



New Media: The Press Freedom Dimension
Challenges and Opportunities of New Media for Press Freedom
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The Role of New Media in developing Democracies

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In a Berkely University Podcast about the History of the United States one of the chapters that studies the issues of Slavery caught my attention. Doctor Jennifer Burns noted that while the United States declared Slavery Constitutionally illegal through the Emancipation Proclamation of 1864, the American Born, African descendants achieved Freedom and nothing else. And she emphasizes, that, Nothing Else. The change in their economic and social condition was absolutely zero.

Of course the victory was profound and essential, but the “results” would lag slowly behind for these citizens.

It would be a struggle of almost 100 years for the African American Citizens to achieve true status of equality in the context of the Civil Rights movements of the 1960's and it was not until then that the deep established cultural biases were to begin to turn around and eventually be overcome.

100 years, IN the United States.

Developing democracies are precisely developing because of long established political traditions of mass attitudes, Power, Ideological ties and corruption cycles, and plain ignorance that undermine institutionality and jades, or demolishes the efficient deployment and management of public institutions on behalf of serving the citizens.

These obstacles can take decades, or a century to overcome even though “essential” victories have been achieved by a given country.

Whether the power in a developing democracy lies partially on a ruling party, an

established Oligarchy or de facto the powers that control the Status Quo or in the case of a détente situation between two political parties of equivalent strength where the de facto power many times lies in those that control the Swing votes in Congress.

The focus of these brief reflections is to bring light to the role of new media and its contribution to the development of our immature democracies and to basically collapse the calendar of change in these countries by making available alternative facts to the “official story”.

It’s a sort of Wiki-democracy coining the wisdom of the Wikipedia where the intervention of the qualified “mass participants” corrects the version for the greater good of accurate knowledge and universal values.

In the recent symposium of communities and New Media entitled WE MEDIA in Miami, its third edition, a young radio reporter from Zimbabwe noted how while in her country a there was a symbolic ample access to Internet, through Internet Café’s and dial-up connections, the reality of the connections point out to a different result on the detriment to democratic development:

A simple emails in Zimbabwe, she explained can take up to 10 minutes to transmit, and forget about complex file downloading which, if possible, can take up to an hour or more.

Such is the case in a country where there is either a complete government control of the “official story” or a significant control by the leading media that practices the worse kind of censorship: “self-censorship”. This situation, more than any, perpetuates the status quo.

In this context, the access to information and thus “alternative voices” published over the web and collectively known as “New Media”, is a critical aspect.

Here at the UNESCO, over a decade ago, it was noted that in the coming information age, there would be a larger gap between those citizens of the world with access and skills to navigate the web (and implicit in those skills the knowledge of computers) and those that did not have access to the same, than the socio-economic differences that have existed up to this point, in the history of humanity between those who CAN and those who CANNOT read and write.

I strongly believe that all of us in positions of power we have a fiduciary duty to our communities to promote and forward a truly universal access to the “world digital intelligence” through any devices. It is important not to allow our thinking to be limited to think about Personal computers and the internet.

The issue embraces all “network devices”, including Mobile phones that studies show is the primary “device” being used by young students in the “main stream”.

The case is specially poignant in the recently established autocracy of Venezuela where the democratically appointed president has changed the constitution to serve the

perpetuity of his rule and pervasive authority of his government.

The civilized world held its breath faced with Hugo Chavez's recent decision to close a leading television station out of political spite.

In these situations of freedom of speech black outs "New Media" and access to the same, becomes critical tools for democracies to correct themselves, for citizens to become aware of the abuses and violations of basic Human Rights (which of course includes the right to be informed) provoked or executed by its ruling governments.

The World digital Intelligence is, for all intents and purposes, infinite, and as mathematicians well know, infinity is the twin sister of 0: When you try to understand and control infinity you really wind up with nothing.

In representation of the Interamerican Press Association that collectively represents the major newspapers of the American Continent I can tell you that we Certainly we are all trying to make sense of the infinite possibilities of the Internet.

Our organizations, some more than others, are in the middle of profound transformations, in the process of becoming multimedia news organizations turning traditional newsrooms accustomed to closing our editions at the end of the day, to being focused on the concept of "continuous news" where our newspapers "close" frequently to bring fresh editions to our web (and other e-devices) audiences.

More importantly, we are struggling, real time, to transform our very successful history of being able to monetize our audience reach into being able to monetize our digital audience reach, which in many cases is AT LEAST as large as our daily print audience but where the average total sales that are coming from our websites are in the order of 4-5% of our total newspaper ad sales. The New York Times is way ahead of the curve, but very much alone in the percentage results.

But newspapers are not the only ones struggling, The Television business model is certainly being challenged by technologies such as TIVO or podcasting where any episode of any TV series can be watched through the web.

It is interesting to note that the most tivoed piece of broadcasting after the last superbowl were actually the ads, which far exceeded the ratings levels of even the best plays themselves.

Its also sobering to reflect that MTV which is an organization that us "traditional media" consider being the masters of the "young audience", has its web site traffic absolutely flat in terms of growth, while they watch the traffic of Social Networking sites such as YouTube and MySpace go through the roof.

If MTV has not been able to figure it out, it is no surprise that "we" traditional media have not "really" been able to either.

But there are many examples and instances where our organizations are embracing the communities that we naturally convene and engage their access to both devices and information, trying to dance with the concept of "Citizen journalism."

We are not quite sure where this is all taking us as "traditional media" but we have a collective certainty that our role is to serve and promote the voice of the general citizenry by being centers of information gravity within the infinity that is the World Wide intelligence, and thus becoming anchors to the navigation and information needs of our constituents.

As traditional media, the only thing we can really control is precisely the character of our own content, basic fact checking and quality of information but produced in multimedia format. In essence, we must learn how to close our news productions continuously or we do not stand a chance in the new generational scenario.

We must be keenly aware of the various other centers of gravity of our audiences that are the shared interests, which is the force that primarily are bringing people together in groups of two, or of two and a half million as is the case in the Reuters "virtual life" experience called "second life" where there are even cameo appearances of real life, "extreme right" political candidates fighting for the French Government and where there are real life, real money real estate transactions as a normal activity within the "virtual world".

And what will happen when the online generation comes of age?

The world as we know it is still controlled by most of us who are digital immigrants and who by definition control the bulk of the Gross National Products of our countries.

We cannot begin to fully understand what the consequences (to traditional media organizations) will be when the digital natives control the bulk of the world economies.

During the "WE Media" in Miami in Feb 2006 I heard the phrase "email is for old people" It was meant to be a provocative statement but it was also a sobering reflection to us "digital immigrants" as to how little we truly understand the world of the digital natives and the dynamic of their communication and information needs.

A French Ministry of Education study emphasizes that the concepts of communication vs "information consumption" of the younger generations are two quite different things.

A few months ago there was much discussion about budgeting for programs of Newspapers in Education in an organization that I serve, NIE programs focus on teaching young kids how to read the newspaper.

To which I, provocatively I must admit, quipped that we should really get some newspaper editors in middle schools to learn how to think like young kids as opposed to having them think like us.