



New Media: The Press Freedom Dimension
Challenges and Opportunities of New Media for Press Freedom
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Session: News Online

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We were given the opportunity for a pretty wide-open interpretation of the topic of this panel – online news and press freedom.

When trying to figure out what I would focus on, I looked over all the conference sessions. I saw represented so many facets of how new media is presenting challenges and opportunities for strengthening a free press.

But one angle that seemed to be missing is the responsibility of journalists and journalism organizations to use the Internet to better inform themselves and their own reporting and to provide access to sometimes difficult to find information.

Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of the United States said “Information is the currency of Democracy.”

Two hundred and twenty years later, former reporter and novelist John Katzenbach slightly edited this to “Information is the currency of Journalism”...

It is the combination of these two notions that I want to talk about.

There are two aspects that are important to raise.

First - how can journalists producing for **any medium** take advantage of the vast array of information that the Internet makes available and possibly circumvent those internal forces that would control or restrict information access?

And secondly, how can online news sites help make available information resources – documents and data - that help citizens better understand complex or ongoing news events.

In terms of the first issue - I believe that journalists (and in this I would include “citizen journalists” and bloggers) need to become much more sophisticated in their understanding of - <slide>

- how to search for information online
- how to evaluate the information they find
- and how to interpret it for their audiences.

So often, particularly those in countries where information access is as under siege as press freedom, journalists bemoan the fact that they do not have access to information from their own governments.

What they often do not realize, or take advantage of, is the vast array of data and sources available from NGOs and foreign governments that could help them tell internal stories using external data.

And even in countries where information access is fairly free, the ease of the “google search” can have a sedative effect on journalists’ curiosity and initiative.

Selecting from the top results of a simplistic search is picking the low hanging fruit.

There is little understanding of how to craft a more targeted, incisive search that will dig more deeply. There is little use of specialized databases and information indexes.

I continue to be surprised at the lack of understanding by many journalists that the “deep web” – that material not indexed by search sites like google or yahoo - is 500 times vaster than the “surface web”.

Often the best information treasures are to be found in this deep web in the databases and pdf files that indexes don’t reach.

So, to this august gathering, I would like to add to the plea that Mr. Osman from Somalia made this morning – about the need for better training of journalists. Journalists should be the information vanguard – to be so, they need advanced skills in the harvesting of information online.

Journalists must fully leverage the tools the internet makes possible to stay updated and aware of news and information from multiple sources – not just the news wires.

They must become more sophisticated and efficient in their information seeking skills.

The second issue is online news organizations' opportunity and responsibility to help make information resources available to their publics.

Whether it is lack of time, skill, or imagination, or, cynically, a reluctance to send people off their sites to relevant external sources of information, most online news sites do not routinely facilitate access to key documents, data, or other supporting information that could help interested news consumer more deeply inform themselves.

The role of hunter / gatherer has never been so important and journalism organizations need to step up.

Here are some examples of news organizations taking on this role:

At the Sarasota Herald Tribune, a medium sized newspaper's website in the state of Florida, there is a "public records" section which provides links, organized by topic, to government databases.

The Guardian, in London, has compiled key documents from the ongoing concerns about the conduct of the war in Iraq in one well organized page, making it easy for people to get at the full-text of material that might only be quoted from in the news report.

Sometimes news sites will provide direct links to documents that are relevant to the story they are reporting on – Here is an example from the Washington Post linking directly to the Dept. of Justice report about missing computers at the Federal Bureau of Investigations.

I believe that this is one of the areas where online news sites and the journalists that report for them could aggressively advance the notion of freedom of information and fulfill the important role as "information central" for a community.

By doing this, they will be truly taking advantage of the bottomless newshole and the power of linking that are among the unique characteristics of the online medium.

And they will be creating a story package that combines smart reporting and access to source documents that provides reporting unique to the online space.

Thank you for this opportunity to evangelize!