Social media participation: what if no-one comes?

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uscla.jpg   I come all this way to California for a Berkman/Annenberg conference on media and social participation and the first main speaker is a Brit. Worse still, it's Richard Sambrook, Global News Director at the BBC (and a very good media blogger). Richard has been very kind about my new book and we tend to agree about Networked Journalism so I wasn't likely to hear anything I disagreed with or hadn't heard before. He gave a superb precis of where we are at and the questions we are facing. But what was interesting were the elephants that then strolled in to the room.

The fundamental assumptions of this conference are that new media technology is changing journalism and offers the opportunity for a more particpatory and democratic form of news communication. The people gathered are serious and informed realists who are active media producers as well as thinkers. Richard is a good example, look at how the BBC has strived to include more UGC and include the public in the process. We all want this to work. We all want more citizen journalism as part of the news media.

This is partly because we know that change is inevitable. We also hope that networked journalism can save the news media from the economic disaster that it is currently heading towards. But it is also because the folk gathered at USC are generally political liberals who want the public to be more political – we want the people to speak and act through social media. So here's the elephant:

What if they don't want to?

The evidence from Richard's talk and other places is that most participation is done by a small minority and they are often the same people who were active before. So do you go out to stimulate more participation? I suspect not in the old pro-active mode. The internet is all about generative creativity. It is about people creating their own communities rather than having them provided. That is why BBC's I-Can project failed.

More to follow from the University of Southern California at Los Angeles. As Richard put it, the conference is effectively a gathering in person of some of the best RSS feeds on new media. For Brits like Richard and I this is a wonderful way to put faces to the blogs. I guess it's real life social networking. One of the best people in this field who is blogging the conference from more of an international development take is Ethan Zuckerman who has done a much better job on his blog of actually reporting what was said today! So I'll just be networked rather than journalist and suggest you read his excellent version.