

“MY FRIENDS COULD BE DEAD”

WHAT WE EXPERIENCED

ABOUT THE HORRIFIC

EVENTS IN BLACKSBURG

OWES TO A GENERATION

CONNECTED EMOTIONALLY

AND TECHNOLOGICALLY

TO ITS MEDIA.

THEIR EYEWITNESS

DESCRIPTIONS, PHOTOS,

VIDEO AND REPORTING

FROM A REMOTE VIRGINIA

TOWN MADE A STORY

VISCERAL TO THE WORLD.

EVERYTHING YOU THOUGHT

YOU KNEW ABOUT MEDIA

HAS CHANGED.

– Bryce Carter, blogging from his dorm at Virginia Tech

This Media Intelligence Report is part of the Random Acts of Media Project conducted by iFOCOS, the media think tank and organizer of the We Media conferences.

The participatory research project captures “random acts of media” submitted by contributors throughout the world. Through its network of experts, iFOCOS documents trends and changes in media usage and provides insights into their implications and applications.

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The Random Acts of Media Project can be accessed through the iFOCOS site.

The Reckoning

The 800 reporters from the world's news organizations who descended upon Blacksburg, Va. to cover the shootings of students at Virginia Tech quickly discovered an inconvenient truth. Though remote, Blacksburg was hardly isolated. One of the first wired communities (1995), Blacksburg's students, educators and citizens reported the horrific events first-hand through long-established digital and social networks. The news reached the outside world well before the television crews found their way to the Blue Ridge, a full day before newspapers could publish their next edition. Rather, the story unfolded on the Internet and on cell-phones, the personal and preferred means of communication of an always-on generation. The story was in their hands.

To an extent, that is always the case. Journalists have always been reliant upon the first witnesses to news. What has changed is that the first witnesses are not only the first reporters, but also the first, immediate distributors of the news that informs a large part of a connected society. The way they create, share and distribute news through their personal media connections and social networks changes the balance of knowing, learning and experiencing the news.

Five years ago we started telling a story about the coming democratization of media. In a 2003 report we forecast a changing landscape in which informed citizens would set the agenda for news through their ubiquitous, personal information connections and networks. We called it We Media.

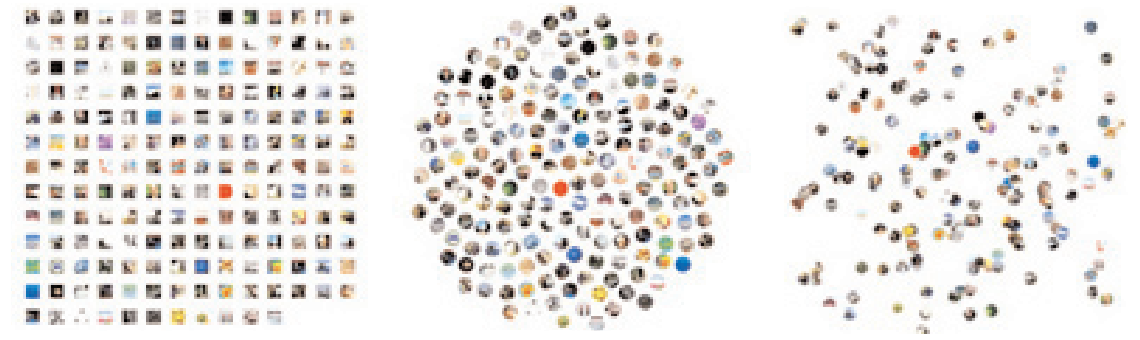
This report documents how ordinary citizens -- the students of Virginia Tech -- applied We Media at a defining moment in their lives. Their stories reflect a transformation with sweeping implications. We analyze what the transformation says about the culture and how media is changing as a result of it.

Everyone has stories. Stories represent who we are. They portray our life experiences and help us connect through shared experience. Telling a story is a powerful way to communicate. We are our stories. We express our experience, thought, and emotion in compact messages that we convey to others and to ourselves.

That has always been true. Today, personal narrative has become more prevalent, and perhaps more urgent, in a time of abundance and choice when many of us are freer to seek a deeper understanding of ourselves and our purpose.

That is the story of Virginia Tech. That is the reckoning.

Dale Peskin and Andrew Nachison
Managing Directors, iFOCOS



Media Shift: 12 sweeping changes

MEDIA CATHARSIS. Through personal media, people express sorrow and grief, connect with one another, schedule services and vigils, form support groups.

SOCIAL NETWORKS: THE NEW LOCAL. Community redefined. Shared interests extend beyond physical borders. Geography is no longer a barrier to participation. Content is created and shared as part of a community's social currency.

CONTRIBUTION CULTURE. Anyone can contribute to the news/information agenda or participate in the conversation. We share facts, comment, analysis, images, music.

REAL-TIME SOCIOLOGY. The science of observing societal habits and behaviors is expressed and recorded as we use pervasive media.

DERIVATIVE MYTH DEBUNKED. Everyone creates the news. Much of what is created is used and recast by traditional news outlets. Only a small percentage -- less than one percent -- of all news on the Internet derives from newspapers.

THE NEWS SPIRAL & THE ORGANIC STORY ARC. News tumbles through a connected society, spiraling through media, changing as it goes, an organic story with no beginning, middle or end. What seems chaotic is actually a story arc that assumes clarity, context and meaning as it unfolds through a proliferation of sources, many accessible to anyone. The days of once-a-day publishing cycles and scheduled news broadcasts are mere supplements to a continuous stream of news and information available any time through a variety of sources and ubiquitous devices. No one owns a story.

THE MANIC MAINSTREAM. After a decade of denial, suddenly the web looks less like a threat to old media and more like a resource it can easily exploit. News outlets plunder material posted on the web as they pump their own content into the online ether.

RESPONSIBLE DISCLOSURE. A fine line emerges between full disclosure and exploitation. Television networks cross the line by showing too much of a killer's multi-media rants too often. Good will is lost as backlash ensues.

A PLACE FOR NEWS TO HAPPEN. The Internet becomes more than merely a first draft of history. It becomes a place where news happens in real time.

SNOOZEPAPERS. A day late and many developments short, the dead-tree medium is relegated to yesterday's news tomorrow. News organizations publish to their websites first.

DEMOCRATIZATION OF MEDIA. A vision achieved: A free press belongs to everyone, not just those who own one.

PROLIFERATION OF SOURCES. The privileged source, so coveted and protected by professional journalists, can either publish directly now or choose from a variety of outlets to get a story out.



Posted on Flickr, this photo of the student vigil at Virginia Tech -- and many like it -- were created and shared by students who documented news and experienced catharsis through their mobile devices and the Internet.

We Media's witnesses

Connected by networks technological and social, a wired generation expressed the story of its time through its media. The way we are informed will never be the same.

By Dale Peskin

Unaware of a shooting in a dormitory that left two people dead, Virginia Tech graduate student Jamal al Barghouti headed across campus to meet with his advisor. Nearing Norris Hall he ran into police, guns drawn, rushing inside. As al Barghouti took cover, he pulled out his Nokia camera-phone and started recording. Then came the haunting sound of 26 gunshots. As the volley increased in intensity he unexpectedly recorded his own startled voice: "Wow."

Across campus, freshman Bryce Carter was hiding in his dorm room. When word reached him that fellow students had been shot, he did what many his age would do in a time of crisis; he blogged. After assuring friends that he was alive, he wrote these words on Bryce's Journal: "My friends could be dead."

Over at the business school, computer science-business technology major Kevin Cupp was locked down, distanced from the computer servers he managed as webmaster of Planet Blacksburg. He took out his cell phone and sent an instant message to Twitter, the new digital network where people describe what they are doing at the moment. His first of many posts that day: "Trapped inside of Pamplin, shooter on campus, they won't let us leave."

What we experienced about the horrific events on a black day in Blacksburg owes to a savvy, social generation connected emotionally and technologically to its media. Eyewitness descriptions, photos, video and reporting from a remote, rural Virginia town – one of the world’s first connected communities -- made a story visceral to the world.

The capability to instantly capture and disseminate information at a time when it was most needed, as well as to communicate with each other across time and geography, has not only helped unite a community but has become a real-time example of how personal media empowers and defines communication in our connected society.

The Internet encouraged a collective expression of emotion that was faithfully reported by traditional media outlets. News organizations responded by plundering material posted on the web and pumping their own content into the online ether. Two students from Sweden provided a cable network with amazing scenes of students at windows of the classroom building, reportedly taken as shots were being fired. A news site used a dark, blurry photo taken on a cell phone by a student in a French class taking cover in a hallway as Cho Seung-Hui stalked victims in Norris Hall.

Watching events unfold, the shift in media was perceptible. As the force of anchors, news crews and reporters descended upon the Virginia Tech campus, they sought as never before video contributions from those with firsthand experiences. But the story belonged to Virginia Tech students.



Terror captured in real time on a cell phone in Norris Hall.

They were at once reporters, witnesses and subjects of the deadliest shooting in U.S. history. It was like watching a new kind of reality show where the stars used their devices, their social networks, and their wits to survive and to cope.

Student-run news operations at Virginia Tech out-reported the major media throughout the week, and did so with professionalism, sensitivity and a thoroughness to which any news organization should aspire. Collegiate Times editor Amie Steele was a steady, informed presence on network television. Several news sites, including McClatchy’s Real Cities network, linked to Collegiate Times. Via the web, student media held a worldwide audience - at one point overloading their computer capabilities. The front-page headline in the student paper spoke for a campus and to a nation: "Heartache."

Suddenly the web looked less like a threat to 'old media', and more like a resource it could easily exploit. As if the world outside of newsrooms didn't already know, the Los Angeles Times ran this story days after the shootings: 'Students turn to web in time of tragedy.'

So, too, did adults. While social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace became an integral part of the story, millions turned to the sites produced by mainstream news outlets for the latest from Blacksburg. But the Internet had done more than create a distribution center for news and information; it became a place for news to happen. An online community emerged around the story. The immediacy of the medium helped to relay both the scope of news as well as the full emotion of the event. Once again, citizen journalists armed with



The Washington Post -- a day late and many developments short.

Proliferation of sources

vision of a free press has come to fruition

mobile phones supplied invaluable material, including pictures and video footage of the shootings, to established news organizations.

Newspapers lost more hallowed ground in the media war for immediate attention and instant influence. An editor for The Washington Post lamented the “dead-tree” limitations of covering a breaking story that made newspaper editions the harbingers of yesterday’s news tomorrow. A day late and many breaking developments short, the mighty Post was relegated to this headline on Tuesday, April 17, a full day after the shootings: “Gunman Kills 32 at Virginia Tech In Deadliest Shooting in U.S. History.”

There can be no denying now that We Media – the ecosystem in which everyone is media – is a dominant force of communication in our culture. The digital network has changed the way we create, access and distribute news and information. As sources proliferate, more are available to most anyone. The privileged source, so coveted and protected by professional journalists, can either publish directly now or choose from a variety of outlets .

“The nation's founders operated on the idea that a free press was a freedom that belonged to everyone, not - as legendary writer A.J. Liebling famously remarked - just ‘to the man who owns one,’” Gene Policinski, executive director of The First Amendment Center, wrote on the American Press Institute web site. “Thanks to cell phones, video files and the Web, that expansive vision from more than 200 years ago has come to fruition in the early 21st century.”

democratization of media



NBC anchor Williams relied on “some guy named Vinny” for essential coverage.

As the Virginia Tech story demonstrates, a new generation demands participation at a time when the democratization of media shakes the authority, as well as the economics, of traditional news providers.

“Why should we trust what was reported on cell phones and the Internet?” a testy CNN reporter asked a student-witness on camera. “Don’t you get it?” the student responded. “Its our story, not yours.”

As the student went off to awaiting crews for a series of interviews and special reports with the other TV networks, a CNN producer channeled the network’s coverage to a report on counseling services available on campus.

The TV moment recalled the recent complaint by NBC Nightly News anchor Brian Williams that he had spent a career as a journalist only to compete now with “some guy named Vinny.”

But it was not Vinny with whom Williams had to compete in Blacksburg. It was Jamal, Bryce, Kevin and Amie. They are, for the moment, the celebrated journalists of their generation, embedded correspondents reporting from a war zone with all the courage and authenticity that radio reporter Edward R. Murrow famously exhibited covering the bombing of London during World War it.

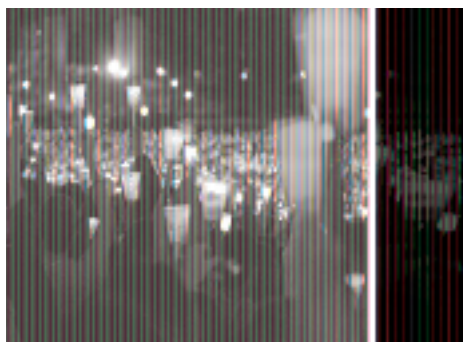
Perhaps less sophisticated than Morrow’s reporting, their citizen journalism is shown, replayed, recast, remixed and referenced over-and-over again

on the Internet as well as on traditional newscasts. The unfettered, unfiltered coverage of the shootings is accepted for what it is, unapologetic for its lack of cohesiveness or for its personal perspective. The audience understands the story is personal and incomplete, a work in progress that continues long after the network camera crews and out-of-town reporters leave Blacksburg.

The We Media Generation now looks to pick up the pieces, to remember their friends and their community, and to share their stories of survival with the rest of the world. It is the informing story of their lives. No wonder they asked NBC and the outside media to leave campus for violating their fragile peace by repeatedly overplaying, then replaying over and over, the grotesque rants of a killer, once a disturbed fellow student.

Their story turned quickly to coping with unimaginable tragedy, a cruel and unforeseen twist for college students living in the sanctuary of a college campus. Amid tragedy there was pathos and authenticity in the way they mourned, grieved and supported one another through public acts of catharsis.

At the Tuesday night vigil for their slain comrades Virginia Tech students lit “The Drill” with candles and the glow of screens on their cell phones. Virtual vigils emerged across the web. Happy Slip, a vlogger in New York City, posted a photo sent via a cell phone from the vigil. These words accompanied the photo: “Know that a community here in New York was on their knees praying for you tonight.”



Vigil at “The Drill” -- student photo posted on Collegiate Times.

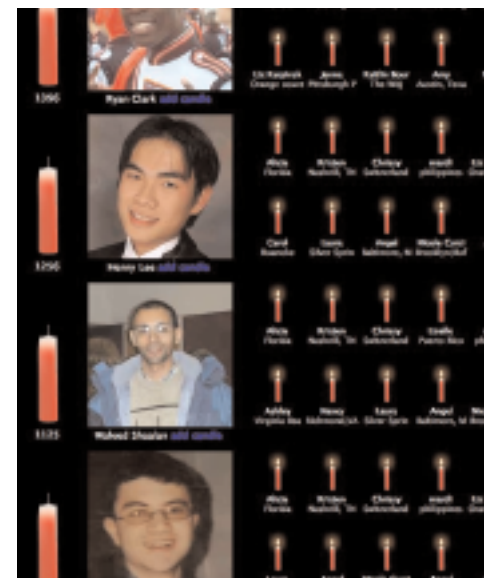
Thousands of bloggers shared similar sentiments. Technorati, a web site that indexes blogs, tracked nearly 30,000 posts about Virginia Tech the following day.

As expressions of sorrow and support, memorials proliferated on the web. West Virginia Blogger collected links to the personal web sites of victims, many on MySpace or Facebook, as a way of paying tribute. “It’s one thing to hear a list of names on TV, or read them online,” she wrote, “but if you take a second to view a bit of the person’s personal life it will give you a deeper understanding of that person.”

Forums were established on sites such as VTtragedy.com and VTincident.com for students to express their condolences and grief. The creators of OneDayBlogSilence.com proposed a day of silence in the blogosphere to pay tribute to the victims. Citizens of the virtual world Second Life established a memorial for visitors to leave virtual notes and flowers.

The big news organizations did their best to compete with the raw elegance of user-generated tributes, but their stories seemed trite and extraneous amid the outpouring of personal expression.

As the world tries to understand what happened in Blacksburg, the conversation should once and for all dispel the “derivative myth” spun by newspapers and news broadcasters. The myth holds that most news of value is created and owned by the newspapers who publish it or by the broadcasters who air it. While there is no denying that news organiza-



Virtual candles for victims on VTtragedy.com

The derivative myth

tions may add value to news by employing large numbers of specialists to gather, create, edit, produce and distribute it, the notion that they either “own” the news or that they are the original source for it becomes irrelevant, if not absurd, when everyone is media.

Today’s news tumbles through a connected society, spiraling through media, changing as it goes, an organic story with no beginning, middle or end. What seems chaotic is actually a story arc that assumes clarity, context and meaning as it unfolds through a proliferation of sources, many accessible to anyone. The days of once-a-day publishing cycles and scheduled news broadcasts are mere supplements to a continuous stream of news and information available any time through a variety of sources and ubiquitous devices.

With their cell phones, networks and knowledge of place, Virginia Tech students were better prepared to report the events overtaking them than the swarm of professional reporters who descended upon Blacksburg following the shootings. On camera the students appeared more composed, informed and sure-footed than the confused reporters from the big cities.

Community – a word that is now used to describe the digital connections among people, as well as the social and emotional ones -- was the word heard time-and-time again from Blacksburg. Extended by personal media, the Blacksburg community quickly expanded to include students on campuses everywhere, as well as a diverse, caring generation connected to each other through digital media.

“Today we are all Hokies,” student leaders proclaimed when asked by reporters how the tragic events would impact Virginia Tech. In a show of support, fellow students at universities across the U.S. created video tributes and memorials on YouTube, some remixing an audio track of Avril Lavigne’s “Keep Holding On” with slideshows of photos grabbed from Flickr. Many of the videos ended with a slide displaying the logo of their universities next to the words “today we are all Hokies.”

Powerful forces were in play in Blacksburg. One was the invisible infrastructure of digital networks, wired and wireless, connecting a geographically isolated community to itself and to the world. Another was the connected culture of young adults, savvy content creators and communicators who instinctively use social media as integral parts of their life. When shots rang out, the story unfolded through their devices and their networks.

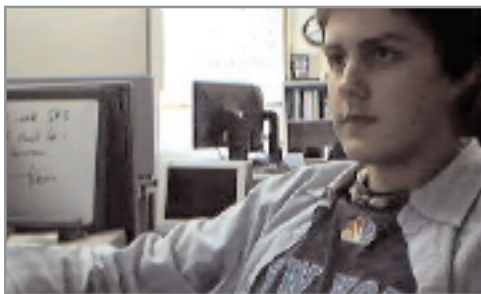
A new generation of media experts provided an indelible record of what happened on a terrible day in Blacksburg. They have created a lasting tribute to and by its community. The way we are informed will never be the same.

Dale Peskin, a former reporter and news executive, is a managing director of iFOCOS. He can be reached at dale@ifocos.org

the news 'spiral'

powerful forces:
networks and culture

Embedded at Virginia Tech: One student's reality online



Freshman Kevin Cupp, a freshman Business Information Technology major, was one of many wired, student witnesses to the tragic events at Virginia Tech.

The webmaster of PlanetBlacksburg, Cupp provided compelling, real-time account of events from campus -- through text messages, SMS, web posts, blogging, and digital photography even as he was locked down after the shooting spree.

His cell-phone and web posts on Twitter -- a new global community where users describe what they're doing at the moment -- provided a chilling record of reality captured and shared by a connected community.

Cupp's work was used extensively in reporting by Mainstream Media, as well as shared and redistributed throughout the online world.

MONDAY, APRIL 16

10:05 am: Trapped inside of Pamplin, shooter on campus, they won't let us leave.

10:30 am: There are two cops outside the window with guns watching for the guy. We've made breaking news on CNN.

11:03 am: They've got us held up in a classroom now. Students have decided to play hangman on the chalkboard.

12:48 pm: They evacuated us, I'm finally home. This is such a horrible tragedy. Over 20 dead so far.

1:17 pm: I'm ok, just still shocked. Yes, CNN is behind, check planetblacksburg.com, we're posting updates as they come in.

2:22 pm: Getting ready to do an interview for the CBS Evening News. Updating planetblacksburg.com with updates.

2:51 pm: I've been pretty busy getting all these updates in, I'll try to blog later. But watch the CBS Evening News tonight.

6:29 pm: Just did an interview with Chris Pirillo for his video stream, going to do an interview later for Mike Chandler.

8:28 pm: Me and Planet Blacksburg on the CBS Evening News. ([Link to video on You Tube: http://youtube.com/watch?v=](http://youtube.com/watch?v=))

TUESDAY, APRIL 17

12:54 am: Finally in for the night, exhausted. It's been a long, tiring day of talking to reporters and gathering news for Planet Blacksburg.

1:58 am: Finding it hard to go to bed, there is too much going on. Thanks to everyone around the country and the world for their continuing support.

2:48 pm: At Sharky's with an LA Times reporter; Geraldo Rivera is at the next table.

5:39 pm: Just got to the news room, got held up in traffic while the President left campus. Nikki Giovanni gave the perfect closing speech.

5:44 pm: CBS News interviewed me on camera about how we used Facebook through all of this, so I might be on the Evening News again.

9:36 pm: Candle-light vigil was amazing. Pictures will be posted on planetblacksburg.com shortly.

11:56 pm: CNN's package they just aired about a friend who was involved was hard to watch.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 18

12:34 am: Just want to welcome my new followers and thank them for their interest and support. Also, thanks to @mchandler for having me on netscoop.tv

1:36 am: Updated the flickr <http://flickr.com/photos/ke...> PlanetBlacksburg.com got over 1 million hits yesterday, glad we could help inform.

11:08 am: Back on campus. Newseum.org is here to interview us on camera.

5:39 pm: Updated the flickr. CBS has finally left me alone. The big media has been very invasive this week. We have some big stories to publish soon.

7:44 pm: We've made a unique decision not to cover the new developments of the shooter; it was his plan to take over the media this way.

7:48 pm: Instead, PlanetBlacksburg.com will cover the Blacksburg community and their stories. We are preparing an "Open Letter to a Coward."

THURSDAY, APRIL 19

12:16 pm: Going back to my regular job on campus, one of the first of many steps to getting back to normal.

3:43 pm: Going to the hospital, Marching Virginians are playing for the people there, might visit an injured friend as well.

FRIDAY, APRIL 20

2:46 pm: Just came back from the drillfield, lots have come out to show support and pay respects to lost ones. Nothing can ever break Hokie Spirit.

“ON MAY 4, 2007 AT APPROXIMATELY 9:45 PM CDT, GREENSBURG WAS ALMOST COMPLETELY DESTROYED BY AN F5 TORNADO. THE INFORMATION YOU SEE ON THIS WEBSITE IS BASICALLY NOW HISTORICAL. GREENSBURG RESIDENTS AND FRIENDS ARE CLEANING UP AND MAKING PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.”

<http://skyways.lib.ks.us/towns/Greensburg/>



And then, Greensburg

With their town lost, citizens used online media to share stories, connect, and get on with life again

It was personal. A huge twister formed on the Kansas plains 100 miles east of a civilization known as Wichita. Without warning, it wiped out “a darn good place to live” in minutes. Nothing was left to Greensburg except its stories. A community turned to personal media to share them.

The weekly newspaper, not scheduled to publish for another five days, was destroyed. So the Kiowa County Signal, which formerly had 1000 readers, invited those with photos and video to post them to Flickr and YouTube. The paper’s modest website suddenly became an indispensable source for news, links, and vital communications among residents. With an aerial photo from the Associated Press and a Google Maps application, residents were able to identify their homes, businesses, schools, and places they held dear.

On YouTube, Jburtonstone published dramatic pictures of the rubble.. Sabian2323 posted a video of first-responders checking the damage. Another video showed radar images taken from Internet sites set to the music of Elvis Presley.

But the best reporting came on the blogs. Mike U. broke the news with this Internet dispatch: "A plea from Greensburg dispatch ... 'Ford County communications this is Greensburg ... we just took a direct hit...!'

Blogger Patsy Terrell’s reports led to links to her site from CNN.com. The Crazy Pastor Blog wrote about seeing the beginnings of the storm while driving through the area with his family.

And on geographic and Google Map blogs, before-and-after satellite images provided stark perspective of a place wiped off the map.

We see clearly the beginnings of a world in which we are all media, all of us empowered to create, consume, tune in or out, and to take charge of our digital, networked media experiences.

The power of media institutions is giving way to a distributed, decentralized network that includes everyone. Any institution that once had to go through media to deliver information are now themselves media.

But what will we make of that power? Which institutions will adjust and thrive under the new order, and which will crumble? Will the connected society be better off, simply different, or a nightmare of noise, tribalism and oceans of meaningless data?

Communications will undoubtedly play a central role not only in how businesses and governments function but in any progress in addressing problems of extreme poverty, health care, climate change and economic disparities that contribute to global conflict and human suffering.

So we need to figure out what's next: our new place in the world of We Media.



In a world in which we are all media, individuals assume unprecedented authority to inform and to act

The power of me

By Andrew Nachison

We Media sounds so simple, perhaps naively utopian when we're optimistic about a world of better-informed and better-off communities; or darkly dystopian when we anticipate confusion, isolation, chaos and distrust. In either case We Media is daunting because it means different things to different people – it depends on who you think of as we. Some people think that We Media implies an inverse, or an opposite – “un We Media.” They imagine a world of us vs. them – and We is invariably a non-commercial collective of open-source, “bottom-up” grass roots, net roots media freedom fighters, somehow doing battle against, well, someone else. Corporations for sure, especially big ones, and the writers, producers, engineers and executives who work for those corporations are “them,” no matter how talented, motivated, impassioned and committed they may be to their work and its impact on society.

It's a simple story line, starkly divided and primed for David's inevitable triumph over Goliath.

But it is wrong. We Media is everyone, and that's a much harder notion to come to terms with. It means we've got to get used to having conversations with people who look at the world very differently than we do, and that we have to figure out our place in a world that will continue to include Davids and Goliaths. The Goliaths remain huge, powerful and enormously influential, along side a lot of Davids out there too – an army of them, as blogger Glenn Reynolds described it in a 2006 book.

For news companies, the notion of grassroots, bottom-up publishing has largely defined the rise of We Media – so big media have viewed We Media as a threat to monopolies and market share, rather than as an opportunity for civic engagement and human improvement. The defensive posture is doubly ironic considering most of what's published and discussed online has little to do with news.

Still, the first significant We Media experiments, like OhMyNews in Korea and the Independent Media Center in the United States, were explicit challenges to the perceived inadequacies of mainstream journalism.

The Independent Media Center (indymedia.org), launched during 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, still describes itself in revolutionary terms:

“The Independent Media Center is a network of collectively run media outlets for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of the truth. We work out of a love and inspiration for people who continue to work for a better world, despite corporate media's distortions and unwillingness to cover the efforts to free humanity.”

But We Media is about much more than journalism, it's bigger than us vs. them, and it's harder to grasp than simply fighting the man. We Media contrasts with the traditional notion of *the* Media. *The* Media is a thing unto itself. It serves, informs, mediates, manipulates, informs or annoys us. It is out there somewhere and we use it or consume it or maybe try to get inside of it – but we aren't part of it.

We Media is different. It's here, it's everywhere, and it's everyone - all of us. We can now connect directly with each other. In the world of We Media we are all consumers, creators and distributors of information. And yes, big media is, like it or not, part of We Media, along with little media, bloggers, governments, terrorists, con artists and virtual pedophiles.

So what happens when We Media becomes the default way of life, the global status quo, the cultural norm, rather than an aspiration or a novelty?

We get more of what's already happening around the world – the power of traditional institutions that once controlled communication through monopolies on technology and distribution is giving way to the chaotic conversation of everyone else, of choice.

That means we get instant access to information about the 2007 Virginia Tech student massacre – not only from mass media, which remains a pervasive and powerful node in the global information network, but from students, families and friends of people who were there, in the midst of the shooting, with eye-witness accounts, photos and videos distributed with immediacy and authenticity that professional media could not match.

So we saw at Virginia Tech the emergence of the new order for professional journalists. The job of fact-gathering is now what we might call after-the-fact gathering, or meta-reporting. Journalists now have to focus less on events themselves, or what officials or witnesses say of them, but on

the amateur journalism produced and distributed worldwide before the professionals have even arrived on the scene, through mobile text messaging services like Twitter, social networks like Facebook and MySpace, collaborative news services like Digg, NowPublic, Global Voice and Reddit, and on countless blogs.

And even if we don't use all these tools, or produce media, but simply consume and share it, we can use it to learn more about the world and about our place in the world – or anyone's place in it.

We can go to Iraq to see a hospital bed, where a man named Ahmed Hameed describes how he lost his hand and leg when a car bomb exploded in the market in Baghdad's Adhamiya neighborhood.

We can see this on a video blog called Alive in Baghdad (<http://alivein-baghdad.org/2006/11/27/car-bomb-survivors-no-longer-statistics/>).

Or we can go to East St. Paul, Minnesota, where two men named Willie and Jermain wear red boxing gloves for a "practice" fight on a streetcorner. We can see this on a web site called Minnesota Stories (http://www.mnstories.com/archives/2006/11/street_boxing.html).

Or we can go to Libya, where a blogger named Khadija Teri's New Year's resolutions included: "Be more assertive with my husband (threaten to leave if the house is not finished soon)."

(<http://khadijateri.blogspot.com/2007/01/setting-myself-up-for-guilt-trip.html>)

We can share all of these experiences, now, simply by connecting to the network – by finding or following the links, from where-ever we happen to be: at work, at home, at a bus stop or here in a hotel with our noses in our mobile phones or our laptops.

Do we know for sure that any of those scenes, observations or reflections from around the world are true or real? Not really. They may all be staged, fakes, fiction, like LonelyGirl15, a teen-ager who attracted millions of viewers to her webcam videos posted on YouTube, only to be revealed to be a 21-year-old Los Angeles actress working off a script written by an aspiring film-maker. The revelation didn't matter – the production continued, and so did the audience. (<http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=loneylgirl15>).

So what does it mean when we can access unimaginable volumes of data and ideas, channel surf around the globe until the end of days and never view the same thing twice, or search and narrow in on what we want, when we want it, or people we like and want to hang out with, all the while hovering in a fog of uncertainty about what's real and what's not, about who's trying to fool us and who's trying to help us?

If you are the world's only super power, it means you are tempted to turn your back on your democratic principles and, instead of celebrating and spreading freedom, democracy and free speech, you become a censor. That's what's happened earlier this year to the U.S. military in Iraq, where access to MySpace, YouTube and other online services were blocked on military data networks. Obviously there would be an endless supply of alternative outlets for soldiers who wanted to tell their stories and tell their families that they are safe, or miserable, or frightened. Still, the challenge to American ideals was predictable: as the power to produce and distribute information shifts to individuals, there will be clashes, conflicts and disruption in democracies such as the United States and in dictatorships such as China, where a market economy's need for information conflicts with a regime's need to control it. 1.3 billion people in China will be heard, no matter how many of them, or how many American technology companies, are employed by the government to try to stop it.

And terrorist will use the same networks to post threats, to communicate with each other and to spread fear through media –by making and distributing their own media, like videos of executions and bombings.

Meanwhile, We Media is expanding into virtual worlds like SecondLife, where Reuters has dispatched a reporter to cover the virtual comings and goings of avatars, virtual real estate speculators and cartoon pornographers.

We Media is here. Now we must all adjust to our new role in the world, to new ways of learning, to new ways of making and using media – and to new opportunities.

Andrew Nachison is a managing director of iFOCOS.

Ideas in practice

Everything is Digital.

All information is or will be digital, and from that follows an infinite variety of products and services organizations and individuals to splice, parse and reconfigure digital products into an ever-expanding universe of new products. Innovation in how we communicate about our lives, and how we apply data to them will be relentless.

What To Do: Reimagine the home page, unbundle content. Your brand can take different forms to match individual preferences. Personalization is one approach – like personalized web content on My Yahoo, or easy-to-change web site skins, which are familiar to bloggers who use services like Typepad and Blogger, or content aggregated through services like Netvibes, or friends and their ideas aggregated through Facebook and MySpace. Imagine skins for whatever you offer – and content untethered to go where people want it. Develop a variety of skins with fluid, flexible designs to allow customers to organize the experience for themselves.

Everything is media.

All companies are or will be media companies. Media is not only the message, but the model. Media organizations create a variety of experiences around they produce, share, remix and redistribute with others. The power of media institutions gives way to a distributed, decentralized network that includes empowered individuals, empowered companies and governments that come to terms with a new way of communicating.

What To Do: Don't just use media – be media. If you're Budweiser, experiment with Bud.tv; if you're a politician, collect feedback from people you're supposed to represent to help set your agenda. Talk with people – not at them – using video, blogs and virtual meetings. Don't worry about controlling your message. If you're an advocacy group, don't look to media to dig up the facts that matter to you most – dig them up yourself, and publish them.

Trust in flux.

As power to determine our own media experiences expands, trust in media institutions is shifting. Our research last year in 10 countries found that media is generally more trusted than government -- with the notable exception of the U.S. and UK. Trust is clearly in flux: one in four people said they had abandoned a news source after losing trust in its content. This year we found that 72 percent of Americans are dissatisfied with the quality of journalism – yet 76 percent also said the Internet has had a positive effect.

What To Do: Actions speak louder than your words. Don't tell people you should trust them. Do things that earn their trust. The BBC is the world's most trusted news source – and, in stark contrast to US news organizations that have scaled back their foreign news gathering, it has journalists stationed and reporting news around the globe, all the time.



MORE ABOUT WE MEDIA

You can learn more about the changing landscape of media by downloading the original We Media report at www.ifocos.org.

"...(We Media will) be the reference point for any serious discussions of this topic from now on. "

David Weinberger, author

Small Pieces Loosely Joined and Cluetrain Manifesto

"By far the most comprehensive, thoughtful and perceptive analysis I've seen. Every journalist, offline and online, should read it."

John Naughton, author

A Brief History of the Future: The Origins of the Internet



WE MEDIA CONFERENCE

Our annual conference brings together global leaders, developers and entrepreneurs from media, technology, business, finance, telecommunications, entertainment and research in participatory forums, exhibits and workshops.

For information on the 2008 conference send an email to info@ifocos.org or add your name to the conference mailing list, also at info@ifocos.org

Multi-media coverage of previous We Media conferences in Miami (2007), London (2006), and New York (2005) can be found at: <http://ifocos.org/wemediamiami>

The 2007 We Media movie is at www.ifocos.org



JOIN THE iFOCOS COMMUNITY

We are a community of innovators committed to harnessing the power of media, communication and human ingenuity for the common good. Membership includes diverse participation by and benefits to individuals, companies, startups, nonprofits, NGOs, educators and educational institutions.

Information and sign-up at <http://www.ifocos.org/join>

ABOUT iFOCOS

iFOCOS is a think-tank and action center that helps individuals and organizations worldwide understand and use expanding media and communications technologies to innovate their businesses and create better-informed global citizens. Members tap into the shared knowledge and collective intelligence of a global, cross-sector community of thinkers, leaders and innovators.



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