

GV Conference Notes.

Anyone who had harbored doubts about the importance of the 'Blogosphere' would come away from the Global Voices Conference convinced that this is a significant new universe of public discussion. The "Global" part of the name is well taken. Aside from the spread of nations represented, from Tunisia to Thailand and Cambodia, from Venezuela to Poland and the new Central Asian republics, the sheer size of the emerging blogosphere is staggering. One Chinese blogger, Kevin Wen, suggested a new blogger is born in China every two seconds.

With the advent of television in the developing world a generation ago came the evocation of an image of a Third World slum lacking water and paved streets, but with TV antennas on every roof. This desire for access to communication technology was lamented, presumably for plugging the poor into a consumerist universe that was inappropriately prioritized. With television - one-way, and hierarchically structured, there was a point to the critique.

Today's technology gives the primacy of communications technology a new twist as Neha Viswanathan, GV South Asian Editor, pointed out. Neha suggested that I imagine being "a woman in a village with a 12Kbps connection somewhere in the middle of Nepal, I could blog about the fact that my brother was taken away by soldiers without anyone having been told."

As the above human rights oriented example suggests, the bloggers present at the conference represented blogging in the public sphere, rather than the personal one. The relation of this type of blogging on issues of general concern to mainstream media was very much in the air. The sense was not one of opposition to mainstream media, but rather of trying to figure out what the mainstream media will do in relation to this growing public arena. "I'm not saying it will replace mainstream media, but it will become a huge source of experiences". said Neha.

Lucy Hooberman, an executive in the Creative Research & Development department of the BBC attending the event, said that the BBC is working hard to figure out how to relate to this burgeoning area of human interaction. BBC journalists, according to Lucy, want to blog. For them it is not so much editorial control that is the issue, but a question of tone, a more intimate relationship with their audience they crave. As Dan Gillmor has pointed out elsewhere, a desire for transparency is emerging as a key journalistic value. According to Lucy, blogs are also seen as a route to this end that is sought after by BBC producers.

## The Blogosphere is an empathetic space.

One area where the journalistic and blogger spheres intersect is in disaster situations. The disasters mentioned are typically newsworthy events. Specifically mentioned were an earthquake in Kashmir, bombings in London and Dakka, a plane crash in Iran, as well as the South Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. Blogs came into their own in these situations for a variety of reasons.

Neha suggested that unlike a newscast, a blog "makes you want to connect to somebody who is half way around the world." In the disaster that was the Tsunami 'You could relate to the fear, the distrust of the government, the fact that the media only wanted to report on the scandal.'

Another sidelight is the nature of what is being communicated. While the discussion of the internet usually suggests increased flow of information, *per se*, Dina Mehta, a blogger and ethnographer from Mumbai, suggested that the Tsunami Blog she and a few others put together to great success tapped into a desire to help, creating a public sphere with a strong emphasis on empathy; "It's what I call technology with heart'.

This 'helping' quality of blog communication spoke to Sokari Ekine, a blogger from Nigeria and GV African blog editor. For her blogs offered a more positive image of African life. This seemed to mean not the typical boosterism of local media, nor an unwillingness to criticize typical of media beholden to power, but rather a 'solution-orientated' mindset among speakers.

Neha suggested that even blogs that seem at first glance trivial to outsiders such as 'Mommy Blogs', parents bragging about their children, reveal the potential to redefine public space as an arena where things like post-partum depression, career choices, or access to child health care can become issues of public concern. Sokari suggested that for women in Sub-Saharan Africa where feminism has weak representation in the culture as a whole or in the mainstream media, the Blogosphere offered women a rare voice.

In addition to participating in the conference, I met with Alan Fountain; Alan is Professor of Television Studies at Middlesex University. In 1981 he became the first Commissioning Editor for Independent Film & Video at Channel Four. I asked Alan to trace the history of non-professional content production at the BBC. "The idea of access was strongest in the 70's through the 80's with the development of the Community Programs Unit - peak time slots like *Open Door*, and *Open Space* - that was then followed by video

diaries which at its height was also a peak-time slot and had a lot of influence in British television." Alan feels that the BBC then turned somewhat away from promoting non-professional content, mentioning *Video Nation*, a BBC website where amateurs can download video clips and points out that this project could have an on-air presence as opposed to its strictly web-based situation now. For Alan the time is ripe for BBC to consider how to open its doors to the new universe of citizen producers.

According to Lucy Hooberman, this process is well underway. One wakeup call was the recent London transit system bombings. At the beginning of the event the main sources of info on air were "personal stories, photos coming in via mobile phone, accounts coming from bloggers on the ground." But how to deal with this non-professionally-sourced information?

Lucy described what BBC producers were looking for in terms of the Blogosphere. "One of the things they are asking us for is a way of understanding where the voices are, who the voices are, which ones they should pay attention to, and which ones they should pay attention to first." "We're trying to find ways of joining the global conversation rather than just wading into it." She added.

Some of the BBC efforts are more technical: "We've got people thinking about how to track blogs over time to bring them into the news room. We've got other people thinking about how to quote the best of the blogosphere on our sites... We're trying to look at systems that are going to enable us to do this... we're looking at a huge pent up internal demand for access."

The relationships between the 'cyber-publics' created via new social software and what some people at the Conference called 'the Traditional Media' are complex and at very early stages of development. One thinks of the relationship between theater and the movies a century ago, or perhaps more aptly, the early development of photography as it related to fine art. For me, the Global Voices Conference was a valuable introduction to this new arena both in terms of an overview and in terms of specific practices and practitioners.

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