

**News as an Ecosystem:  
Shifting Perspectives for Citizen Journalists**

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### **Introduction**

When NYU Professor Jay Rosen appeared on Comedy Central's "Daily Show" in March 2005, he self-identified as a blogger. Rosen's alliance with this burgeoning practice was an important moment in the history of American journalism because it elevated the status of bloggers, demoted mainstream media, and helped birth yet another significant journalism trend—the citizen journalism movement. Rosen's description is particularly stunning because his own career was formed on the bedrock of journalistic cannon—the Dewey-Lippmann debate. Rosen discussed the role of an informed public in American political life in his doctoral dissertation, and he came to the conclusion that while Lippmann's cynicism defeated Dewey's optimism about the public, Dewey should have won. Rosen's designation as a blogger signals an important shift in the location of journalistic accountability and responsibility. In the past, newspapers as social institutions were the primary creators of news in the public interest. However, given the ability to self-publish, the accessibility of global computer networks, and the constant evolution of technological tools, that responsibility now also belongs to Rosen and many other individuals.

On July 31, 2006 the Web site Technorati tracked its 50 millionth blog, and that number continues to grow at an exponential rate.<sup>i</sup> Given the epidemic-like growth of this practice, blogging is poised to become as mainstream as news programs on major television networks and stories in newspaper chains. While most of the discussion about citizen journalism now focuses on the practice and genre of Web logs, or blogs, it is important to note here that there were citizen journalists before bloggers. Some current

examples of citizens performing journalism include: Internet newsgroups held Intel responsible for its flawed chip; common man George Holiday videotaped Rodney King's brutal beating by the Los Angeles Police Department; and CBS clerk Matt Drudge was issued press credentials by the White House. These events are evidences of the often underestimated but truly powerful opportunity for ordinary citizens to reach, impact, move, persuade, and inform their fellow human beings around the world.

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### **Abstract**

Significant social, economic, and cultural trends such as technological innovation, globalization and political unrest have created a new media landscape and a new model for news production and delivery. The legacy model, which moved news from producers to consumer in a primarily unidirectional way, is now being replaced by a much more fluid, flexible schema, which finds citizens producing as well as consuming news and information.

When viewed in this perspective, the creation, distribution, and consumption of news becomes part of a larger ecosystem that operates interdependently on both a micro (individual consumer) as well as a macro (media outlet) level. Media ecology is the study of media as environments, and media ecologists have been studying the relationship among technology, culture, and communication for many years. This analysis applies media ecology theory to definitions of news, to changing concepts of news, and to technological shifts in the news production and consumption process. I propose that an ecological approach shifts responsibility for the consumption and production of news to the consumer, who is now responsible for the quality of the information he or she

processes. I believe that this shift is integral to successful media reform on both micro and macro levels. In addition to clarifying and developing this novel approach, this analysis also presents an initial review of the literature of the ecology of news and offers a promising prospective for media reform and the future of journalism.

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## **Background**

It is not surprising that journalists now have a whole host of descriptors for their profession and practice. In addition to “Internet,” used by Wikipedia to define Matt Drudge’s work, journalism is often prefaced by advocacy, citizen, community, online, public, precision, video, and way new. There are adjectives used to describe the practice and function of journalism-- participatory, investigative or civic; adjectives used to describe media used to deliver news-- print, video, digital, online, broadcast or print; adjectives used to describe the genres of journalism--sports, celebrity, science, and environmental; and adjectives used to point out the profession’s flaws-- yellow, ambush, gonzo, and gotcha.

Correspondingly, there are a host of descriptors to define current media outlets and practices: these include mainstream media, alternative media, independent media, social media and finally, emergent media. Describing media as emergent is particularly useful in this analysis because it foregrounds the evolutionary process whereby media come into existence. It also more accurately depicts the existing technological affordances, distribution channels and communicative forms now being used to conceive, design, share, publish, and distribute news. Finally, given the variety of adjectives used to

describe journalism, it emphasizes the social constructive aspect of media and thus provides an important perspective for defining news as an ecosystem.

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### **Disentangling Media from Journalism**

Coverage of the July 7, 2005 London subway bombings included video clips from survivors cell phones. These grainy but powerful images were almost instantly broadcast to global audiences on television and the Internet. This event exemplifies the current media landscape, which is experiencing tumultuous change since the advent of digital technologies in the early 1980s. Change, innovation, and experimentation is so predominant now that it has become exceedingly difficult to distinguish the communicative form that delivers the news from the practice of journalism, which motivates individuals to both create and consume news. This is a vital distinction and worthy of serious deliberation because the results of both these endeavors--the product of the media and the product of the practice of journalism--are not the same.

Too often *media* is substituted or used interchangeably in discourse for journalism, journalistic practices, and news and information delivery. In the analysis that follows, I make a clear distinction between media, which I define as the communicative form in which the news is conveyed and journalism, which I define as the discipline, practice, and ethical and democratic responsibility for communicating news to an appropriate public. For example, mainstream media (MSM) is most often associated with the major television networks, the media conglomerates and large publishers, who produce and distribute most American newspapers. In most current popular usage, it also refers to the practices and procedures that produce those products. *But they are not*

*synonymous*. The social practice of journalism is not the media industry. This is a critical distinction: if the organizations and institutions that currently produce a majority of the news product consumed are structurally flawed, the practice of journalism is not.

This distinction is necessary for many reasons. First, it is important to distinguish the communicative form that delivers the news from the practice that created it. This will help clarify the complex interrelationship of the two and further elucidate how both consumers and producers of these communicative forms manipulate and design them. Second, this approach may help *rescue* the journalism profession and practice from its association with large media conglomerates, whose marketing agenda are degrading the quality of information that most mass audiences consider news. I will first clearly define media and journalism, explain their complex and often symbiotic relationship, and then offer different language and a novel approach to explicate the current and future state of news generation, consumption, and use.

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### **An Evolving Definition of A Medium**

Current and historical usage commonly associates the term *media* with a distribution channel or a representational form. Rhetorician Rodrick Hart says simply “a medium is that which carries a message” (53). He qualifies and explicates that description, however, with a list of “media variables,” circumstances under which a medium is selected by a speaker. For this discussion, two of the most significant variables are the questions: “Does the method chosen enhance or detract from the speaker’s message?” and “Is there textual evidence that the speaker considered these factors when framing the message in question?” (53).

These two variables are significant because they foreground the dynamic and performative quality of media selection and suggest that a medium may be more than simply a channel.<sup>ii</sup> In his *Mediamorphosis: Understanding New Media*, Roger Fidler also echoes the container-like quality of media when describing a medium as “a vehicle that conveys information” (287). Ultimately, Fidler is attempting to describe the future of newspapers when he inaugurated the term *mediamorphosis*, which stresses the social, culture, and technological influences exerted on existing media.

Other important definitions of a medium, such as the one posed by Barnhurst and Nerone in their *Form of News*, highlight the mediating function of media and describe them as connectors of other forms. They depict newspapers as a representational media form explaining: “A newspaper connects sources of news with readers; it brings them into or facilitates particular relationships” (2). Bolter and Grusin, in their seminal *Remediation*, also offer a functional definition of a medium in the context of their representational and relational aspects. In their view, a medium is “that which mediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the nature of the real” (65).

This concept of a medium as simply a container, channel, or delivery mechanism is now obsolete: it is also historically inaccurate. As comprehensive histories of media development, such as Paul Starr’s *The Creation of the Media* and Elizabeth Eisenstein’s *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* and *The Printing Press in Early Modern Europe*, accurately demonstrate, communicative media have always had a dynamic quality. However, in the past, their form (stone, writing, paper, and print) often took many years to be developed and assimilated, so their dynamic quality was not easily recognized. Media are not

simply channels or roads by which messages (news included) travel. Instead, a medium is a fluid and flexible form—a *dynamic choice* reporters, writers, and producers make when they are designing and composing a new story.

The advent of digital technologies has made the dynamic quality of media readily apparent. Computer-mediated communication is removing the temporal and spatial constraints of legacy forms and precipitating the rapid emergence of many new communicative media forms, which have created unprecedented access to news and information all over the world. Given this current media environment, news currently takes many forms including oral, textual, visual and audio. As has been historically demonstrated, it can be delivered to mass audiences in cost-effective and powerful ways, which is the key focus of the news industry.

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### **Disentangling Modern Media Forms**

Gumpert and Cathcart build on the historical understanding of media as channels—“a medium is not only a channel or channels of communication”—and extend the definition to include the context and reciprocal quality of media—“but it is also a learned, shared, and arbitrary system of symbols”. Their definition is useful here because it also requires us to foreground form as the key to “disentangle the content of modern media from their technical forms” (304-5). Which thread, if pulled, will separate the medium from the message and the message from its cultural ancestry? Rhetorician Kenneth Burke claims it is impossible to separate form and content; however, Catchcart and Gumpert turn to Burke for the answer to this difficult dilemma: they claim that we now need a Burkeian philosophy of media form to

complement his philosophy of literary form. It is an insightful request because it challenges rhetoricians and media theorists to first understand that there are forms “peculiar to each medium,” and second to be able to identify those medium-specific forms (304-5). As these steps are taken, we will evolve toward a fuller understanding of precisely how news is rhetorically integrated into its consumption and use.

Media Ecologists Walter Ong, James Carey and Teilhard deChardin support this definition of a medium as a fluid and flexible form shaped by agents who make dynamic choices about message design and structure. Carey, former dean of Columbia’s School of Journalism, defines a medium as a site wherein we can view human beings pursuing their hopes and dreams within specific environments (110). Ong is similarly focused on media as environments, and in *Romance, Rhetoric, and Technology*, he defines a medium as the interface—or mediated space—“between one’s inner and outer realities.” According to Ong, “a medium is the macrocosm (the *outside* world), an extension of the microcosm (myself inside my skin, with special reference to my consciousness), so the (media) mediate between microcosm and macrocosm and thereby inevitably promise to be the link between the two” (107).

Ong’s definition is especially useful in this analysis because he includes two key points often missing or assumed in other definitions of a medium. First, Ong defines media as being a product of the internal world. Second, media or mediated spaces link the internal and external worlds and create perception: we perceive the world based on the link between the internal and external realities. Thus the link between the internal and external world is a medium— a lens on the world, personal reality. He further specifies media as “modern devices for knowledge storage and retrieval (print, encyclopedias, indexes and concordances,

photographs, sound tapes, video tapes, computers, and all the rest)” (104). It is important to make the distinction here between the *devices* used to store and retrieve information, such as those Ong lists above, and the *process* by which information is stored, retrieved, delivered, channeled, and distributed, which is a critical component of the news industry and the practice and profession of journalism. Jesuit Paleontologist Teilhard deChardin extends Ong’s definition and poetically articulates the formative potential and power inherent in media and their construction:

By virtue of the biological quality and properties of thought, we find ourselves placed at a singular point, at a node,<sup>iii</sup> that commands the entire fraction of the cosmos open to our experience at the present time. The center of perspective, we are at the same time, the center of construction of the universe. (4)

If Teilhard offers the micro perspective of media construction, then the corollary macro view is posed by Neil Postman: “A medium is a technology within which a culture grows; that is to say, it gives form to a culture’s politics, social organization, and habitual way of thinking” (62). Postman, who is often heralded as the originator of the term *media ecology* and founder of the program in media ecology at New York University, provides this genesis of the concept and defines the field of study thus:

In its origin, the word (ecology) had a considerably different meaning from how we use it today. As found in Aristotle, it meant “household.” Aristotle spoke of the importance to our intellectual equanimity of keeping our household in order. Its first use in its modern meaning is attributed to Ernst Haeckel, a German zoologist, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. He used the word as we do now, to refer to the interactions among the elements of our natural environments, which a special emphasis on how such interactions lead to a balanced and healthful environment. We put the word *media* in front of the word *ecology* to suggest that we were not simply interested in media, but in the ways in which the interaction between media and human beings give a culture its character; and one might say, help a culture to maintain symbolic balance. If we wish to connect the ancient meaning with the modern, we might say that the word suggests that we need to keep our planetary household in order. (62)

When Gencarelli explicates the work of Postman, he explains that media “become, and *are* our culture”. Furthering the definition of media ecology and media as environments, he offers: “media and technologies are environments to the extent that they impact and become part of and permeate the very world in which we live and the ways in which we conduct our individual lives within it” (64-65). Thus we arrive at a more evolved, complex, and culturally aware definition of media: media are cultural forms that interact with human beings to help them maintain systemic balance. This working definition of a medium will be used together with a working definition of journalism to illuminate the relationship between media forms and journalistic practices.

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### **An Evolving Definition of Journalism**

The goals and principles of journalism are concretized in the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s (PEJ)<sup>iv</sup> statement of purpose:

The central purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with accurate and reliable information they need to function in a free society. This encompasses myriad roles--helping define community, creating common language and common knowledge, identifying a community's goals, heroes and villains, and pushing people beyond complacency. This purpose also involves other requirements, such as being entertaining, serving as a watchdog and offering voice to the voiceless.

In addition to this definition, PEJ also lists nine journalistic principles. These include: an obligation to report the truth; loyalty to citizens; dedication to verification; independence; monitor of power; forum for citizen debate and discussion; interesting, relevant, proportional and comprehensive reporting; and finally, a conscience—a moral compass directed by ethics and

responsibility. These are things journalists are expected to do and to believe—it is both the practice and the process and the profession’s abiding principles. It does not include profit margins, conglomerates, buy-outs and by-ins, the industry, the media and the media monopoly. This is a very important distinction: the practice and profession of journalism is not the business of delivering news, a product generated by THE MEDIA and “sold” to national, international, and global audiences. We have to define journalism separately from the news industry if we are to recognize citizen journalists.

In *The Sociology of News*, Michael Schudson devotes an entire chapter to defining journalism and does not exhaust the topic. He concludes with this definition: “(Journalism is) information and commentary on contemporary affairs taken to be publicly important” (14). Similarly, in an opening-day address to Columbia’s journalism student, James Carey, clearly defines journalism, explicates its role and distinguishes the field from the media industry:

Like the novel to which it is at every historical point connected, Journalism converts valued experience into memory and record so it will not perish (...) Journalism takes its name from the French word for day. It is our daybook, our collective diary, which records our common life. That which goes unrecorded goes unpreserved except in the vanishing moment of our individual lives (...) (...) here you will study the practice of journalism. Not the media. Not the news business. Not the newspaper or the magazine or the television station but the practice of journalism. There are media everywhere (...) there just isn’t all that much journalism. (Carey 1-2)

In defining and distinguishing the practice of journalism from the media industry, Carey can be seen also to frame the role of the citizen journalist. Given the recording and memory-making role of journalists, it follows that this function can be assumed and has historically been assumed by *ordinary* citizens. This was indeed in the case for much of the history of American

journalism until the 1830s, when distribution of news shifted from periodic journals sold by subscription to penny papers sold daily on street corners (17).

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### **Introducing Citizen Journalists**

Just as digital technologies are creating revolutionary effects, the penny press similarly signaled the inauguration of a commercial revolution in the practice of journalism as well as the rise of news making as an industry and a business enterprise. This understanding is critical because it helps address some of the structural problems Robert McChesney identifies in the operation of the American media: “If we value democracy, it is imperative that we restructure the media system so that it reconnects with the mass of citizens who in fact comprise ‘democracy.’ The media reform I envision (...) can take place only if it is part of a broader political moment to shift power from the few to the many” (3). This shift McChesney advocates is indeed happening now, and it is often described as the citizen journalism movement.

In an ironic and paradoxical twist, technological affordances, which previously allowed the mass distribution of news and information to large, increasingly homogeneous audiences, are now giving that same power to individuals. Low barriers to entry provided by the Internet and computer networking technologies, as well as new genres, such as blogs, offer a new media landscape for twenty-first century journalists. Freed from large investments in distribution and production equipment, (known as the long tail in marketing terms), individuals and grass roots organizations are pioneering a host of new journalistic styles and practices and generating new communicative media forms, such as You Tube and hyper-local geographically based Web sites, as well as refreshing older forms, such as obituaries.

One of the most clearly and fully articulated discussions and explanations of the citizen journalism movement can be found in the Winter 2005 issue of Harvard's *Neiman Reports*, which is devoted entirely to citizen journalism. An excellent summary of the current status of the movement is found in Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis's essay, *The Future Is Here, But Do News Media Companies See It?* In addition to lessons learned from successful citizen media efforts and a very important graphic, *The Emerging Media Ecosystem*, Bowman and Willis explain what citizen journalist actually do: "Citizens everywhere are getting together via the Internet in unprecedented ways to set the agenda for news, to inform each other about hyper-local and global issues, and to create new services in a connected, always on society" (6).

Lessons gleaned from projects, such as Wikipeida.com and Ohmynews.com, also demonstrate that the communicative form and the content are inextricably linked. For example, the news that citizen journalists choose to *share* is intrinsically different from the news professional journalists have been trained to *report*. Thus, it is more important than ever to ask the following questions when studying emergent journalism practices, such as the citizen journalism trend:

Which conventions from legacy media are being adopted?

What journalistic practices are being used?

What new communicative forms are emerging?

Which of these new forms are medium specific?

How do these forms work rhetorically? Are they effective?

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### **News as an Ecosystem: A Developing Model**

As an apparently never ending succession of innovative, Web sites and news delivery systems, such as Wikinews, Google News and Indymedia demonstrate, the ability for citizen journalists to seize the potential of digital technology and create novel and effective ways to deliver news and information is unprecedented. However, a systemic and environmental approach to news—the development of an ecology of news—requires more. In addition to embracing the power and potential of producing news, citizen journalists must also embrace their power and potential as *consumers* of news. This is not something that is regularly mentioned in discussions of the citizen journalism trend or in the literature on media ecosystems. This can be traced, in part to the fact that the citizen journalism trend and its resulting “products” are still often viewed through the framework of legacy and MSM media. For example, in his *Journalism as a Conversation*, Jean K. Min, director of OhmyNews International, says, “We believe bloggers can work better with professional assistance from trained journalists. On the other hand, we also believe professional journalists can expand their view and scope greatly with fresh input from citizen reports” (18).

Bowman and Willis also use legacy media to frame their discussion of emergent media in the accompanying text to their graphic, *The Emerging Media Ecosystem*. They state:

The relationship between citizen media and mainstream media is symbiotic. Information communities and weblogs discuss and extend the stories created by mainstream media. These communities and the blogosphere also produce citizen journalism, grassroots reporting, eyewitness accounts, annotative reporting, commentary analysis, watchdogging and fact-checking, which the mainstream media feed upon, developing them as a pool of tips, sources, and story ideas. (7)

Finally, the BBC's Director of World Service and Global News Division remarked in the *Neiman Reports* that "We don't own the news anymore." I believe these remarks and examples show that even the most robust citizen media formats are still often framed within the MSM and legacy models. What is now needed is an ecological approach, which includes the symbiosis Bowman and Willis identify. However, an ecological approach must be complete; it must include both the product and consumption of news in the model.

In addition to the work of media ecologists, such as James Carey, Walter Ong, and Neil Postman, who recognized power and potential of emergent media forms, their dangers, as well as their capacity to be shaped with humanism, other scholars are helping to define the ecology of news. Sociologist Kathleen Carley and Communication Theorist David Kaufer eloquently reinforce the need for an ecological approach to studying communicative forms, such as news. According to Carley and Kaufer, "Without a systematic ecological perspective...the impact of communication technologies (and I would argue practices) are often misunderstood" (88). They then go on to explain how such an ecology works: "Content, context, agents and the communicative transaction are inextricably bound into a single ecological system such that affecting one ultimately effects all" (88). Finally, they submit a lens in which to frame the future study of this process:

Despite a growing acceptance in the literature that individuals, social structure, culture, technology, and language are somehow related as mutually defining elements, the literature has mainly been silent on positing specific mechanism tying them together. [What is now needed is ...]an operational model of communication that is sufficiently detailed or precise enough to permit formal analysis. (206)

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## **Conclusions and Directions for Future Research**

As we move from discussions of media and media ecology to the exploration of an ecology of news, it is critical to use the systematic and organic requirements of ecological systems to better explain and understand the news creation and consumption process. This is a highly exploratory initial discussion and analysis: much more work needs to be done to fully develop an ecological model of news. However, I believe this perspective is quite promising because it builds on the untapped potential of human imagination to generate new communicative forms. It also helps locate older forms that have outlived their usefulness. As news matures and extends its global reach, it is exciting to consider that ecology may replace democracy as the formative ideology of the American media structure.

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<sup>i</sup> These statistics are compiled by David Sifry at Sifry's Alerts, which is available on the Web at <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000436.html>

<sup>ii</sup> The questions Hart suggests writers ask when selecting a medium include: "Is the speaker making any important social statement by delivering his or her message via this medium? Does the method chosen (i.e., spoken or written) enhance or detract from the speaker's message? Does the size of the audience the medium can reach present or deny any important rhetorical possibilities? Are there any important "sponsorship effects" associated with messages presented via this medium? Does the medium chosen permit the speaker's personality to become any important force of persuasion? Do sub-audiences exist because of the medium chosen for the message? and Is there textual evidence that the speaker considered these factors when framing the message in question?"

<sup>iii</sup> In geography, "node" refers to the point where two chains of mountains cross and present a characteristically higher elevation. (242)

<sup>iv</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism was formerly associated with Columbia University and is now affiliated with the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C., which is composed by and approved of by journalists.

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