

Conspicuous Eclecticism or Mexican Waving? Citizen As Publisher

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Here are two key media analysis rules:

1. Never generalise from your own media behaviour
2. All the best work is done in conference coffee breaks or late at night over a glass of red wine (or two)

In this blog I will try to avoid the former, while pleading guilty to the latter.



Digital Debate

One of the big themes at the [Saltzburg Global Seminar](#) on media and development has been the [debate over whether the Internet increases or decreases the variety of media we consume](#). Does it narrow debate into echo chambers or allow thousands of connections to bloom?

Ethan Zuckerman gave a great [presentation](#) to kick the debate off here in Austria and a group of us kept that conversation going deep into the night in the Schloss Leopoldskron dining room. (Yes, it is the one where they filmed *The Sound of Music*)

[John Bracken from the Knight Foundation](#) picked the theme up with me over a coffee today and we stumbled upon some glib phrases that might help describe the disparity

in this debate.

We were talking about how a British media organisation like the BBC has become global thanks to the Internet. During the Iraq War it was a key source for a lot of concerned Americans. It's not just about the Internet. BBC World Service, of course, has long provided an alternative for much of the world for decades.

But the key difference with online is that we use social networks to amplify our media consumption and connect our sources to other people through Twitter, Facebook, Delicious, Google Reader etc. So the BBC becomes part of American social media discourse.

So never mind citizen journalism, Web 2.0 is the era of the Citizen Publisher. But what kind of publisher?



Forward Citizen

Do most people simply retweet what is popular? Do they feel enthused to re-publish material because their friends have sent it their way? This is a form of digital Mexican wave that can create a meme. That wave can build momentum and become a storm that can influence what corporations, politicians and journalists do in the real world.

But other people might characterise this kind of crowd behaviour as mob rule, a swarm or herd mentality that reduces variety and plurality.

Perhaps you are a different kind of citizen publisher, someone who practices 'Conspicuous Eclecticism' (Copyright C.Beckett/J.Bracken 2010) These people are part of social networks that prioritise the unusual, the Long Tail information. Instead of retweeting news headlines or the latest pensee of Stephen Fry, these people seek to demonstrate their access to more specialised sources.

This is not just showing off a kind of online intellectual elitism. It may be that these citizen publishers are deliberately cultivating sources of references to empower their professional or vocational activities. It's a kind of Citizen



Not Waving

Of course, in practice, people will probably indulge in both kinds of citizen publishing at different times. But to what degree they do either will tell us a lot about how much the Internet contributes to fostering real dialogue. I suppose the good thing about the Internet is that it is much easier to do either. Feel free to head for the mass or the marginal at the click of a button.

But for those of us concerned about media policy and the value of journalism this matters. I suspect that if we want to understand how the Internet works then we need to know more about citizen publishing. There is already loads of Good Stuff out there, the real question is whether people ever see it.

Instead of obsessing about citizen journalists – the bloggers and the people who create all that user generated content – perhaps we ought to spend more time looking at the linkers, the -re-tweeters and the Like-rs on Facebook. It's a kind of curation but I prefer to call them Citizen Publishers or perhaps Networked Publishers? (cf [Networked Journalism ad nauseum](#))

[Follow the Salzburg Seminar on Twitter at #salzburgmedia]

[The BBC's Head of Global News Peter Horrocks recently gave [a speech on the corporation's global responsibilities.](#)]

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