New Media Versus Old Media
By David Vaina

New technologies lead to new media platforms and styles. As new forms gain a greater audience share, the debate grows more intense about whether practitioners of the new media honor the time-honored professional standards that separate journalism from the gossip sheets.

David Vaina is a research associate at the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization devoted to evaluation and study of the performance of the news media. PEJ describes itself as nonpartisan, nonideological, and nonpolitical. The organization is affiliated with the Pew Research Center.

In the 1970s, Zhou Enlai, China’s prime minister, was asked what he considered to be most significant about the 1789 French Revolution. He reportedly remained silent for a minute but then answered, “It’s too soon to tell.” The same might be said as one assesses the impact of what is being called the citizen media revolution on political discourse in the United States.

There are justifiable concerns about potentially negative ramifications as we transition from an era of traditional, gatekeeping journalism to one shaped, at least in part, by a decentralized blogosphere where citizens now turn to nonprofessionals for information on the White House, Congress, the war in Iraq, and other foreign policy issues.

Advocates of this new form of journalism counter that news sources outside the realm of the dominant media landscape will, in time, enrich, not degrade, the public discourse.

It may well be that both things are true to some degree. Measuring that balance may take decades, not years, and its impact on democracy in the United States will only be known when the metamorphosis is complete.

The Web site Technorati is a recognized authority on blog traffic and user-generated content across the Web. Site managers report that they are tracking almost 113 million blogs and more than 250 million pieces of tagged social media. Technorati counts 1.6 million news blog posts per day [www.Technorati.com].

The New Kid on the Block

Much of the distress about the rise of citizen journalism (e.g., blogs, wikis, YouTube) centers around the idea that information is less accurate because it may not have been authenticated the way reporting has traditionally been verified by editors at newspapers and television networks. Let’s consider the scandal that dogged 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry because of his alleged involvement with a young female intern.

Matt Drudge, characterized as “America’s most influential journalist” earlier this year by New York magazine, reported that Senator John Kerry, at the height of the 2004 presidential
primaries, may have been involved with a much younger woman (not named by Drudge) and that this relationship threatened to end his hopes of defeating George Bush later that fall.

There is no evidence that Drudge had interviewed either the young woman or someone from the Kerry campaign to confirm the allegation before he published his story on the Drudge Report, the sixth most popular news site in the United States the week ending September 22, 2004, according to data from Hitwise.

Both Kerry and the young woman denied any such relationship, and, ultimately, no evidence ever materialized that confirmed the affair. Mainstream news organizations largely declined to run the story, believing the evidence was “exceedingly thin.”

Cartoonist Matt Wuerker works on a drawing for the Politico, a political publication with both print and online versions.

Kerry, of course, went on to win his party’s nomination, but did this story contribute to the cynicism Americans show regarding their elected officials? As David Frum, a former Bush speechwriter who blogged on John Kerry’s affair on the National Review’s Web site, said in New York magazine, Internet reporting can convert myth to reality in an incredibly short amount of time: “I read about [the allegation] in the paper, I heard it, gossiped about [it], but I didn’t do anything like reporting. I joked about it on the Internet in a way I would at dinner. Then I learned the Net is like print, not like dinner.”

While traditionalists worry about journalism without verification, it may be that new media enthusiasts consider their craft as something altogether different from what’s practiced at the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal, two bastions of U.S. mainstream media. According to research from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, just a third (34 percent) of bloggers see blogging as a form of journalism; nearly two-thirds (65 percent) do not. Just 56 percent said they spent extra time trying to verify facts that they include in their posts either “sometimes” or “often.”

New media are also criticized for the practice of anonymous blogging. The same Pew survey showed that 55 percent of bloggers write their online postings under a pseudonym. The concern is that bloggers may be more likely to publish a false rumor because it is harder to trace a mistake back to its source if no proper name can be linked to a blog posting.

What’s more, one may worry if this apparent lack of accountability could inspire bloggers not only to offer apocryphal information but also to contribute to a juvenile and nasty tone on blogs’ message boards. If so, will only the most devoted political junkies be able to tolerate this milieu, turning off and tuning out even more of the electorate?

How Much Do Blogs Matter?

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Whether citizen journalists have seriously wounded American politics over the last several years has been a matter of substantial debate in political and journalistic circles. But economic and survey data suggest citizen media’s reach may not be as long as some contend.

Let’s first look at online political advertising. During the 2006 elections, an estimated $40 million was spent on advertising over the Web, up 38 percent from the $29 million spent in the 2004 elections. It is a substantial amount but still accounts for only 1 percent of total political ad dollars spent on all media platforms in 2006; and blogs are just a subset of that 1 percent.

Second, while the percentage of those who identify the Internet as their primary news source has grown to 26 percent, a strong majority of the American public is still getting their news from television. According to a July 2007 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press survey, two-thirds of Americans say they prefer television. Again, blogs and other forms of citizen media are just one component of online news, where the biggest audience numbers are generated largely by sites owned and operated by the richest media companies, such as Time Warner’s CNN.com, Yahoo News, AOL News, and Gannett’s USA Today.com. Reportage on these sites is overwhelmingly traditional in nature, suggesting most Americans, when they go online, are still consuming news that adheres to time-honored principles of fairness and accuracy.

Still other signs suggest that Americans remain hesitant to abandon the type of journalism practiced in old media, even if they are leaving old media platforms like newspapers en masse. A different survey from the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that 68 percent prefer getting news from sources without a particular point of view, while just 23 percent want news that confirms their points of view.

The trend toward opinionated journalism is not limited to online media. On cable television, some of the biggest draws are from personalities like Bill O’Reilley and Keith Olbermann, who offer highly politicized solutions to the country’s problems. In October 2007, Marvin Kitman, writing in the Nation, the leading liberal magazine in the United States, declared that the “objective, ‘that’s-the-way-it-is’ style they use at all the network evening news shows is so old, so over” and urged the networks to hire their own version of the left-leaning Olbermann. Such a shift would represent a radical departure from network television’s historical commitment to neutrality as once expressed by the late Richard Salant, president of CBS News in the 1960s and 1970s: “Our reporters do not cover stories from their point of view. They are presenting them from nobody’s point of view.”

The amount of resources invested in news-gathering is another issue affecting the changing journalistic climate in the United States. Due to substantial job cuts at newspapers, far fewer news reporters are available to cover events than at the beginning of this decade. Data from the American Society of Newspaper Editors show roughly 3,000 fewer full-time newsroom staff people than the industry’s recent peak of 56,400 in 2000. For many, this has led to fears that newspapers’ role as a watchdog on government and big business may be rapidly weakening.

It appears that at least some bloggers understand this apparent void, and a few may be trying to fill the gap. As David Glenn recently pointed out in the Columbia Journalism Review, the
original reporting done by blogger Joshua Micah Marshall and his staff has uncovered major political scandals, including the White House’s firing of U.S. attorneys and a questionable land deal involving Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski. Other bloggers, like those at the Huffington Post [www.huffingtonpost.com] and Pajamas Media [www.pajamasmedia.com], are also doing their own original reporting, suggesting there may be more convergence than divergence between the old and new media.

Conclusion

The debate surrounding the effect of citizen journalism on democracy may be stuck in a “What if…” mode for now. The notion that blogs are damaging our civic infrastructure is generally anecdotal and theoretical.

But the world of media is changing unquestionably. Power is shifting from the people who produce the news — be they journalists or bloggers — to the people who consume it. Citizens have far more choices, and they are fragmenting across the spectrum of those choices. The net effect is not really the emergence of a better or worse civic discourse but a different one. The trend that seems clearest, for the moment, is that as the audience splinters, the sources of news will become more oriented around niche or specific subject areas and points of view. The question, at least for now, is how we reassemble in a central public square.