

Media Convergence: Power to the People

Anger is an energy.

Public Image Limited, "Rise"

I am a Web-based citizen journalist and activist. I read news, share it, debate it, and debunk it. I engage thought leaders and build communities. And I do it all without limit or delay, thanks to media convergence: the synthesized, multidirectional flow of information among print, broadcast, and digital platforms.

Not long ago, traditional media were limited in space and time. They also went largely unchallenged as the final arbiters of newsworthiness. Now, they are bit players in a bustling online bazaar where users can pick, choose, cobble together, and customize their very own news feeds. In this brave new digital democracy, concerned citizens like me have a global platform and a clear shot at the status quo.

The Force of Freedom

My ability to publish, broadcast, and connect is staggering. Users can follow my blog by email, Twitter, or RSS to read updates as soon as I post them. They can engage and debate each other, sharing links to related sources. Through my own links to news sites, blogs, social media, and YouTube channels, I provide pathways for citizen groups to merge and grow.

This is freedom of speech—on steroids. Digitally encoded information can travel as far, as fast, and as long as technology allows. This is just as true for *The New York Times* as it is for amateurs like me—unconstrained by corporate owners, sponsors, and influence peddlers—who are free to set up shop and vie for consumers in the marketplace of ideas.

Howard Fineman, *Newsweek* veteran and current editor for *The Huffington Post*, is among a growing number of mainstream journalists to embrace [“open-source, citizen-based reporting”](#):

Some people—some of whom I greatly admire—scoff at citizen journalism. One of them is Ben Bradlee, the legendary editor of the *Washington Post* in the Watergate days. If you have a heart attack, he said, you don't call for a 'citizen surgeon.' He's right about that.

But when the body politic is sick—and who could argue that it is not—citizen journalists may be just what the doctor ordered.

Despite this acknowledgment by Fineman and others, many mainstream journalists still insist they have a monopoly on the truth and refuse to recognize the unique contributions of citizen reporters. But the reality is this: solid journalism, regardless of the source or medium, has less to do with accruing experience and connections than with demonstrating boldness, integrity, fairness, persistence, and the moral fortitude to resist the forces of suppression. In each of these respects, we citizen watchdogs, or “watchblogs,” have collectively raised the bar.

All Access, No Accountability

Unfortunately, not every self-proclaimed purveyor of truth operates in good faith. Many digital dwellers conflate propaganda and news, slander prominent individuals, and spread baseless rumors. And they answer to no one.

Consider this: In April 2012, after two *USA Today* reporters wrote about a Defense Department contractor's tax liabilities, [unknown persons tried to discredit the reporters](#) by blasting them on message boards and blogs, creating a phony Wikipedia entry, and establishing Twitter and Facebook accounts in the reporters' names.

That these unscrupulous con artists share the stage with honest, dedicated journalists makes it far more difficult for audiences to know the truth when they see it. This can only undercut the contributions of serious individuals like me, who seek to promote the common good.

Progress Holds Great Promise

Over the next decade, I fully expect citizen journalists and bloggers to increase their ranks and up their game, perhaps more closely aligning with traditional news media to the great benefit of both parties—more thorough reporting, greater responsiveness to audiences' needs, and enhanced credibility. Media monopolies will further dissipate, and users' options for where and how they retrieve news will expand significantly. Increasing competition will make journalism more audience-centered and user-friendly than we ever thought possible.

Will this mean the extinction of the gatekeeping elite? Not if they can adapt and evolve. We grassroots reporters will gladly show them the way.