State 2.0: lessons for e-politics from networked journalism

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Instead of asking what is so wrong with our political communications today, why not ask, 'what is working?' And perhaps, even more daring in such a depressed age, 'what can we expect from a more digital democracy?' Are there lessons to be learnt for politics from the experience of networked journalism? [This is the orginal version of an article published on OpenDemocracy]

The enthusiasm amongst US liberals over Barrack Obama's Internet-injected campaigning has now moved onto a more mature discussion about how the exercise of power can be enhanced by digitally-based initiatives. Most of us in the Rest Of The World shared the excitement and look forward to that more expansive, substantive and critical debate. Elsewhere in the world, from Afghanistan, to Iran, to Britain even, the discussion around online democracy is about the impact on power rather than the internal analysis of digital activism itself. Democracy is about politics, not only elections and certainly not just about media.

Here's the problem. Economic collapse has merely confirmed the public's sense that the conventional way of doing politics – including liberal Western representative democracy – is not delivering intelligible or effective approaches to the big contemporary challenges like climate change, social stress, identity conflict, and inequality. These are global issues but citizens feel them at a personal and community level. They do not believe that politicians have answers or even the credibility to pose the questions. They feel disconnected and distrustful.

How to connect? The most interesting reconfiguring of the way we organise ourselves as societies is happening around political communications. The key mediation variable at the moment – apart from straight-forward policies on freedom of expression – is the Internet.

We are seeing emerging ways of networking that are building altered relationships between civil society, government, business and the citizen. There is nothing innately democratic or progressive about the role of the Internet and digital communications in this. But the potential for supporting more open and responsive politics is certainly there. There is evidence of an increased capacity for a more interactive style of democracy. And possibly there is even some indication of a more fundamental restructuring of power flows and the mediation of decision-making and influence.

There are plenty of US examples from the works of people like Clay Shirky and Manuel Castells [1] citing new Internet-based examples of collaboration. You can throw in some UK cases from writers like Charlie Leadbeater[2] and my own *SuperMedia[3]*. But there is also evidence from research by people such as Matthew Hindman [4] as well as the critical analysis of people like Cass Sunstein[5] that indicate the limitations of digital democracy.

Indeed, new problematics are emerging around online democracy. How do we weight participation to influence? How to we create the algorithms that will accurately assign policy impacts from public inputs? In other words, just because people can click and vote/opine/donate does not mean that they are being democratic in a deliberative, equitable or efficient manner. The danger is that we are we are simply replacing the clunky but established mechanisms of candidates, offices, ballot boxes, and parliaments with a kind of random, self-selecting and unconsidered online politics game.

The news media is critical to this discussion and it is also a good test case for the theories of change. I want to suggest that both the enthusiasts and sceptics may be right. We are not witnessing a whole new-born form of digital democracy. But neither are the old structures unaltered. Instead, what we are seeing is a profound shift that could reconfigure rather than revolutionise current arrangements. I think it is time to concentrate on those networking instances rather than the ideological absolutes.

In America where so much of this sense of change stem, the debate regarding journalism has and remarkably, still

often is, seen as between Old and New Media. There is still an extreme dialectic between one position that hopes the Internet is merely another medium versus those who believe it is the only media. Some still pray that the Internet can be undone or conversely while others insist it is the key to everything. If this was ever a tenable frame for the argument, it is now redundant . Most US news media is now substantially digitally-driven and in significant ways, online. Non-Americans like myself find the discussion in the US highly informative, innovative and serious but often frustrating. We enjoy but are puzzled by the ideological gulf in debates between people like Paul Starr[6] and Yochai Benkler.[7]

There are all sorts of deep cultural and historical reasons why the argument in America is constructed like this. Perhaps it is the religious moral underpinning of all American ideology that makes protagonists see these issues in terms. Or possibly it is simply a product of the self-consciously ethical approach taken by the more high-minded American journalism analysts. There are also economic specifics that have accentuated the feeling of crisis in US news media. There is a sense that the road is forking, an era is ending and the bright shiny new future is rather bleak and threatening. Indeed, it is. Because of its bloated profits, virtual monopolies and over-commercial imperatives during the golden business years of the 80s and 90s much of the US mainstream news media acquired large debt as well as public disinterest without even noticing. So now the closures and redundancies are far more brutal. Financially US news media has further to fall. Their audiences have disappeared more rapidly and completely.

I travel around the world talking to journalists and the challenge to the accepted ways of doing things in America feels far more cataclysmic than in other media markets. In Europe we have major tax- supported news organisations to fall back on. In the Majority World mainstream media business is generally still growing alongside booming new mobile and Internet platforms. But while the routes may be different and taken at different speeds, the direction of travel in journalism is broadly similar worldwide. News media is changing and so are political communications. So we all have an interest in answering the question posed most acutely in the States: can the news media of a digital age enhance democracy?

The answer is that all around us we see that networking works. Networked Journalism works. This is the synthesis I set out in *SuperMedia.[8]* It combines the technical capacity of mainstream media with much greater public participation in a thoroughly more open structural relationship between citizen and/as journalist. It is about the shift in journalism from a manufacturing to a service industry. It is a change in practice, from providing a product to acting as facilitators and connectors. It means an end to duplication and a focus on what value every bit of journalism production adds.

The *SuperMedia* version of Networked Journalism is a description of what is happening but also an aspiration that recognises that society (and especially media organisations) must invest resource and accept a shift in power. This model does not work well enough yet to replace the old business model of mainstream mass commercial media. That is a big worry at a time of immense economic stress. But perhaps the real task is not to 'save' old journalistic institutions. They worked best as a means of producing surplus value for shareholders rather than in providing social, economic and political benefits for people in the 21st century.

This is not to reject market forces. Quite the opposite. Online networking exposes journalists precisely and directly with what the public want and need. That is a good thing. Of course, there are market distortions such as the tendency for online communications to produce dominant brands in search, aggregation and distribution of information such as Google and the BBC. But even these mammoths are far more attuned to their consumers' specific interests then the giants of mainstream media ever were.

This is also the lesson that the dominant brands of politics need to learn. And those activists or groups who seek to challenge or provide alternatives to those major political power forces should also see how networked journalism offers new possibilities. Civil society organisations, business, government, and NGOs need to recognise that they are becoming media networked organisations. The experience of journalism as it goes online is a lesson for all

other social, political and economic groups. Recent Polis research[9] has highlighted how international development NGOs are increasingly becoming media organisations. But it also shows that, despite their ideological advocacy of transparency, democracy and empowerment, they are still failing to understand their responsibilities and potential as networked journalism facilitators.

The point of Networked Journalism is that the citizen as an individual and as part of these organisations is now part of the production of news communications. The relationships offered by networked journalism offer the potential for increasing trust in that news communications. By extension it could go some way to restore greater faith in political communications, too, and thus even in politics itself.

If people can participate in something at all parts of the process, then they are more likely to take a responsible and considered stake. If networked communications can offer greater openness, transparency, relevance and control for the citizen then they will be more likely to engage with the substance of the content. They will also be more prepared to support and even invest in that process.

The question of how to monetise online journalism is a technical one. The real task is not to find a clever and undetectable way to screw the public for what they used to get through advertising. The proper question is what should be produced that will convince them to pay for real value. A more networked journalism helps build in that kind of relevance to people's interests and needs that might generate a desire to fund the process.

So let's go back to the question in that first optimistic sounding paragraph: What works? By this I mean not to give a list of examples, but types. Just to show that this is not a 'bliss list' of wishful thinking, here are a couple of things that are *not* working.

1.   The Wikipedia principle has not transferred well to journalism. I have yet to see a successful news online project that use the principles so well deployed on that wonderful encyclopaedic resource.

2.   Comments on political blogs do not create constructive debates. Despite clever attempts at moderation, referring and filtering, the conversation around blogs is still random. Fun, sometimes insightful, but it makes a limited contribution to anything approximating to the public sphere.

So what kinds of things work? Well, from the Hudson River to the streets of Tehran it is clear that the mainstream media now recognises that **the citizen as eyewitness reporter** has transformed whole stories such as the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami and set the agenda on events like the Iran Demonstrations of 2009.

Interactivity works. Sites that allow the public to contribute and respond do best and build the most durable traffic. The BBC's investment in user generated content and interactivity means it now commands major flows of interest and material around big events and issues. It can't predict or entirely control that interactivity but it has direct benefits for its journalism.

Independent specialist media has filled gaps. The Internet has shown us that mainstream media left vast swathes of public interest unattended. Some of these are niches far down the Long Tail. Other examples may be unsavoury: look at the success of Islamic extremism online, for example. But elsewhere take the growth of citizen-generated sports fanzines and parenting websites, for example. UK sites parenting sites like *Netmums[10]* or fan forums like KUMB (Knees Up Mother Brown)[11] show how it is the way that journalism is produced, as well as the actual content that makes it work. When it comes to our football team or our family, we are prepared to invest effort in creating journalism as well as sharing communication with others. We give to get in the online exchange economy. Together we produce the kind of journalism that mainstream media failed to provide.

That brings us to the unquestionable success that also takes us to the limits of journalism and politics: **social networking.** The two websites cited above are built on social networking. They perform the basic journalism functions. They report, comment and analyse on topical events – especially their specialist areas but they are also constantly invading other areas deliberately or unconsciously. However, the reason that the community has been

created and then sustained is that is a social network as well. It is about identity and community, a mutual interaction at emotional and cultural levels as well as the simple exchange of information and opinion.

Much of the content may be considered superficial and trivial compared to the *New York Times* or *The Economist*. But even on very practical and personal sites like *Netmums* and *KUMB* there is a huge amount of material devoted, for example, to highly ideological conversations around political ideas of gender, identity, education, ethics and personal morality. These are [non-] political forums command attention, create engagement and stimulate vibrant discourse that politicians and the news media can only dream of and they are run by the citizens. And they are not just online. These communities have real world overspill and direct impact on activism.

Add these kind of sites to the overtly social networking sites such as Facebook and you have an idea of Web 2.0 as a sphere[s] of networks, not a collection of websites. It is a space that is still generally untouched by conventional politics or journalism.

So this is how politics works in the digital age. It alters the current hierarchical, institutional-based, static distribution of power which is granted to politicians and bureaucracies in exchange for the sporadic electoral sanction of the ballot box. It takes on the character of networks: more constant, fluid, self-regulating forms of information exchange. But while the citizen is now intrinsically part of all aspects of the process, you still need politicians, even parties and parliaments. So we will still need journalists, newsrooms and even media organisations to make Networked Journalism work.

This is all subject to change and contestation as we are still at an early – and critical – phase. The important thing is to recognise the lessons for politics in the way that people enjoy and commit to new networked kinds of communication. The content of social media is 'political' in its forms and subjects. It helps people to mediate ideas about how they live their lives, what they value and what they want to debate. This is where journalism should be and this is where the real political interest is already. It may not look like conventional news or politics but that is precisely why people like it.

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[2] Charlie Leadbeater *We Think (Profile, 2009)*

[3] Charlie Beckett, *SuperMedia (Wiley-Blackwell 2008)*

[4] Matthew Hindman *The Myth of Digital Democracy (Princeton 2009)*

[5] Cass Sunstein *Republic Web 2.0 (Princeton 2009)*

[6] Paul Starr, *The End of The Press, New Republic Magazine, March 4 th, 2009*

[7] Yochai Benkler, *New Republic Magazine* accessed 09/09 http://www.tnr.com/article/correspondence-new-era-corruption

[8] Charlie Beckett, *SuperMedia (Wiley Blackwell 2008)* Chapter Two: pp41-86

[9] Charlie Beckett, LSE EDS Discussion Paper, NGOs As Gatekeepers To Local Media: Networked News For Developing Countries,
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[10] http://www.netmums.com/home/home/

[11] http://www.kumb.com/forum/