

Journalism in the wake of participatory publishing

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Introduction

Enabled by the increasing popularity of web-based easy-publishing technologies, the vibrant rise of participatory publishing – which could be ideally understood as “the act of a citizen, or a group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information” in order to “provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires” (Bowman & Willis, 2003, p9)¹ – in the past five or six years has such a significant journalistic implication that many critics have even declared it to be the future of journalism. However, and rather surprisingly, this issue has not stirred up much debate among Australian journalism educators. Combining original data from a national survey of Australian news uses with previous research, this paper is a preliminary attempt to explore the current development of participatory publishing and its potential relationship with professional journalism. Starting from a review of the explosion and potential power of online participation in and outside Australia, the paper then places traditional journalism in the centre of the fledgling online public sphere to argue that participatory publishing provides a golden opportunity for traditional journalism to rethink and react in the way it is meant to be. In order to survive well with the ideal of public service, however, journalism must change from a lecture to a conversation, listening and talking to the public rather than remaining a closed stubborn profession that has long been a potential detriment to a healthy public sphere.

The global explosion of participatory publishing

Looking at the confusing, overlapping and sometimes contradictory disarray of labels associated with participatory publishing (PP) might discourage some first-time entrepreneurs. Some terms appear self-reflective: “personal publishing”, “self-publishing”, “do-it-yourself journalism”, “participatory journalism”, “citizen journalism”, “deliberative journalism”, “alternative media/publishing”, “collaborative publishing”, “open publishing”, “social media”, and “community publishing”. However, when it comes to hybrid terms that did not exist before the web, such as wemedia, weblogs and podcasting, or a weird combination like “thin media”, things begin to trigger vertigos. The problem becomes even more puzzling as one goes deeply into the blogosphere (the world of weblogs) with moblogs (mobile blogs),

vblogs (video blogs), warblogs (blogs about war), and more recently, milblogs (military blogs), pblogs (political blogs), blogads (ads on blogs), “klogging” and “Ozplogistan” (the Australian blogosphere)².

This disarray of terms in itself reflects the vibrant, diverse, complicated and seemingly chaotic development of PP – an unprecedented explosion out of a complex web of many immediate social, political and technological factors, of which the penetration of weblogs is an overwhelming example. Weblogs or blogs are a form of online journals where continuously updated musings about any topic, including public affairs, are date-stamped and presented in a chronologically reverse order (Redden, Caldwell & Nguyen, 2003). Before 1999, there were only a handful blogs (Blood, 2000). Three years later, no one could be sure of the exact number but there was “a new blogger joining the crowd every 40 seconds” (Levy, 2002, web document). By the end of July, 2005, Technorati – a blog performance monitoring service – was tracking over 1.3 billion links between 14.2 million blogs, of which 55% were considered active (having some posting in the past three months) and 13% updated at least once a week. This almost doubled the number of blogs (7.8 million) that Technorati was tracking in March, 2005, which means that about 80,000 blogs were being created every day (i.e. about one every second) (Sifry, 2005). In terms of content volumes, the research found that there were about 900,000 posts being created every day (i.e. 10.4 posts per second).

The weblog community “sprang up suddenly” after Cameron Barrett published on camworld.com a list of blogs compiled by Jesse James, but the “bandwagon-jumping (stage) turned into an explosion” only after the launch in 1999 of many free and easy-to-use web-based tools such as Pitas, Blogger and Groksoup (Blood, 2000). With these tools, aided by the fast intrusion of a range of complementary technologies (especially handheld devices such as the digital cameras and mobile phones with built-in cameras), the need for demanding skills in video/audio production and using HTML or DreamWeaver is eliminated. What first-time users need to do is just to register, choose a preferred default format, type and attach whatever files they want, and hit the “publish” button to reach potentially millions of readers – at any time and from anywhere. Not less importantly, these technologies met with what Brian Winston (1998) called “supervening social necessities”, immediately taking off in the

controversial 2000 American Presidential Election. Then the aftermath September 11 and its subsequent war in Afghanistan brought the American blogosphere closer toward the centre stage of public debate (Pew Research Centre, 2002) and transformed it from a meeting place for mere discussions of technological themes and web design to an agora of “a healthy daily debate about political and cultural issues that’s relevant to the millions of news junkies out there” (Hiler, 2002, web document). This was intensified, in and outside the US, by the “quickenning urgency” of news in the wake of a series of other disastrous events or controversies, including the general war on terrorism, the second Iraq war, the Bali bombings and, more recently, the 2004 American Presidential Election, the Asian tsunami, the London bombings, and Hurricane Katrina.

With that comes an increasing audience size and political influence, especially in the US. In the second war on Iraq, blog sites became a source of news for 4% of online Americans (Rainie, Fox & Fallows, 2003). At the onset of the Federal Election in November 2004, two surveys by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 7% of the 120 million American adult Internet users owned a blog or a web-based diary; and more than a quarter of them (27%, representing 32 million) read blogs – an increase of 58% from January of that year, with 12% having posted comments and other material on blogs (Rainie, 2005). Some bloggers have even been given press credits to access the nation’s most important political events and places such as the Democratic National Convention in the summer of 2004 and, more recently, the White House. In late 2002, one of the world’s most respected journalism schools, the University of California at Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism, started a two-unit course called “Creating an IP (Intellectual Property) Weblog”. Responding to the event on Slashdot.com, one blogger reported that a local high school had run a similar course as part of its journalism curriculum and he himself had been a volunteer blogging teacher at an elementary school.

The American blogosphere has been credited as the driving force behind some of the nation’s recent biggest political scoops, the most recent of which is the fall from grace of CBS journalist Dan Rather (Eberthart, 2005; Kiss, 2005; Thornburgh & Boccardi, 2005). The story began on September 8, 2004, when Rather presented on CBS four documents allegedly written by a commander who oversaw President Bush during his

service at Texas Air National Guard in the 1970s, which showed, among others, that Mr Bush used influences to obtain a preferential treatment in an effort to evade the draft and join the Texas force. Within minutes of the broadcast, however, CBS's assertion that it "had consulted with a handwriting analyst and document expert who believes the material is authentic" (Thornburgh & Boccardi, 2005, web document) did not stop serious doubts from being raised on a number of independent online forums and weblogs. A series of conservative bloggers – mainly Matthew Sheffield of RatherBiased, Paul Mirengoff of Powerline and Kevin Aylward of Wizbangblog – conducted their own investigation, seeking advice from experts of 1970s type-writers and examining the material's fonts and formatting to conclude that it must be forgeries produced by a modern PC. Their reason: it had Times New Roman font style, was proportionally spaced, and had a superscript "th". After a dozen days of stubborn reassertion of the authenticity of the documents, CBS finally confessed that "CBS News cannot prove the documents are authentic" and that it "was a mistake we deeply regret". An independent review panel – consisting of Dick Thornburgh, former US Attorney General, and Louis Boccardi, former AP Chief Executive and President – was commissioned by CBS to investigate the whole process and arrived at the same conclusion as the blogosphere. Faced with pressures, Dan Rather stepped down from his well-respected evening news anchoring career.

PP is of course not only about weblogs but a range of other platforms such as email lists, bulletin boards, on line forums, chat rooms and collaborative publishing websites, which have registered their own victories. For example, Slashdot.com, a cooperative "news-for-nerds" website of technological development, had already recorded 10 million unique readers each month (with about half a million contributing articles) when it was seven-year old in 2003. In South Korea, within only three years since its launch on 22/02/2000, OhmyNews, a collaborative news service operating with the motto: "Every citizen is a reporter", had become the country's most influential online news site – a national forum attracting around two million readers a day, with more than 30,000 citizen-journalists (from housewives and schoolkids to professors) posting stories and comments on a given day and contributing 80% of its total content. In the summer of 2002, two Korean schoolgirls were run down and killed by a US Army armoured vehicle on patrol, an incident that the conservative mainstream Korean media never wanted to question. OhmyNews, however, treated it

so harshly and aggressively that mainstream outlets finally had to choose but to pay close attention. As a result, for the first time, a huge movement against the American military presence was organised around the country in the subsequent months, boosting the presidential candidacy of the then little-known reformist Roh Moo Hyun, who later granted his first interview as president to the news service. More examples can be found in Bowman and Willis (2003).

This is not a mere Western phenomenon. In Iraq, the now well-known young architect Salam Pax struck a dramatic emotional chord with tens of thousands of people thanks to his heartening musings, with a caustic sense of humour, about happenings around him before and during the second Iraq war on his weblog (“Where is Raed?”), which was read by around 100,000 people were redistributed into 14 languages only a few days after the break of the war (Gillin, 2003; Piller, 2003). In Vietnam, an unidentifiable Internet-savvy music fan recently shook the mainstream press after conducting an online investigation to break on an online forum that a very famous song of Bao Chan, one of the country’s most established pop music composers, was totally copied from a Japanese album. The initially stubborn plagiarist eventually had to publicly apologise and withdraw his by-line from the song’s credits. This was the beginning of subsequent exposures of some other pop music plagiarists, also by online community members, which continued for a few months in 2004.

Participatory publishing in Australia

In Australia, as early as 2002, PP platforms like weblogs had already been boosted as a site for expressions of shock, grief and dismay as well as first-hand and eyewitness accounts within the hours and days of the Bali bombings (Manktelow, 2002). However, in general, Australian online participation remains much more limited than in the US.

Table 1 presents the preliminary findings of a national survey of Australian uses of online news that the author conducted with a representative sample of 790 Australians in July and August 2004. Of the popular online participation activities in question, only passing some witnessed or heard information had reached the majority (71%) of online news users, who accounted for about 30%-37% of the general Australian

population. This is also the only participation feature that was frequently used by more than a quarter of online news users (27%). Exchanging links to news stories between peers and participating in online news polls had reached a considerable portion of online news users but the proportions doing these on a frequent basis were limited. Meanwhile, news/information exchange websites were still a minor source of news, being used by only 9% of online news users. Weblogs – the central launching pad of the online participation movement in the U.S. and other countries, unfortunately, had been heard of by only 28% of the online news sample (or around 9% of the whole sample), read by 11% and used as a platform for expressing opinions by 4%. Virtually none of them posted comments on weblogs regularly and only 4% read it frequently. This is probably a reason why in the same survey, the ability “to have my say to the media” and “to discuss news and current affairs with my peers” were not chosen as reasons for Internet users to adopt online news (for a detailed report of this survey, see Nguyen et al., 2005).

In a nation that is traditionally receptive to new media technologies, such a rather weak uptake of online participation might be seen as a structural problem. On one hand, the number of readable and high-quality independent outlets on public affairs is limited. On the other, while the mainstream media in other countries like the US and Britain have been substantially contributing to the recent penetration of PP via their intensive coverage of them since at least 2000 as well as their active adoption and integration of these technologies into their online operations, their Australian counterparts have been very slow in catching the wave (Cook, 2005; Bruns, 2005). Except for the ABC and, to some extent, the SBS, which have a fairly rigorous tradition in tapping the power of forums, weblogs, podcasting and other online participation services, the Australian commercial media have generally been rather indifferent to the potential of online PP platforms. When locating resources for this article, I found it quite astonishing that it was not until 2004 that weblogs began to receive a substantial coverage, if any, in commercial publications. Blogger and academic Axel Bruns (2005, web document) went further to accuse traditional media’s online outlets of continuing to “hinder rather help their users” to engage in online content and public debate via such mechanisms such as using online registration as a compulsory requirement for full content access.

Despite this, there have been a few notable successes that indicate the potential influence of PP on the outcome of public affairs in Australia – such as the breaking of the well-known Meg Lees and the Kernot/Evans affairs by the notorious Crikey.com.au, which had a mailing list of 6,500 elite subscribers as of September 2005 (it was sold to Private Media Partners for A\$1 million in early 2005). Some independent weblogs have gained substantial power: results from Technorati, which tracks blogs' influence by links and page views, show that as of May 2005, prominent Australian blogs received fairly high ratings, with Tim Blair's timblair.net on top of the list (being linked by 1839 other blogs), followed by Tim Dunlop's *The Road to Surfdom* (733 links), John Quiggin's johnquiggin.com (315) and Tim Lambert's timlambert.org (226) (Martin, 2005). A visit to the home page of timblair.net on September 20, 2005 reveals that it had received 3770722 page views. There have also been some positive signs of change. In early 2005, Internet giant Ninemsn had 100,000 registered users within only one month of launching its blogging service, Spaces. In May, a group of Australian bloggers, including Senator Andrew Bartlett, gathered for the first time in Sydney for their first conference to discuss the state of play of and possible measures to get the public more involved in the Ozplogistan. Starting from the 2004 Federal Election and then the Asian tsunami, major Australian online operations provided a number of experimental blogs for their journalists to interact with their users and for their users to interact with each other. This, among other things, has led some observers to predicting that in the run-up to the 2007 Federal Election, 2006 or 2007 is likely to be Australia's year of blogs (Cook, 2005).

Journalism in the yet-to-be-ideal online public sphere

The vibrant rise of PP has led many to questioning the fate of journalism. As the need for the media as the third party to mediate in the communication of public affairs is no longer inevitable, the power to govern the public sphere no longer belongs solely to the media, generating abundant speculations about the death of journalism in online communities. This, however, should be seen as excessive technological determinism: PP, when closely examined, can even intensify the crucial role of journalism – a more reactive and responsive journalism, to be exact – in the information age. As much as the fledgling online public sphere is potentially powerful in improving public debate, it has shown itself to be as potentially detrimental. Online communities are far from

becoming an ideal public sphere that Jürgen Habermas (1996) – that acute, though controversial, German observer and thinker – envisioned.

An ideal public sphere, according to Habermas, is “a domain of our social life” to which everybody can access in principle and in which “such a thing as public opinion can be formed” through the governance of rational and critical discussions of matters of general interest by “(autonomous) private persons coming together to form a public” (Habermas, 1996, p398) – a dream shared by early netizens like William Quick, who coined the term “blogosphere” deliberately with the Latin root “logos” to imply “logic and reasoning”. The reality of online participation is, unfortunately, not quite so. It has materialised and become power in some cases – but it is largely lost in many, if not most, others. As netizens assemble and, in Habermas’s words, “express and publicise their opinions freely”, they do not always unite. To use the classic analytic triad of online communities (Lister et al, 2003, p174), people now have a shared space and probably some common relationship but there is nothing to guarantee shared values. Because of this, the ethics of participatory discourses – the acknowledgement and articulation of other feelings, races and values in seeking a universal agreement of moral standards (Wilson, 2004) – too often fall into oblivion on this online medium. Empirical research has shown online discussions do not work toward consensus, are often short-lived with little impact and can easily turn into “dialogues of the deaf” that would lead nobody to anywhere (Arteton, 1987; Brants, Huizenga & van Meerten, 1996; Tsagarousianou, Tambini & Bryan, 1998).

In many cases, the border between participation and ideological abuse and sensational responses is just a hair-thin line. From her research and her own experience, Australian blogger Sophie Masson (2005, web document) noted that “some people seem to only respect ‘free speech’ if you agree with them”:

At its best, blogging, for the writer, can be a terrific experience, enabling you to have genuine discussions with readers, and engage in the kind of thoughtful and illuminating speculation that can often inspire new ideas and new trains of thought in you. However, that is the ideal situation, the deaf, with the original post hopelessly lost in a welter of tangents, *parti pris* positions, shouting matches, and a certain amount of intellectual bullying which I have found quite intimidating at times... I think *the medium itself has an atmosphere which makes people confrontational* (Masson, 2005, web document, my emphasis).

This might become even more serious by the removal of the need to reveal identities in the lack of face-to-face interaction, which, while probably providing people with more freedom to express themselves in the way they truly think, are potentially conducive to dangerous abuse at the same time. The online public sphere, in short, is far from operating on the strength of autonomous and rational arguments which scientifically filter, in Habermas's words, such a thing called "public opinions" (those based on scientific reasoning) from such a thing called "mere opinions" (those based on established cultural norms or collective prejudices). In some cases, it could even result in what Senft (2000) called the "cult of public opinion" – not "the court of public opinion".

This is worsened by the fact that the easy publishing environment of the web – the launching pad of online participation – ironically provides a fertile land for the many rumours, hoaxes and cheating games to freely circulate and for many individuals and organisations with vested interests (including, among others, politicians, celebrities and public relations corps) to sway public opinions. As Rebecca Blood – a most authoritative voice in the world of weblogs – is radically correct in declaring: "The weblog's greatest strength – its uncensored, unmediated, uncontrolled voice – is also its greatest weakness" (quoted in Lane, 2002, web document). The same thing applies to online forums, chat rooms, bulletin boards and the like in this "publish, then filter" – rather than "filter, then publish" – world, as Clay Shirky (2002, web document) called it. The online public sphere, therefore, risks easily becoming a chaotic and anarchic space, which might eventually turn people into more sensationalised and even more desensitised, rather than scientifically critical, citizens.

This is why I believe a responsible journalism – one that is both aggressively reactive and responsive to public concerns – is all the more needed in the online public sphere. In a time when people have a potentially powerful means as much to reach "universal agreement" via critical discussions as to become irrational, the need for the professional moderation and facilitation of a responsible journalism to avoid further social and ideological fragmentation and to work toward consensus is still there, if not intensified. In a time when a former CBS gift shop clerk can quickly become an Internet personality and a millionaire just by continuously posting unchecked rumours surrounding politics, showbiz and the weather in a so-called *Drudge Report*, a

responsible journalism would only have an even higher chance to become a lifebuoy for a public being swamped in an information overload. And in a time when technologies allow ordinary people to even fool the whole global media system (such as the self-produced video clip of Nick Berg's beheading in 2003), the gate-keeping function of the press is strengthened rather than becomes obsolete.

And even when consensus is reached in online communities, journalism still has a crucial role in bringing it to the wider public via their far-reaching traditional and online operations. After all, the blogosphere and other online participation platforms are still dominated by an elite segment of societies – those who are on the more advantageous side of the digital divide, i.e. those with higher socio-economic status and more social power. The Pew studies found that blog creators and readers alike tended to be young males with broadband connection at home, more educated, better financial resources and more Internet experience (Rainie, 2005). Even the adoption and use of online news and information – the precondition for online participation – is still activities among this elite circle (Nguyen & Western, 2005). This is not a “digital delay” as many people would hope: the gap will hardly level off over time because the Internet follows “the logic of upgrade culture”, as Lister et al. (2005, p180) pointed out: “Differential (or non-universal) access is objectively a feature of the Internet. The Internet will never work like the pre-deregulated television where all shared more or less the same kind of technology, could access the same channels and all experience the same TV texts. Universal access in this case built out of the technology by the logic of upgrade culture – that is to say there will always be better software and faster computer architecture creating uneven access conditions”.

Therefore, for independent online PP outlets to work well toward a true democracy of every one, for every one and by every one, their common concerns must be echoed and elaborated in mainstream outlets until a “universal agreement” is reached. This, however, is not to encourage a “professional colonisation” of the online public sphere and to call for preserving a top-down model of communication between journalists and citizens here. Rather, it is a call for a reverse process, one in which journalists are no longer mere agenda-setters but also let the public set the agenda for themselves. That is, in addition to seeing their professional duty and obligation as informing and educating the public, journalists now would need to be directly informed and educated

by the public in their daily operation. This represents a compromise in a two-step process: online participants initiate their dialogues and create what Cornfield et al. (2005, p3) called “buzz”; then journalism responds and works together with them so that these concerns can arrive in broader democratic decision-making contexts. It would be essential to remember that a healthy public sphere is constituted by no single force but by three main institutions – namely journalism, social movements and the discourses between citizens, experts and policy-makers, which need to constantly interact with and influence each other in seeking democratic decisions (Edwards, 1999; Roll-Hansen, 1994).

If some in the online PP world is still angry with this seemingly “elitist” assertion, a close look at what has happened in the biggest scoops of online participation so far will reveal how this asynchronous coordination between mainstream journalism and PP is exactly the case. It was true, for example, that OhmyNews initiated the attacks to American military presence in South Korea and forced the mainstream media to pay attention but the outcome of all this – the regime change and the national movement against the American presence – was rather the result of joint efforts between OhmyNews and mainstream media, which spread its messages much far beyond its still comparatively small, although huge in number, community to the general Korean population. Similarly, it was true that the mainstream media at first did not pay much attention after Trent Lott made the racist comment that America would have been much better off had it chosen Strom Thurmond as its President in 1948, when Thurmond’s campaign was centred on an opposition to equal rights for blacks and whites. But when the rising blogosphere fiercely reacted, professional journalists did bring the issue to their agenda, leading to Lott’s resignation. Too often, we attribute these victories to OhmyNews and the blogosphere without acknowledging the crucial contribution of the mainstream media, which is just unfair. While the need for professional journalism might be no longer inevitable, it is at least still indispensable.

Participatory publishing as a condition for journalism’s sustainable development

That is not to say, however, that journalism has been responsible enough in their relationship with online public participation. Apart from some examples like the above, in which mainstream journalism was forced – rather than volunteered – to act, the general picture does not allow any easy sanguineness. A study by Shultz (2000), for example, found that readers’ concerns raised in online forums on mainstream news sites were rarely, if ever, paid attention to by journalists. In a recent study on how American journalists see the blogosphere, Marci Roth (2005) from the Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Pennsylvania sent out a 25-item questionnaire to an approximate number of 3,800-4,000 journalists to receive back a total of 57 responses. While the study found both positive and negative views on weblogs, does this extremely poor response rate indicate an indifferent attitude among journalists to the blogosphere? Certainly, there are many other methodological problems but it seems to me that ignorance or disinterest is at least partly the case.

In Australia, ironically, with the hope for a soon-to-come year of blogs has also come some sign of misuse and potentially careless control by commercial interests. In August this year (2005), WebDiary – one of Australia’s earliest and most distinctive weblogs and one of the very few PP ventures offered by the Australian commercial media so far – became independent from FairfaxDigital after its host, the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s senior journalist Margo Kingston, did not agree to turn it into a Fairfax-standardised blog to save money and embed advertisements in comments. “One of the things that Fairfax and Murdoch ... (have) been developing for a while is that they do not see they have any duty to readers, they are wanting to develop an interactive media so they can milk revenue from this audience. And use their free creativity” – Kingston said in an interview with the ABC’s Media Report on September 1, 2005. At the time when media ownership laws are soon going to be loosened under the Howard Government, this raises a serious and urgent question about the future of PP. The situation is so despairing that Australian journalist, author and blogger Antony Loewenstein (2005) contended that there is only one way out: alternative media. In this final section, however, I would argue that embracing PP in professional toolkits and commercial strategies is probably the only way for professional journalists and media executives to guarantee a sustainable future.

First and foremost, any attempt to make direct profit from PP or to use professional power to govern it reflects a complacent ignorance of one crucial fact: journalism is itself a driver of PP. It is the problem of a news profession that has long closed their door to public access, turning a blind eye not only to the public's concerns over their standards but also to its needs and tastes (Ettema & Whitney, 1994; Henningham, 1992; Henningham, 1998; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). In Australia, the most recent evidence comes from a national study contrasting journalists and news audiences, whose results were summed up in a rather provocative abstract: "The authors found that journalists and their audiences are different demographically; they are different in their views on the credibility of the news product; they are different in their perceptions of the quality of news; they are different in their assessment of sources of influence on the news product; they are different in their views of the adequacy of local coverage; and they are different in their attitudes to contemporary issues" (Brand & Pearson, 2001, p63). Worse, our professional newspeople are notoriously "arrogant, overbearing, intrusive, aggressive and prejudiced" (Stannard, 1989, p54) and are "often sensitive creatures ... not (taking) kindly to criticisms of what they do" (Henningham, 1992, p2).

This discrepancy and attitude – combined with the increasing trend of ownership concentration, the cooperate strategy to "get more out of less" (focusing on small markets of highly educated and affluent audiences rather than the general public) and the recent change in journalism tone from objective reporting to subjective and judgmental coverage – has rendered journalists' hard-earned independence and detachment from outside pressures to the risk of bleeding into isolation from communities (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). Ironically, as Henningham (1992) pointed out, journalists themselves have long become a threat to press freedom – and thus substantially contribute to what Habermas called the "refeudalisation of the public sphere" – a process in which "organisations strive for political compromises with the state and with one another, as much as possible to the exclusion of the public" (1996, p29). All this turns the very justification for the very existence of journalism – its mission to act as the independent watchdog of public affairs, to "let all with something to say to be free to express itself" so that "the true and sound will survive; the false and unsound will be vanquished" in a free, open and self-righting marketplace of ideas (Siebert et al., 1956, p45) – into a modern fallacy.

Consequently, public distrust and disrespect is found everywhere. In the US, according to the most recent survey by the Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press (2005), the press was seen as being “often inaccurate” (by 56% in June 2005, compared with 34% in July 1985), being unfair in dealing with political and social issues (72% versus 53%, respectively), being “often influenced by powerful people and organisations” (73% versus 53%), paying “too much attention to bad news” (67% versus 60%), caring nothing about the people being reported on (56% versus 48%), and trying to cover up their mistakes (62% versus 55%). In addition, the majority of Americans believed that when deciding what stories to report, news organisations care more about attracting the biggest audience (75%) than about keeping the public informed (19%) – and more about “entertaining people in order to attract the biggest audience” (69%) than about “informing people in order to serve the public interest”. In Australia, my own 2004 survey shows that while respondents tended to have a positive image of the Australian media in terms of accuracy and honesty, they were negative in terms of fairness and bias and, most importantly, they were not convinced that the Australian media are trustworthy (see Table 2). Earlier, the 2003 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes found that around 80% of Australians were critical of media ownership concentration in their country and nearly 70% believed that the mass media must have less or much less power (Gibson et al, 2004). The situation is so critical that Nicholas Lemann recently had to moan that “the danger of these ongoing assaults (on journalism) is a general public that don’t believe in us (journalists), don’t want us any more” (quoted in Loewenstein, 2005, web document).

It is this image crisis that is probably the first thing that professional newspeople and their employers need to seriously address – and responsibly act – in the wake of PP. From bulletin boards, online forums to weblogs and collaborative websites, the long trend of declining media credibility has been declared to be a considerable motive and imperative for the public to join the recent rise of PP. The Pew studies found that the unprecedented growth of the American blog audience in 2004 was attributable to two kinds of blogs – those on recent political affairs and those on media affairs such as the “Rathergate” and the Sinclair Broadcast Group’s retreat from plans to broadcast a program critical of John Kerry to avoid an advertising boycott (Rainie, 2005; Cornfield et al., 2005). In understanding this, journalists might then appreciate that for

the first time in history, the press that has long needed to be “pressed” is now under true and direct public pressures. In other words, if public pressure has been the key weapon of journalism in dealing with other powers, then it is time for journalism as a power to feel its sharpness. And if public service is what journalists claim for their professional status and – in the last analysis – the economic pillar of the media business, they have to adapt to this new ecosystem and act responsibly.

It would be a prior imperative to recognise, before it is too late, a very simple fact: journalism is a paradoxical profession. Professionals must have some autonomy over their clients (Henningham, 1990) – but unlike doctors or lawyers, journalists serve a client base that would not easily accept the role of laymen waiting for guidance. In the fledgling online public sphere, the public also wants it in the other way round – people want to use their freedom and creativity to inform and educate their traditional news feeders. Thus, the most assured way for journalists to enhance their place in the heart and mind of their clients in this interactive and decentralised environment is attention, attention and attention to their concerns – both on and off their home front. If Phillip Meyer (2005, web document) is right in arguing that “the only way to save journalism” in a time when “the pure audience is drifting away as old readers die and are replaced by young people hooked on popular culture and amusement”, is to build a business model based on influence – one that creates a sharp countermeasure to the increasingly blur line between journalism and pseudojournalism, then that influence would not come from a journalism being out of the public touch. The buy-it-or-accept-ignorance attitude should no longer be held in the Internet age. After all, journalists’ professional power is more charismatic than formal – it is gained through trust and respect rather than organisational structures or professional expertise. And after all, professionalism also means a reliance on clients’ interests and demands as their supreme service orientation (Henningham, 1990). Note that online participants share their thinking and emotion across the blogosphere – winning one heart might equal winning tens or hundreds of hearts.

This not only guarantees a sustainable development in the long run but also generates immediate benefits. As theorised by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001), the public is an interlocking body – with three levels of engagement: being involved, being interested and being uninterested. Everybody belongs to all three groups, depending on the

issue. A computer engineer might be uninterested in and even ignorant of latest medical developments but is certainly an expert in new software related to his/her work. That is to say, in any issue, certain members of the public know more than journalists do – and the web is a wonderful tool for the latter to fill the gap in a cost-saving way. For another thing, closer to news events, online participants can pick up many things that traditional journalists miss or cannot update due to their limited resources. There are bubbles but deep in the information fog are what blogger ObviousGuy calls “jewels of information and true news”. These first-hand sources can “unearth the strange, the quirky, the interesting nugget that would have remained hidden” (Lasica, 2002, web document). The scenario envisioned by Dan Gillmor – fifty pictures of a news event might be posted before print or broadcast photographers arrive on the scene (cited in Runnett, 2003) – is nothing far from reality. When CBS was investigating the “Rathergate” in a hope to defend itself, ironically, it had to look to bloggers to locate a 1970s typewriter expert (Eberthart, 2005). Two more examples would exemplify this:

- According to the *New York Times*, the doom of the Columbia space shuttle was first hinted on an online discussion group 11 minutes before the AP issued its first news alert concerning the event (cited in Bowman & Willis, 2003).
- In the morning of July 7 2004, when the American TV viewers received on NBC the first news story about John Kerry’s official announcement of John Edwards as his running mate in the 2004 American presidential campaign, they would not know that they were laggards. The night before that, a witness’s post on the USaviation.com forum had already noted that “John Edwards vp (vice-president) decals were being put on (the) engine cowlings and upper fuselage (of Kerry’s campaign plane)”. By the time the first story appeared on NBC, the news had already invited considerable cheers and doubts about the presidential pair’s future on the forum.

What if journalists still do not care? At the best, the emerging “fifth estate” will act as the “gatekeeper of gatekeepers”, using their collective power to correct it. In disseminating and interpreting news, online participants often redistribute professional news reports through hypertext links across interest-sharing and like-minded communities with free and fearless comments. As blogger Chris Mooney (2003) argued: “Some of the web’s best known political bloggers ... have become

veritable journalistic power brokers due to their large online followings. A link on one of these bloggers' sites can catapult a previously unknown web writer into fame, or notoriety or both". The same thing can happen to journalists. When the Jayson Blair plagiarist scandal was on the way, the executive editor of the *New York Times*, Howell Raines, was reportedly forced to resign partly due to aggressive pressure from many influential American bloggers and their followers (Regan, 2003). The RATHERGATE is another spectacular example.

If this collective pressure still did not work in the end, the worst scenario might come: journalists would have to witness in pain their role diminishing in this age of easy publishing. If their tastes and needs are not well-served and their concerns are not addressed in one way or another, news audiences might turn to their communities for news. This is a new fair game: you need to attend to me so that I attend to you. This rule is crucial to journalism at this turning point, when the impressive penetration of the Internet as a news medium, already a mainstream status in terms of audience size, especially young audiences – has shown no sign of stopping (Nguyen, 2003). Already, some members of the public have spent large amounts of money as donations to their favourite weblogs to continue their existence or even to go out to do their original reporting (Hourihan, 2002). This, along with the large followings of sites such as OhmyNews and the fact that advertisers have begun to tap the power of PP, sounds a warning toll that if journalism is not performed well, the rising PP ventures might become a good alternative. If this happens, the most practical outcome would be clear: declining readership trends would continue; advertising funding would plunge; and certainly loss of job opportunities for journalists themselves would occur. As Rupert Murdoch has recently put it:

What is happening right before us (...) is a revolution in the way young people are accessing news. They don't want to rely on the morning paper for their up-to-date information. They don't want to rely on a God-like figure from above to tell them what's important. And to carry the religion analogy a bit further, they certainly don't want news presented as gospel.

Instead, they want their news on demand, when it works for them. They want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it. They want to question, to probe, to offer a different angle. Think about how blogs and message boards revealed that Kryptonite bicycle locks were vulnerable to a Bic pen. Or the Swiftboat incident. Or the swift departure of Dan Rather from the CBS. One commentator, Jeff Jarvis, puts it this way: give the people

control of media, they will use it. Don't give people control of media, and you will lose (Murdoch, 2005, web document).

The demise of journalism is unlikely but is possible.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that a combination of many technological and social developments in the past few years has resulted in a shift of news/information production from an institutionalised industry into a mode of popular expression. By tapping the power of the web and other new media to transform itself from mere news consumers into “prosumers”, the public as the traditional underdog in the news and information flow has created a new information order and paved the way for a potentially better democracy. While the traditional domination of the institutionalised news media might be able to be eliminated in the nascent online public sphere, its many potential defects have also provided a golden opportunity for a responsible journalism to take an even more needed role.

To survive well, however, the venerable and vulnerable journalism profession has to move from lecturing to conversing, accepting that the public has an equal share of agenda-setting and watching power. Continuing to exercise the traditional journalist power and commercial influences over public engagement in the information age is a risky business that does not guarantee a sustainable development for journalism itself and for democracy in general. As Anderson, Dardenne and Killenberg (1994, p14-15) argued, in order to avoid the abandonment of democracy “to the buffeting of social accidents”, “journalism actually must become *a communication discipline* – which, ironically, is what it had thought it was all along”:

Journalism in the information society can no longer characterise itself as a conduit. Merely informing cannot be its primary communicative goal. The mainstream news media work best as forces of social and cultural communication, with ‘conversation’ as their defining metaphor. While investigating, uncovering and informing are appropriate for any communicator, they must be balanced with corresponding functions of listening, negotiating, adjusting and discovering through dialogue.

To adapt to the new system and to equip journalists to do it, journalism education would benefit itself from embracing participatory publishing forms in its agenda in a

radical manner – both theoretically and practically. The future journalist will need to be trained to not only become more critical gate-keepers but also to act as listeners, discussers and forum leaders/mediators in an intimate interaction with their audiences. These skills are critical in an “increasingly crazy world”, in which online participation might not take anybody to anywhere. A well-meaning democracy must be based on compromise – and the journalist of the future needs to be competent in moderating and facilitating healthy debate without losing compromise. Certainly, bringing these informal PP forms into formal education will meet with dramatic challenges (and even radical alteration) to how journalism has been traditionally taught. How should “personal journalism” with its informal writing style be added to the established body of journalism knowledge, especially elaborate and well-crafted news writing? How should the “personal voice” in journalists’ weblogs be governed by their long-held ethics of objectivity or impartiality? Could blogging journalists both “think and write” at the same time? How should they be different from ordinary citizens who blog? But if professionalism is the aim of journalism education, these challenges must be head-on-head encountered as soon as possible.

Notes

(1) Bowman and Willis (2003) actually used the term “participatory journalism” in this definition. For reasons not examined in this paper, I do not see blogging and the like as journalism, therefore accepting the term “participatory publishing” with “publishing” in the simple meaning of “making information public available”.

(2) In writing this article, I owe much of my awareness of events and stories to the Poynter Institute’s E-media Tidbits Weblog – a brilliant and invaluable sources of information for those who want to follow updates about online news development.

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Table 1: Online participation in Australia
(by percentages of Australian online news users)^a

	Have done	Do frequently ^b
Participate in online news polls	48	17
Get news from news and information exchange sites	9	N/A
Go to an information exchange site to have your say	21	4
Receive links to news stories from peers	50	8
Send links to news stories to peers	40	6
Pass information you have just heard or witnessed	71	27
Have heard terms like “weblogs” or “blogs”	28	N/A
Read weblogs	11	4
Post comments on weblogs	4	<1

(a) As of September, 2004 – all data were weighted according to the sex by age distribution in Census 2001.

(b) Very often or often

Table 2: Public attitudes to the Australian media (by percentage of the whole sample, maximum n rang from 765 to 770)

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The Australian media are fair	23	47	30
The Australian media are biased	37	45	18
The Australian media cover news accurately	29	47	24

The Australian media are dishonest	13	49	38
The Australian media are trustworthy	19	57	24

As of September, 2004 – all data were weighted according to the sex by age distribution in Census 2001.

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