journalist Preetam Rai told us that:

In a place with a very young population like Cambodia, blogs and social tools have helped people mobilise support for their causes. Blog or internet based activism may not help them get the desired result at the moment but it does help in spreading messages and building a community (Personal communication).

Macro-changes: Curvilinear relationship in political domain

Shifting the level of discussion to the macro-social level, we can assert that there appears to be a relationship between content control and cumulative impact of citizen journalists' blogs. Specifically, we speculate that there is a curvilinear relationship between the level of content control at the society-wide level (i.e., the inverse of freedom of expression and political activity) and the impact of citizen journalism news blogs. That is, that the impact of news blogs is least when there is extensive content control in the ambient environment, but also where there is great freedom of expression. This is because, where there is little or no content control, it is more likely the case that there is a free marketplace of ideas. Thus the special voice of an alternative source loses its special status. Hence, where there is more competition, the relative advantage of a citizen journalist as having special insight or unique sources is likely to be diminished. There are occasional exceptions, of course, but we are referring to the broad and typical situation which prevails.

To pursue this distinction, and in contrast to Cambodia, we can cite the situation in Taiwan. In Taiwan, where freedom of speech is relatively unrestricted, blogs serve as semi-public forums for social matters and have less to do with seeking to precipitate societal change. I-Fan Lin, a blogger from Taiwan, said about the blogosphere in Taiwan:

I do not think most Taiwanese bloggers care about providing about Taiwan to the world or to the Taiwanese public. (Some English bloggers do.) Most blogs are places to share thoughts with friends, not to broadcast, although some of the blogs do attract a lot of visitors. As a result, blogs act more like spreading ideas person by person (Personal communication).

Our argument about the relatively muted impact of citizen journalists in open societies findings support in a systematic study of citizen journalist blogs in the United States. Specifically, a report released in 2008 found that “the most promising parts of citizen input currently are new ideas, sources, comments and to some extent pictures and video—but not citizens posting news. . . most [citizen media] sites are no more open—and often less so—than mainstream press. Rather than rejecting the ‘gatekeeper’ role of traditional journalism, citizen journalists and bloggers appear for now to be recreating it in other places” (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008)

On the other hand, the impact may actually be greatest where there is moderate control or where the society has recently transitioned from a rigidly controlled environment to one where there are fewer controls. The Philippines, for instance, illustrates this possible relationship. Filipino blogger Mong Palatino noted that in 2007 mid-term election, most candidates have set up their own personal websites, blogs and Friendster accounts. Further, the party-list groups, who represented the marginalized and underrepresented sectors of Philippine society, effectively used various social media, such as YouTube, to make large in-roads in recent elections.

Also in terms of Malaysia, Sabah Umno Wanita Chief, Senator Datuk Armani Hj Mahiruddin, claimed that Malaysia has almost 500,000 blogs that are actively operated by various groups and individuals for different purposes:

Sheer numbers have made the use of blogs most powerful in influencing the thinking of Malaysians, especially concerning politics. Usage of blog sites has the most effective coverage of information dissemination, given the large number of Internet users who surf the web and blog sites every day (Daily Express News, 28 April 2008).

Armani said he was basing his claim on a Universiti Malaya’s Media Department study which asserted that 70% of the results of the 12th General Election had been influenced by information posted on blog sites (*Daily Express News*, 28 April 2008).

Malaysian blogger Ahmad Hj Abang claims that blogs in Malaysia were important in preserving what turned out to be a narrow victory for the National Front Coalition. Blogs allowed voters to express their concerns, but were insufficiently attended to by the plot leadership. The importance of blogs, he finds is now much more recognized by political leadership. He relates the following:

For the past years our voters have communicated via blogs and websites. At the same time our government was misled by officers who are actually sycophants, in believing that all was well in the country. It was not well. The drive to fight corruption was dragged down and the judiciary in disarray. By this time attempts to coax our leaders to read the blogs

and chatsites were to no avail. Thus, on polling day [8th march 2008] the voters deserted many of our leaders. The National Front Coalition still won the day but are deprived of their usual two-third majority. This is the power of Citizen Journalism...These examples are successful. So successful were they that now, even our Government Ministers resorted to blogging in order to explain some policies and actions (Personal communication).

Counter-reaction from elites

Yet, the success of bloggers has provoked a creative reaction on the part of at least one government in terms of how it wishes to respond. Of course there is the approach of arrests and detentions. As an example, also drawn from Malaysia, a recent case may be instructive. Raja Petra Kamaruddin, an Internet journalist whose website had been highly critical of official corruption and misconduct, most notably regarding the complicity of Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister in the murder of a Mongolian translator. The enormously popular website, "Malaysia Today," which had attracted tens of thousands of daily readers, was banned by government order from all 21 of Malaysia's Internet service providers 2008 (Asia Sentinel, 2008).

As has been often learned, sometimes attempting to suppress information only attracts greater attention and publicity to that information. This principle is illustrated in this case since it attracted the attention of Jeff Ooi. Mr. Ooi, a newly elected opposition member of parliament, said that those who had ordered the ban "should be hanged for stifling Internet. . . [they] are not our final judge to decide what is good and what is bad for Malaysians in the access to information. Malaysians who are online are mature enough to discern what's good and what's bad. It's only idiots - yes, IDIOTS at MCMC [the body that banned the journalist] and those who are not online who are fearful of the Internet" (Asia Sentinel, 2008).

This case is all the more interesting because Mr. Ooi gained his fame and influence because of his prominent blogging activities. Thus this case illustrates that blogging can lead to a new vector of influence in which there is a "circulation of elites" as outsiders gain enough power so that they become the new insiders. This stands in contrast to co-optation, a strategy in which outsiders are brought in by current elites to work along side, rather than replace them. (This theme will be returned to at the paper's conclusion.)

Arrests of bloggers are by no means unique to Malaysia. To draw on the case of the People's Republic of China, the activist organization Reporters Without Borders says that Chinese authorities have imprisoned fifty cyber-dissidents (and 29 journalists) because of their work (Boxun News, 2008b).

But while arrest and censorship of journalists is certainly nothing new, China has found a more creative answer to the critical nature of blogs. Beyond having its security agents arrest bloggers for posting problematical material, the Chinese have also deployed a second line of defense. Experiments beginning in the 1990s in Hunan province have led to a counter-attack to the large numbers of critical bloggers and their vast outpouring of material. Its novel line of defense has been to build a "sophisticated army of web commentators [who are] paid to drown negative comments in a tidal wave of support for the party line, and to steer online chat away from sensitive subjects" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2008).

These propagandists have become known as the "Fifty Cent Party" (Wu Mao Dang) since it is supposed that they receive that amount for each positive post. According to Boxun News (2008a) propaganda workers focus on specific websites such as the China Spiritual Civilization Network (Zhongguo Jingshen Wenming Wang), in order to "actively seek to influence, alter, and control public opinion by removing critical articles and comments and replacing them with pro-government articles and opinions. In this way an extensive network of pro-government propaganda workers began to be active online. . . A national Public

Opinion and Information Bureau was set up, with subsidiary departments in every province and municipality. It is truly a testament to the Chinese Communist Party's faith in and ability to act on the power of propaganda to create such an extensive and formal nationwide network to influence, alter, and control public opinion" (Boxun 2008a).

One estimate is that more than a quarter million people in China are employed in this capacity, often outside the official party circle (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2008). This activity lends a new degree of inauthenticity to online postings and confusion to attempts to understand the public's sentiment. In one sense, then, such an action is innovative in that it taps the taken-for-granted sense of spontaneity and candor which the Internet supposedly characterizes to produce a cynically manipulated picture and set of arguments. In another sense, these practices draw on a long history of manipulation and strategic deception through the propagation of false reports, stories and statements. Such practices of course not only predate the Internet but the Communist Party by millennia.

On the other hand, those who wish to express themselves freely and critically have also been innovative. According to Boxu Yang of Peking University (Personal communication), some Chinese bloggers who wish to express themselves freely have come up with a "Trojan horse" system. That is, they will write initially about four pages of innocuous or pro-government gibberish. Knowing that the government-sponsored readers are under a "pay for performance" regime, assume that those readers will simply scan a few initial pages and, finding nothing offensive, will move on. This then leaves the bloggers free to devote the balance of their writings to expressing their candid and critical views. This tactic of "hiding in plain sight" is a clever response to centralized systems of manipulation and control.

Yet, as indicated above, there remain clear lines: according to one human rights advocate, that immediately prior to the Olympic Games opening "a blogger named Huang Qi was formally charged with inciting state subversion for posting a few pieces on his own blog that speculated about the possibility of corruption as a contributing factor in children's death in the Sichuan earthquake . . . for that he stands a good chance of spending three and a half years in prison" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2008).

Conclusion

Shifting the level of discussion to the notion of competing voices, another conclusion that we derived from the study is that the mere existence of these outlets poses a challenge to traditional power structures, even when availability to the general public is limited. The reality of these challenges has implications that play out on at least five levels.

First, they call into question the profession of journalism, since the issues of vetting, responsibility, and procedural training are pertinent to maintaining the relative autonomy and authority claimed by the profession. Blogs represent a challenge at this level because, to use the argument advanced by Peter Berger (1969) in a different albeit related context, the legitimating expertise is shown to be commonplace rather than uniquely conferred through training and certification, or the semi-charismatic civil religion of professional journalism.

Second, it seems that the public looks for authoritative answers to the problems and events that confront them, and the oppositional readings of events that are provided by these outlets offer answers and solutions that pose a direct challenge to traditional sources of agenda setting in the media and in the larger society. The citizen journalists' alternative evidence and explanations serve to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of the reader and displaces the sanctioned outlets in the determination of what the basic facts are and what their significance portends.

Third, the alternative channel provides a competing explanatory framework through which outside interest groups can seek to persuade or pressure those in power to alter their decisions. As we have seen from these few examples, pressure from bloggers can embarrassment officials (and media, due to their lack of coverage) forcing them to take action.

The fourth challenge stems from the nature of human cognition. This challenge arises because of the fact that the larger the number of alternative explanations presented to someone, the lower is the authority and persuasive power of any particular explanation. This finding is robust across multiple domains of intellectual activity and is independent of subject area. Hence the credibility of any given source is reduced by the existence of alternative and provisional interpretations, no matter actual validity. Thus the mere fact that citizen journalists and blogs are presenting alternative data and interpretations (assuming that they are read), the influence and authority of the mainstream outlets will be reduced.

The fifth challenge is related to who ultimately not only has a voice but also power. As suggested by this brief analysis, voice can lead to power. In the case of Jeff Ooi, his blogging led to him becoming a member of the parliamentary government of Malaysia. So, blogs can become important tools in the contest over political representation as well as in eroding the control of traditionally dominant elites over the narrative of society. Of course one way for elites to respond to the challenges of bloggers is to repress them through jailing fines and covert attacks. Another way is to compete with them directly. Perhaps the most attractive course for a minute he leads is co-optation. And while co-optation remains a valuable tool, calculus on the part of outsiders of whether to take a half loaf versus a whole, as it were, remains a complex strategic question.

Beyond these five issues, it is perhaps worth pondering a sixth issue, suggested by John Pavlik (2008, p. 78). He has noted that generally speaking in the West, it is opinion and reaction to news stories that dominates the blogosphere. These western blogs tend not to offer original reporting per se (though there certainly is some reporting done via blogs) but rather more commonly offer comment and opinion. This is different than what Western mainstream/professional journalists see as their role, which is to provide objective and “hard” news. At the same time, journalists are seemingly increasingly injecting opinion into their reporting. Thus the role of the blogosphere may be more commentary than reporting/citizen journalism. The result is that there is increasingly a blended model in which commentary is harder to separate from news. It is worth considering to what extent these trends may also be occurring in the non-Western world of blogs.

In sum, from the viewpoint of existing social institutions, political and news blogs and citizen journalists are costly competitors. From the viewpoint of social change, blogs and citizen journalists are clearly provoking change in who has control over social resources, including the popular understanding of the government and its purposes. This in turn raises severe challenges for countries such as China in terms of social stability and the distribution of resources. The assumption is that, over the long term, additional competition for social narrative will benefit society. The unfolding of this assumption through new media technology, such as Internet blogging, bears careful and sustained scrutiny.

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