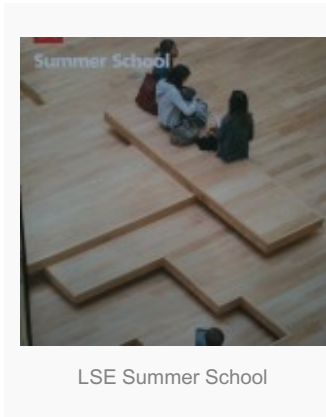


When Documentation Becomes Reality (Guest Summer School blog)

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2010/07/08/when-documentation-becomes-reality-guest-summer-school-blog/

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Kevin Anderson (@KevGlobal) gave a positive history of the virtues of new media journalism in a talk to the [Polis Summer School](#) that captivated most students. But as Summer School student Joanna McNurlen reports, social media at its most unmediated can create profound problems. Do we really want total freedom of digital expression?

When Documentation Becomes Reality

by Joanna McNurlen

Let us begin with a typical college party: music blaring, Solo cups everywhere, drunk people falling over one another... and don't forget the cameras, capturing it all. You can't go to a college party without seeing people (usually girls) snapping off rounds of photos to document their presences in the social scene. The next morning (or later that night), these young women upload their photos to Facebook and broadcast their social achievements to their friends and compatriots on Facebook. Comments pour in as users cheer the evening's tidings or lament their failures to attend. For the picture-takers (who are, in the sense of new media, photojournalists), the purpose of attending the party soon becomes not to interact with people but to document their interactions with people: the documentation of reality becomes reality.

Certain amateur new media users walk a similar path. They take photos and videos that instantly upload to the Internet, they use GPS software to track and broadcast their locations, and they tweet about everything they experience. The new media call these tech-savvy people "journalists," but without the old connotation of the term. These so-called journalists do not investigate stories but merely broadcast experiences. They work as transmitters, publicizing their experiences with neither critique nor analysis. In doing so, they invite critique and analysis from other sources, which poses a problem.

To explain this problem, I would like to invoke Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra and Simulations" (1) and apply it to new journalism. Baudrillard argues that our society has replaced our concept of reality with a series of symbols and signs, removing reality's original meaning. He refers to this process as "the precession of simulacra."

Basic Realities

The first phase of said process is "the reflection of a basic reality," or the raw footage from a new media journalist (i.e. video, sound, or photographs). The second phase "masks and perverts a basic reality," much as a journalist might do in reporting or commenting on something he or she sees. The third phase "masks the absence of a basic reality" – a blogger commenting on the news story and offering her own thoughts on the issue, despite a lack of first-hand experience. The fourth and final stage "bears no relation to any reality whatever" and is too far from the original event to have meaning. This reflects misquotations and citations of studies that fail to prove the author's claim.

Any form of media (be it video, audio, or photograph) creates a false reality in that it captures one perspective of a larger event. When people respond to these perspectives, they are basing their own views on already distorted information and thus further augmenting the problem. To them, the documentation of the event is reality.

Like the Facebook photojournalists who take pictures to form a new, flawed reality online, new media journalists who serve only as transmitters perpetuate the false reality, leading to inaccuracies. To minimize this distortion, journalists must, in keeping with the ideas of new media, monitor one another. Only then can they stay close to true reality.

1. Poster, Mark; Baudrillard, Jean (1988). *Selected writings*. Cambridge, UK: Polity. [ISBN 0-7456-0586-9](#).

[This was a guest blog by Polis Summer School student by Joanna McNurlen.

You can find details of the [Polis Summer School here](#) and you can follow it on Twitter with the hashtag #IR245]

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