KETTERING REVIEW

A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

KETTERING REVIEW

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Media and the Public Sphere

by Noëlle McAfee

"The Internet seems to be 'up there' zinging information packets from one corner of the world to another: a new 'blogosphere' produces reports on events large and small; distinctions between public and private disintegrate with the most intimate spaces and acts visually digitized and disseminated."

I go here cautiously, somewhere between technological determinists —who think that all new media are liberating—and skeptics, who worry about the loss of face-to-face communication and the ironic isolation that occurs when everyone is a blogger and no one is listening to the other. The determinists are wrong to think that just because citizens can now have their own media that they won't use it poorly. The skeptics may be harder to convince.

So I start by quoting from an e-mail that a dear colleague, Bob Kingston, sent me in response to a post I had written on my own "blog" (which he had learned about after his assistant printed out the post and faxed it to him at home). The post had concerned the issue of time collapse in Iraq, a topic he did, in fact, find interesting. But he was also interested in this whole process of blogging and what it might mean for politics. So he got out his recorder and dictated a long memo that his assistant later typed out and e-mailed back to me. Here is part of it:

> As I think you already know, I'm just a little skeptical about the utility and the morality of everyone "blogging merrily along." I remember, when I was still a small boy, a hundred years ago, I used to linger around elderly gentlemen, sitting in groups of two or three on benches in the park, talking with conviction, camaraderie and high seriousness about the world today—in which they obviously played very little part. To a degree, I was always impressed by them: by their conviction, their experience, even their wisdom. Yet at the same time, my dominant thought was scornful, in the way that only young can be to old: silly old fools, they could sit around talking because they have

nothing else to do, and nobody was going to listen to them anyway! Something of that latter attitude prevails every time I hear of a blog, nowadays: why would anybody assume that somebody else had the time or patience to listen to whatever trivial preoccupation is on his or her mind? That's what friends are for; and people who might reasonably be relied upon to *do* something; but why the hell should anybody else want to listen to me! As one who is committed to—genuinely committed to—the continued and extended generation of a deliberative culture, I recognize that, ideally, everybody should be ready to talk and listen to serious commentary, by anybody, about the matters that affect us all. And this kind of freedom to express is ultimately much more important than the freedom to wear a tie or a hair-do that will attract others' interest. So I should welcome the habit of blog. Perhaps what I ultimately fear is that it might have a kind of inverse effect—not without some kind of kinship to the a-temporal difficulty that you cite in the blog itself: a kind of encouragement towards—and easy acceptance of—a group self-indulgence that could paradoxically lead towards a world in which we ultimately assume less responsibility, as individuals, for collective action. It may become, at worst, a kind of upscale version of the gripe: an easy way to justify the expression of personal disdain, instead of doing anything serious for collective improvement.

If it is true that blogging is akin to a few people idly talking to each other—or even worse, as I used to think, that it is like someone with a megaphone yelling in a desert—then there would indeed be little political value in it. Moreover, much blogging these days, especially in the United States, seems more like ranting than communicating. Despite such occasional use of blogs, I'd like to describe and discuss ways in which these new media can be—and are being—used in keeping with the aspirations of this publication.

But first note something interesting about Kingston's reception of my blog post. His assistant printed it out and faxed it to him; he dictated a reply that he mailed to her; his assistant typed out and sent that reply to me by e-mail. There were many layers of mediation and separation between my post and his reply. Kingston did not encounter the blog on his computer. If he had, he would have seen that he could reply directly to the blog, and that others in turn could see and reply to his reply. In effect, our little conversation could grow larger and larger. Also he would see that on my blog I have links to other people's blogs, and some of those have links back to mine. I can "tag" a post with key words that allow others interested in these topics to find it. As one weblog hosting company puts it, "It's about the links, man." In other words, it's about creating relationships and larger circles of conversation. The elderly men on the park benches in Kingston's childhood might have attracted a few passersby; the virtual conversations online may attract exponentially more. But that is not the main difference

or benefit of these new kinds of conversations. They leave signs that continue to circulate. And these new spaces allow all comers, not just gentlemen.

As early as the 1960s, in my third-grade classroom, a novel idea was already becoming banal: massive strides in transportation and communication were making the world a smaller place. Well-worn textbooks trotted out the facts: step on a plane and in a few hours you could step off in another part of the world; go to the grocery store and you could find fruits from the tropics in your town in the dead of winter; pick up the phone and you could talk instantaneously with your Aunt Ema in Budapest. Other truths weren't mentioned in the textbooks: turn on the

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television and the bloodied jungles of Vietnam could be in your living room; hop in your car and you could be over the border into Canada in a matter of hours; drive to the darker parts of town and you could buy heroin from Afghanistan with the passing of palms.

In the 1980s, Apple introduced the personal computer. When those computers arrived and

roosted on desks in one home after another, they came with a curious software called hypertext. Few people knew what to do with this. If they learned, they had an intriguing code for linking one bit of text with another, so for example, I could footnote a piece of writing ad infinitum with other text stored on my computer, even with drawings, later with pictures, video, music. But for most of the decade this hypertext program was an oddity. Then, in 1989, Tim Berners-Lee dreamed up a way to use hypertext markup language (html) to link data in one computer to data in another.

In the years since, the speed of connections and the amount of available information on the Web has increased beyond what anyone could imagine. I can not only look at most of the world's artwork from my own little computer but also retrieve information on practically anything, from the recipe for Ernest Hemingway's favorite cucumber soup to specifics on how to write my own will, tune my own car, sell my own house, or school my own children.

In the years since reading my third-grade textbook, the world has gotten even smaller and our mental topography of it has transformed radically. So now another banality has emerged: the Internet has radically changed communication, making it swifter but altering its trajectories. There are fewer hierarchical structures and more lateral connections; fewer ways for nation-states to censor public communication; more means for insurgent publics to organize themselves, raise funds, start movements, protect rainforests or blow up trains; more self-authorizing and publicly acknowledged authorities running weblogs. The public sphere proliferates and takes on new shapes. The Internet seems to be "up there" zinging information packets from one corner of the world to another: a new "blogosphere" produces reports on events large and small; distinctions between public and private

disintegrate with the most intimate spaces and acts visually digitized and disseminated; a text message from Boston to Moscow asks a spouse to call home; the ding of "you've got mail" changes the space and time in which our relationships proceed. The computer keyboard, hard

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drive, and screen become extensions of our own bodily limbs, brains, and organs, fundamentally altering perceptual abilities and fields.

In this context, Jürgen Habermas' notion of the public sphere as a discursive space resonates. Today the world seems more immediate, not primarily because of high speed travel, though that certainly makes a difference, but because no matter how remote our region we can immediately and communicatively engage with others across the globe and take in the myriad images, symbols, and ideas that crisscross our perceptual field. Of course, this engagement is not at all im-mediate, that is, without mediation, it is highly mediated through high speed cable, telephone, radio, and satellite infrastructures. Moreover, beyond these physical structures, communication is mediated through a vest array of signs and symbols through which we produce and negotiate meaning, identity, purpose.

But this is not exactly what Habermas had in mind when he described the public sphere as a discursive space. Habermas' fundamental model is of the speech-act communication between a sender and a receiver and the extent to which it is communicative rather than strategic. By "communicative" he means aimed toward reaching understanding, following the implicit, presupposed norms of validity, sincerity, and appropriateness that make conversation possible. In other words, we only bother to talk with each other because we presume that the other person will be, or at least ought to be, telling the truth, being sincere, and not trying to manipulate us. Speech acts that poach upon these presuppositions—for example, that take advantage of our assumption that the other is telling me the truth—are strategic not communicative. Understood so, advertising, political propaganda, lies, and other manipulations are strategic actions. Their aim is not to garner mutual understanding but to reach some other, often veiled, end: to get the other to buy, believe, succumb, or unwittingly obey.

A worry I want to address is the worry that in a complex world the public could hardly be capable of self-rule. In a world that is increasingly differentiated, as Niklas Luhmann described, with each sphere developing its own expert knowledge, we need experts and professionals to look after the common weal. The Internet seems to threaten all that. Is this a dangerous development? Don't we need professions for more than their knowledge—knowledge that can be widely disseminated online—but also for their judgment?

The explosion of information on the World Wide Web is directly linked to the implosion of the boundaries of professional knowledge. I arrive at the doctor's office with a printout of the possible sources of my ailments. Now that I am

armed with a little information, my relationship to her changes. Moreover, the connections that this new technology provides cuts out the middleman. Why get a realtor when I can list my house online myself? Who needs a travel agent when you can book your own travel? Can a travel agent provide something that expedia.com and the sites that allow travelers to comment on hotels cannot? Perhaps a little, but not too much.

The questions arise: Is there something more to a profession than an exclusive hold on some expert knowledge or protocol? Is professionalism simply a product of preserving this exclusion? Does it fall apart when the public, through technology, busts down the door, ransacks the files, shares all the goodies? And what happens when knowledge is not only shared but the non-expert starts producing her own? When the unschooled and uncredentialed start dabbling in these professional enterprises, when they become producers themselves? It is one thing to use a curriculum that an educator has put on the Web; it is another to produce your own. It is one thing to read the paper online and another to start your own blog. The digitization of information that allows for widespread distribution of professional knowledge also allows for non-professionals to produce their own information and then distribute it to all who might tune in.

These phenomena produce natural reactions in the professions: admonishments, defensiveness, outcries, and paternalism. Woe is the layperson who ventures into these domains without expert assistance. The expert has been her protector and agent. When the layperson stops deferring to the professional, she puts herself in danger.

One of the most upturned professions these days is journalism where, not so long ago, the

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hierarchy of knowledge production was clear. Reporters gathered the news and wrote the stories; editors cleared them for publication. Standards were firm, making the news as construed safe and fit to print. But now others are gathering the news, writing the stories, and publishing them online without much, if any, reference to journalistic standards. Of course, this has always been the case with "underground" newspapers, missives run off on mimeograph machines with all the bylines pseudonymous. But due to the poverty of most underground publishers to cover the even modest costs of such papers, their circulation was small and mostly inconsequential.

Now the logic of circulation and reach is quite different. In the blogosphere, one's reach is not tied to one's pocketbook but to one's network, salience, and eloquence. Perhaps only one person reads my blog, but if that persons links to it in her blog, and another blog links to that one, then my reach expands exponentially. With this kind of interlinking of blogs, of comments posted to comments, with "track backs" and information "running up the long tail" from
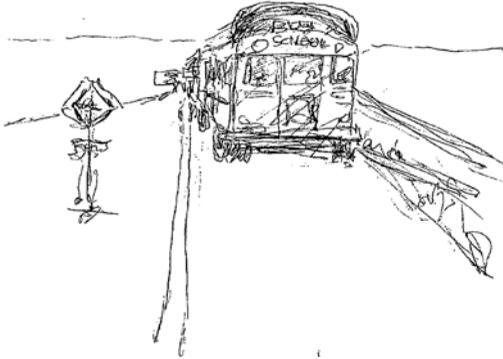
micro to macro media, with cellphone pictures of the London underground bombing and Hurricane Katrina showing up on the evening news, these new digital uses of media are turning journalism on its head.

There are three recognizable patterns of reaction. One is to denounce citizen media use as unprincipled, unverified, and dangerous. Here are these citizens posing as journalists, but they have none of the ethos that the profession has carefully cultivated. Another reaction is deference, bestowing on citizens the mantle of journalist, and then wondering what there is left for the old journalists to do. Maybe the credentialed now become editors, selecting and broadcasting citizen media. The *L.A. Times* had a brief and disastrous experiment in letting the readers write editorials; it led to massive polarization, online slurs, an abrupt end to the experiment, and Michael Kinsley's departure from the paper. A third reaction is to co-opt, to turn reporters and columnists loose as bloggers, opining in a way contrary to all they've been taught.

Finding another response calls for rethinking what this thing called a profession is. Perhaps, as Michael Walzer grants, it is more than maintaining an artificial boundary. Professionalism is also "an ethical code, a social bond, a pattern of mutual regulation and self-discipline." But Walzer barely gives such other possibilities any consideration. Certainly professions have ethical codes, some more robust than others. Codes for realtors are paltry at best, while ones for doctors are quite powerful. But adopting a code doesn't make a profession. Neither does mutual regulation nor even self-discipline. It seems rather that there is something in this notion of a social bond, let's say a social *relationship* between professions and their publics, a kind of promise, a willingness to evolve, develop, and extend judgment. I go to a professional for more than expert knowledge; I go for a bit of wisdom, some judgment as to how, if I do this or that, things might work out.

This criterion seems to separate the professions that have a rightful and important place in a modern democratic society from those that are dispensable. We might be a bit worse off without travel agents, but we'd survive. But we would be much the worse without lawyers (never mind Shakespeare), doctors, educators, and even journalists. When I go to the doctor armed with information on symptoms and the possible causes (according to WebMD, I seem to have the Ebola virus!), I go in search of this professional's discernment, the way her education cultivated by experience can lead her to ask the right questions, weigh possibilities (no, you don't have Ebola) and courses of action. Even with all the information I now possess, even with the change of our relationship—now less hierarchical, more of a partnership—I still expect something important from her as a professional.

The relationship of journalism to a public is a bit more complicated. What made journalism happen in the first place was the ability to publish. Standards evolved over time, mostly as a way to purchase credibility, trust, and readers. Digital

technology changes all that. Twenty percent of teenagers in the United States blog. Law professors blog, as do stay-at-home moms, foodies, economists, gardeners, seniors, stand-up comics, activists, passivists, you name it. Mostly they carry on conversations about their own hobbies, proclivities, and interests. But occasionally, as the meta-blogger Rebecca MacKinnon puts it, they commit random acts of journalism. Laypeople, not journalists, digitally transmitted photos from the London Underground after the bombings. Laypeople, not journalists, reported on much of the crisis during and after Katrina. After the hurricane at least one TV station broadcast images from a blog, effectively turning the news show over to bloggers.

But MacKinnon's larger point though is that most of what goes on in the blogosphere is a conversation, large, interrelated but uncoordinated conversation by a public that is trying to make sense of its world. Some of this conversation takes place in small venues where those interested in something swap information, but at other times the topic in this one little place becomes of great interest to the body politic. Suddenly there are hordes at the door listening in and entering the conversation. This happened to MacKinnon's own little blog on North Korea, a blog whose traffic spiked after Bush named North Korea as part of the "axis of evil." What had been a small parlor in the blogosphere became a stadium.

For all the ranters and cranks, there is something truly remarkable about the blogosphere. It is making the public audible. Earlier ways of hearing the public were rather crude: an opinion poll, the sampling of letters to the editor, the sounds emanating from the street protest, or the five-minute diatribe during a city council meeting. We knew what the people around us were saying, but we could only imagine what "the public" was saying, not that a public had

much of a way to say anything together, anyway.

A public is not a passive body waiting in the wings. It is the effect of a diverse array of people coming together to work through past traumas, forge new identities, and try to understand and decide matters that affect them in common. We don't hear that take on the public much, but it is a much more useful way of thinking about what might make democracy possible. So, if a public is like this, something that happens when unlike people, thrown in the same place, try to understand and deliberate together about their common challenges, then there needs to be a venue for them to converse. The age-old lament about democracy in a far-flung country, about the possibility of democracy in any community larger than, say, 10,000 people, was that this was simply impossible. But not now!

Now we can discern an audible public conversation bubbling up through the blogosphere, where people compare notes (hypertext!), disagree, rant, lament, champion their pet causes, rail against others, hype their own views, but a conversation nonetheless where, occasionally, random acts of deliberation and reflection occur. Even with its unevenness, it is possible to discern in these conversations a sense of how a public is forming, identifying and naming prob-

lems (usually in its own and not expert terms), and might be inclined to proceed.

And this is where journalism comes in—and where it needs to rethink itself. For a long time now, the most mundane and safe journalism

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abided by its own standards of fairness and balance, which for the unadventurous meant reporting two sides of a story, interviewing officials from one political party and then from the others. This was two sides of a very narrow political spectrum, but only one side of a body politic: the world of officialdom, experts, professions, government; not the lifeworld of the public. This public world or public sphere is the space between the private lives of citizens and the official sphere of government. It is a space in which two or more people come together to discuss matters of common concern. These conversations have long taken place, in fits and starts, in the associations of civil society: churches, labor unions, schools, civic associations. Slowly their conclusions could enter public awareness, becoming a public sense of what was right and wrong; think the Civil Rights Movement and the environmental movement.

An adventurous journalist would try to capture this public sense of things in stories, but this was hard to do and harder still to assess or verify. It called for a great deal of judgment and discernment, an ability to gauge public sentiment and concern. But now all journalists are being called on to be adventurous, because the public's conversation, however unwieldy, is manifest on the Web. But being a professional journalist does not mean handing the paper or the station over to bloggers and podcasters; it means using that same judgment to discern what issues are really of concern to the public —and what journalists ought to be covering.

Journalists have other resources that laypeople don't always have, the connections and the skill to connect the dots, to find out how a matter of concern over here is connected to the machinations of some entity over there. They have the training and the resources to verify their sources and to get the story right. Now one of their biggest sources is the public, something that Minnesota Public Radio is rightly exploiting in its project called Insight Journalism, in which it is calling on all its listeners to become sources.

The emergence of an audible public brings to the fore something that was always important: that professionals do not stand above the public but in relation to them. The digital revolution is more than a media revolution; it is bringing about a major change in how we as a people relate to one another and how we see our own role and expertise in relation to the whole.

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