The Public Sphere and Online, Independent Journalism

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The rapid evolution of online, independent journalism affords educators an opportunity to increase students' understanding of the nature and power of the news media. Drawing from Habermas's theories of the role of the public sphere in democratic discourse, the author, as founder of an online news publication, traces trends in concentrated corporate ownership of Canadian media, new forms of online journalism and their democratic potential and limitations, and ways in which educators can help students deconstruct and participate in traditional and newer forms of news media.

Key words: media democracy, Habermas, Internet, blogosphere, citizenship

L'évolution rapide du journalisme indépendant en ligne fournit aux enseignants une occasion de mieux faire comprendre aux élèves la nature et le pouvoir des médias d'information. S'inspirant des théories de Habermas sur le rôle de la sphère publique dans le discours démocratique, l'auteur, qui a créé un bulletin en ligne, retrace les tendances quant à la concentration des médias au Canada, les nouvelles formes de journalisme en ligne, leur potentiel et leurs limites pour la démocratie ainsi que les façons dont les éducateurs peuvent aider les élèves à développer un esprit critique et à utiliser les médias, traditionnels ou nouveaux.

Mots clés : médias, démocratie, Habermas, Internet, blogosphère, conscience citoyenne.

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News media matter to educators in two ways. As a space in which citizens learn, discern, debate, and judge to formulate action, news media can be imagined as an extension of the classroom. And, as a powerful force in democratic society for or against change, the news media as subject warrants critical focus in classroom education.

This article is intended to encourage educators to go beyond the common newspaper-in-the-classroom approach to curriculum. Opportunities for a deeper and more interactive approach to media education arise from the quickly evolving world of online, independent news media, a world that in some important, if limited, respects brings us closer to Jürgen Habermas's ideal of the public sphere.

Habermas (1989) posits that early modern capitalism created the conditions for the "bourgeois public sphere"—an area for public debate. He cites a number of conditions that allowed this sphere to operate: the rise of private property, literary influences, coffee houses and salons, and —primarily—the independent, market-based press. After the mid-1800s, the public sphere was taken over by an expanded state and increasingly powerful corporate interests. Instead of allowing a sphere for debate that could shape the direction of the state, the increasingly commodified media became a force for manipulating the public and manufacturing consent (Curran, 1991, p. 83; Habermas, 1989;).

Even at its height, the bourgeois public sphere excluded women and those who did not own property. But as Kellner (2004) points out, Habermas's arguments serve, if nothing else, as an ideal of what the media should be. As I will elaborate later, many people think the Internet will create the conditions for a public sphere that lives up to Habermas's ideal.

If one accepts Habermas's view that concentrated corporate ownership of news media undermines the public sphere, then Canada would be a prime example. Canada's mainstream news media is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few very large corporations. Indeed, as one media scholar notes, "Canada tolerates a degree of concentration in media ownership that is unequalled in any country of comparable social, political and economic standing" (Raboy, 2005, para. 72).

In the United States, a grassroots rebellion aided by online activists (Moveon.org) convinced legislators to kill a bill backed by President George W. Bush that would have further accelerated concentration. That victory in 2003 has spurred a media reform movement in the U.S.A. (McChesney, 2004). In Canada, although the issue has not yet produced the same level of activism, awareness is building. Prodded by citizens'

dissatisfaction, the Senate Committee on Transport and Communications has conducted hearings into the state of Canada's media and issued an interim report in 2004. The committee is particularly concerned with the effects of so-called convergence, the push by corporations to reap more revenues by buying up and integrating television, print, Internet, and other advertising platforms (Government of Canada, 2004). At hearings held in Vancouver, the committee heard critics of convergence, including myself, describe how this conglomeration trend was causing owners to take on huge debt, slash staff and resources, homogenize news content, and shift editorial decision making to distant headquarters (Beers, 2005).

Vancouver's media market (where I have practised journalism for over a decade inside and outside the corporate newsroom) has, according to one academic expert, "the dubious honour of being Canada's media concentration capital" (Gutstein, 2005). One company, CanWest Global, owns the two major local daily papers as well as one of the two national dailies, giving CanWest Global 90 per cent of paid daily circulation in Vancouver. As well, CanWest Global owns the television station that commands a 70 per cent share for its supper time news broadcasts. "Add CanWest's chain of 12 community papers which blanket the Lower Mainland and you have a news hegemony unrivalled in Canadian history. And it's all controlled by one Winnipeg family, with 89 percent of the company" (Gutstein, 2005). That family, the Aspers, already owned a chain of stations reaching 94 per cent of Canada's television audience when, in 2000, it bought 136 daily and weekly Canadian newspapers, including Vancouver's two dailies, from Conrad Black's Hollinger Inc. (CBC, 2000). The deal added billions in debt to CanWest Global's books. As an editor at the *Vancouver Sun* at the time, I observed firsthand the near immediate financial repercussions: slashed reporting, money shifted into advertorial pages (Beers, 2002a), and veteran journalists given buyouts or laid off to save money (Beers, 2002b).

CanWest's convergers proceeded to consolidate the conservative, pro-business, pro-Israel editorial perspective of their new media empire—a bias "so slanted that Vancouver's daily papers should be read at a 45-degree angle," according to a columnist for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (Connelly, 2005). Columnists and reporters at various

CanWest Global papers were censored or purged. Reporters at the *Montreal Gazette* pulled bylines to protest the erosion of their independence (Brown, 2002; Winter, 2002). The publisher of the CanWest Global-owned *Ottawa Citizen* was fired for refusing to obey a decree that editorials penned at the Winnipeg headquarters would appear in and speak for all CanWest papers (CBC, 2002b). For some, CanWest's power play merely threw into sharper focus a deeper problem. Observed Vince Carlin, chair of the School of Journalism at Ryerson University in Toronto: "You can fit everyone who controls significant Canadian media in my office. This is not a healthy situation" (quoted in Brown, 2002).

Canada's negative experience with concentrated, converged ownership reflects that in other countries, including the United States (Cooper, 2002; Gans 2003; McChesney, 2000; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005). Most American journalists rue the resulting ascendance of corporate culture in the newsroom. According to a study by Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon (2001), 51 per cent of the journalists they interviewed perceived recent news media changes as negative; 24 per cent—who tended to be higher up the management chain—believed the changes positive (p. 128).

At the same time, the corporate ethos is taking deeper root in the publicly funded news media of both the United States and Canada. In the U.S.A, pro-business conservatives have been given the reins of the Public Broadcasting Service and, while seeking more financial sponsorships from large corporations, are devoting more air time to pro-business and conservative perspectives (Labatan, Manly, & Jensen, 2005). The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Fall 2005 endured a seven-week lockout when employees took a stand against further contracting out and other cost-cutting measures. CanWest's owners, meanwhile, regularly drum beat for the de-funding of the CBC, which is perceived as an unfairly subsidized competitor to the corporate news media (CBC, 2002a).

The debate over who may own news media under what terms breaks into sharply different camps. Those defending the prerogative of corporations to buy up and consolidate news media tend to argue that journalism is first and foremost a business driven by the bottom line. Thus, firms must be free to pursue economies of scale to turn a good

profit, even if it means fewer organizations produce most "news" and skew it towards the interests of their advertisers. CanWest founder Izzy Asper famously told his journalist employees they were "in the business of selling soap" (CBC, 2003). Regulators must not interfere, as a CanWest executive explained to the Senate committee: "There is no 'appropriate' level of profit for a daily newspaper just as there is no 'appropriate' profit level for any industry operating in a market economy in which every company competes for investment capital" (Camilleri, 2005).

Those wanting policies that might restrict concentration or foster different ownership models tend to argue, as has Habermas (1989), that a diverse news media is an essential component of democracy. The news media provide citizens the information and ideas they need to make political decisions. Thus, democracy is eroded whenever citizens are limited in their choice of quality news media free to present diverse viewpoints (Gore, 2005). This second camp recognizes the news media as public educators. Indeed, this analysis of what makes for good news media has its corollary in the classroom. As one educator wrote after the attacks of September 11, 2001, "Questioning, exploring, stating the unpopular, challenging poorly reasoned theories, wrestling with convoluted and contradictory positions—this is what liberal education asks us to do. And it is exactly what is needed in the present environment, as we struggle with competing and complex ideas" (Marcy, 2002).

"Questioning, exploring, stating the unpopular" so as to promote a more vibrant democracy – this same civic ideal motivates many journalists to enter their chosen field. But as noted, American news editors and reporters have detailed their deep dissatisfaction with life in today's converged corporate media workplaces. Most perceived their autonomy diminishing as newsroom standards of ethics, rigour, and balance lost out to management goals of saving money and trivializing the news (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001). The most pessimistic feared for democracy itself, its citizenry indoctrinated rather than informed by corporate media's agenda. A citizenry "locked in a closet of misinformation, unaware of alternatives, manipulated by powerful forces that control the memes [transmitted ideas] – this is the ultimate nightmare that men and women of the future face in the

absence of independent media sources" (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001, p. 127).

Against this grim prospect some see hope in a counter-trend: The flourishing of independent news media through the use of new and evolving radio, television, and Internet technologies. This is where I have invested my energies for two years, having founded in November 2003 an independent online source of news and views. As I've indicated, the dismaying experience of Gardener and colleagues' subjects reflected my own. In an attempt to create a positive alternative, I have sought and received funding from labour unions, philanthropists, and socially responsible venture capitalists in British Columbia and launched *The Tyee* (www.thetyee.ca). The goal is to fold in revenue from select advertising and readers' contributions to develop a long-term sustainable future for *The Tyee*. The website offers an outlet to civic-minded journalists – many of them refugees from CanWest publications – while providing an interactive forum to its readers. *The Tyee* exists to serve as a counter-balance to corporate media's biases in British Columbia.

Focused on but not limited to B.C. issues, *The Tyee* breaks news stories sometimes taken up by the wider media, publishes viewpoints marginalized in the local corporate media, and allows visitors to the site to register and make comments after any article. *The Tyee* "repeatedly scooped Vancouver's two daily newspapers in the provincial election campaign [while] providing a very different model of feisty, independent and broad-scale Web journalism" (Connelly, 2005). Twenty six months into its existence *The Tyee* gets more than 180,000 unique visitors viewing more than a million pages per month; emails its stories weekly to more than 12,000 free subscribers; has more than 2,500 registered commentors who have posted more than 50,000 comments; and has published more than 1300 articles, at least 90 per cent of which are original material.

In short, for this public-minded journalist, *The Tyee*, has provided an education about what can be done in the era of the Internet. What follows are some observations about the role independent media plays in broadening the public sphere, the promise and limitations of the Internet

in fostering independent media, and ways to use independent media to promote media literacy and citizen education.

A DEFINITION OF INDEPENDENT

Though I may be accused of using the term too loosely, I will define independent news media as news media not subject to the most common pressures associated with the dominant, corporate form of ownership. Those rising pressures, as reflected in content, include conforming with the perceived status quo, so as not to upset corporate advertisers and the mass audience delivered to those advertisers; and devoting resources to creating "advertising environments" (focusing on themes to attract advertisers who provide the bulk of revenues for large newspapers and virtually all revenues for television and radio).

These pressures skew corporate media's content towards the interests of its corporate owners, tending to position citizens as consumers and to portray neo-conservative policies as inevitable developments. Canadians seem to be aware of those pressures. Three out of four surveyed by the Canadian Media Research Consortium (2004) said news organizations are not independent and are often influenced by powerful groups and individuals, including business, money interests, and government.

Does this mean independent news media are without bias? Clearly no. One of the luxuries of independence, however, can be the power to be selective in the issues and points of view one transmits. In describing "alternative media," Skinner (in press) notes, "They are guided by a purpose or mandate other than the profit motive and they are often organized to facilitate a broader range of input into production than their corporate cousins" and "provide ways of seeing and understanding events that are marginalized or not available there" (p. 24)

Non-corporate news sources with fewer resources and smaller target audiences than the CBC's may exist to critique and correct more mainstream news media. Still other independent news sources may exist to speak to subcultures whose members share certain assumptions or values, and so their news and opinion pieces begin with a biased set of concerns tailored to that audience. And some online news sources are forums where anyone can post stories or pictures or discuss what others

have posted; thus bias is not located in any conscious editorial decision-making authority.

This definition of independent news media, then, includes a host of different media forms, including print 'zines, co-op radio, community cable television, and various kinds of Internet sites. What makes any news media independent is that it is owned, operated, and structured to allow reporting and commentary that compensates for and counters the corporate media consensus. *The Tyee*, for example, does not seek to replicate in a more impartial way all the coverage supplied by corporate media available to British Columbians; rather, the aim is to expand the range of that coverage.

We are, in other words, attempting to expand and loosen restraints upon the democratic ideal of a public sphere, which Habermas (1989) has described as a space that permits citizens to interact, study, and debate on the public issues of the day without fear of immediate reprisal from the political and economic powers. In a similar vein, former U.S. vice president Al Gore stated that democracy works best when its media provide an unfettered "marketplace of ideas" based on reason (Gore, 2005).

The purely technological potential of the Internet to extend the public sphere or marketplace of ideas is undeniable. The amount of time Canadians spend actively using the web, according to an Ipsos Reid survey, is up 46 per cent since 2002 and now averages 12.7 hours a week. The Internet is the favourite medium for younger Canadians (ages 18 to 35), who spend more time visiting websites (14.7 hours per week) than listening to the radio (11.7 hours), watching television (11.6 hours), and reading newspapers (2.5 hours) (CTV, 2005). Internet usage is likely to accelerate as wireless computers become more cheap and portable. Already, Google is pushing free wireless access for entire U.S. cities (Associated Press, 2005), and Massachusetts Institute of Technology researchers predict crank-powered laptop computers will soon cost so little they could be handed out for free in developing countries (Bray, 2005).

Internet news media are able to be interactive, "viral" in distribution, immediately global in reach, and relatively inexpensive to produce.

These traits make the Web seem a natural host for the public sphere that Habermas defines thus:

A network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way as they coalesce into bundles of topically specified *public* opinions. Like the lifeworld as a whole, so, too, the public sphere is reproduced through communicative action. (1992/1996, p. 360). (quoted in Coulter, 1997, p. 37)

Many critics of corporate media therefore celebrate the Internet as a naturally fertile ground for independent media—as the basis, in fact, of a new mediasphere that can compete with corporate media and undermine its influence and authority. Such optimism must be tempered by realizations of how corporations are already exploiting the Internet to their own ends, as well as the challenges independent sites face in gathering resources, establishing credibility, and finding audiences. I will touch on these issues again later in this article.

THREE TYPES OF INTERNET INDEPENDENT MEDIA

The unique technology of the Internet has allowed many types of websites to evolve.

E-zine news media

These websites develop and present original content using traditional journalism approaches. Staff editors create some of the core content by assigning fresh news stories or analysis pieces to paid contributors with journalistic training and experience. E-zines may salt this core content with links to other media, streamed audio and video segments, discussion forums, blogs, and so on. Other e-zine news media besides *The Tyee* include *Rabble* in Canada, *Open Democracy* in the UK, and *Alternet* and *Grist* in the United States. To enhance their credibility, e-zine news media aim to produce original investigation and analysis that prove substantive under broad public scrutiny. Such credibility with the mainstream allows these sites to help citizens to hold powerful institutions accountable.

The blogosphere

A weblog or blog is an electronic notebook kept and updated by one or more persons. The sheer number of blogs – at least 18 million by one digital count—should not be mistaken for a massive infrastructure of independent news sources. Many blogs are eclectic, personal diaries recounting vacations, pet behaviour, and favourite books read. Others convey the blogger's expertise in some field of endeavor, offering, say, tech tips or consumer advice. A small subset of bloggers assign themselves the role of news source, analyst, and interpreter. They are electronic pamphleteers, self-appointed editor/commentators who use their own highly selective filter to note, deconstruct, annotate, and re-spin news items produced elsewhere. Most blogs allow readers to post comments.

Open publishing sites

These are sites where users provide the content. The most noted is OhmyNews.com in Korea, which claims two million visits a day, "tends to be anticorporate, antigovernment and anti-American," and has affected an election outcome, according to Wired.com. Anyone can submit stories to OhmyNews, whose editors decide what to publish and how much to pay, the rate ranging from zero to $16 (Kahney, 2003). An even more open model is Indymedia.org, which grew out of the Seattle anti-WTO demonstrations, and is now a network of websites around the world where visitors may post content without editing and "all content is copyleft, meaning that anyone is free to take and use it for non-profit purposes so long as they give credit to the original author" (Langlois, 2005, p. 48). Still more open is the wiki model, a collaborative workspace where anyone can post, edit, or add text. The visitor traffic for Wikipedia.org, an online, collaborative encyclopedia, now rivals the electronic *New York Times* (Sterling, 2005).

The open publishing concept continues to evolve. The Flikr.com site, developed in Vancouver, lets users post and comment upon each others' photographs. Another Vancouver-based open publishing effort is NowPublic.com, where visitors may post text, video, and photos of their own or from other media. NowPublic visitors not only can comment on posted information but may vote on what news coverage they would

like to see increased. NowPublic's slogan: "Don't like the news? Then change it."

All three categories – e-zine, blog, open publishing—have online functions that allow them to be democratically interactive in ways unlike radio, television, or the highly edited letters pages of newspapers and magazines. The Internet also enables users to bookmark favourite sites, saving and passing on news and views to a "viral" network of fellow citizens. The culture of citizenry modeled online, therefore, is one where news is not passively received, but is challenged, corrected, embroidered and, through individual agency, rippled outwards into the society.

At the same moment, the Internet is fast eroding assumptions about who may publish and report news. Although e-zine news publications like *The Tyee* are relatively rare compared to bloggers, they are becoming cheaper and easier to produce given ever improving open-source content management software. Meanwhile, a burgeoning new breed of "citizen journalists" populating blogs and open publishing sites are shifting assumptions about authority and influence in news media culture.

Joichi Ito (2003) and other thinkers see in this the flowering of a new form of democracy, an "emergent democracy" that changes the flow of power in the media landscape, and therefore in society. The driving dynamic, they argue, is the shift away from expert journalists speaking as "one to many." Instead, citizen journalists share information "many to many" within the horizontal, interlinked world of the Internet. Ito and others claim the power of emergent democracy was evidenced by the toppling of U.S. Senate Majority Leader Speaker Trent Lott when his racist comments and anti-civil rights record, largely ignored by corporate media, received harsh scrutiny in the blogosphere.

Others have expressed skepticism that democratic deliberation is best served by a beehive of bloggers. They are concerned that Habermas's ideal of public sphere as broad public commons will be lost to a fragmented "public of publics" on the Internet.

It is now commonplace to say that the Internet rids communication of intermediaries, of those professional communicators whose mass-mediated communication is the focus of much public debate, and discussion and political information. Dewey lauded such a division of labour to the extent to which it can improve deliberation, not merely in creating a public sphere but also "in the

subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication." This task is, at least in part, best fulfilled by professional communicators who disseminate the best available information and technologies to large audiences of citizens. (Bohman, 2004, pp. 141-142)

Still others have raised concerns about the credibility of news gathered by citizen journalists. The 26,000 registered citizen journalists who contribute to OhmyNews produce a "wild, inconsistent, unpredictable blend" of articles including some hoaxes, and, according to Wired.com, "there are ongoing problems with reporters' undisclosed conflicts of interest" (Kahney, 2003). As a journalist schooled in traditional approaches, I share these concerns about the insularity and unreliability of these new news media forms, even as I enjoy the populist spirit animating Ito's optimism. That is why *The Tyee*'s core content is made up of well-sourced articles by seasoned journalists while also offering some open publishing interactivity, such as comment threads after those articles.

And yet *The Tyee* could only be a creature of the web, exploiting as it does the relatively inexpensive reach of the Internet to create a new space within BC's public culture. In that space the audience we particularly seek to serve—and develop—might be described as "justice oriented citizens." The term is coined by Westheimer and Kahne (2004) in their study of citizenship education. The scholars described three different varieties of citizenship: the 'personally responsible citizen,' the 'participatory citizen,' and the 'justice-oriented citizen.' To make clear the differences, they described sample actions for each: the first 'contributes food to a food drive,' the second 'helps to organize a food drive,' while the third 'explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes.' So writes Evan Cornog in the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

"While each kind of action might be covered in the pages of a local newspaper, clearly it is the world of the justice-oriented citizen that intersects most clearly with the world of journalism, since 'root causes' of problems are what journalists seek to identify, and uncovering injustices is one of the raisons d'être of reporters" (Cornog, 2005).

Of course, Cornog harkens to high ideals of journalism, even if much of what citizens are actually offered by corporate media is sensationalistic and without context.

FUTURE-FOCUSED JOURNALISM

This description of the justice-oriented citizen resonates with Hannah Arendt's ideas about the responsibilities of citizenship in a healthy democracy. After the Holocaust, Arendt was trying to make sense of how that horror unfolded with so little effective opposition and what might make a society more immune to such flights of collective madness. She writes of the citizen's need to connect thought and action (e.g., Arendt, 1978). She wants every citizen to form deeper powers of ethical, moral, and practical judgment, certainly, but go further. Here she draws a bright contrast between the person with informed judgment who is merely a spectator and one who is an actor (Coulter & Wiens, 2002). For democracy to thrive, citizens must be more than merely informed by their news media; they must be equipped and willing to intervene in the flow of events to either head off injustice or create a more just society.

With that aim in mind, *The Tyee* publishes investigative reports intended to shed light on injustices caused by government or corporate actions – a form of journalism some call muckraking. However, we also devote a significant portion of our editorial resources and focus to what I term "future-focused journalism." If muckraking asks "what went wrong yesterday, and who is to blame?" then future-focused journalism asks "what might go right tomorrow and who is showing the way?"

Going back to Habermas's ideal, democracy is best served by a public sphere where competing visions of the future can be expressed and subjected to debate without skewing or censorship to fit the agendas of capitalist media owners or government officialdom. Rarely, however, are truly experimental, much less radical, visions of social change given in-depth exploration by corporate media. In those forums, the ones given space to frame our collective future tend to be denizens of corporate-funded think tanks, public relations experts paid by corporations, advertising experts selling us the shape of the new, and government officials beholden to corporate lobbyists.

In 1990 I was assigned by a junior editor at *Vogue* magazine to report on a different approach to drug policy, called "harm reduction," being tried in Liverpool, England, and in the Netherlands. My report on the measurable health and public safety gains achieved by needle exchanges, prescribed heroin, safety-patrolled prostitution zones, and similar European measures contrasted sharply with the U.S.-style war on drugs approach. My article was well enough written that *Vogue's* editor-in-chief paid me in full – but then killed the piece as too controversial. Yet the independent magazine *Mother Jones* was pleased to run an expanded version of the piece (Beers, 1991), which became part of a textbook on comparative approaches to social policy (Eitzen & Leedham, 2000). And the European experiments I reported on then were, as it turns out, versions of Vancouver's future a dozen years hence. The city today leads North America in experimenting with harm-reduction drug policies.

Future-focused journalism, then, is different from the blue-sky scenarios spun by so-called futurists. The journalist investigates a possible alternative future by reporting firsthand on experiments, whether local and small scale, or large and even society-wide in other nations. The result gives citizens data and real life experiences from which to make judgments about how to respond to injustices and, collectively, choose a different path. Future-focused independent media go beyond informing the individual citizen by bonding and catalyzing communities of citizens who share a vision for change. "Communities of struggle and transformation are . . . communicative phenomena. Social movements are dependent upon the establishment and maintenance of local spaces and diffuse networks of communication through which communities are imagined, developed, and mobilized for action" (Uzelman, 2005, p. 18). *The Tyee* has run many future-focused articles and series of articles reporting on alternative approaches to schooling, energy production, fish farming, timber harvesting, campaign financing, political organizing, and so on.

WHERE EDUCATORS AND INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM INTERSECT

Here I would like to discuss how educators might contextualize and draw from independent media in the education of citizens. That

discussion must begin with an acknowledgment of the weak signal independent media contribute within the loud, ubiquitous buzz of today's corporate media. The Internet may allow cheap and infinite space for independent journalism, but that does not guarantee large audiences for any one source. "Most likely, the Internet will continue to provide a humungous amount of news and news-related websites of varying degrees of accuracy and reliability, but the news audience can – and will – pay attention to only a handful of outlets across all the news media" (Gans, 2003, p. 30).

Likely, those outlets will be corporate in nature and points of view. "[W]hile the Internet has opened possibilities for new avenues of civic discourse, it has not yet even begun to dislodge the commercial mass media from their overwhelmingly dominant role. There is also a strong trend of commercialization and centralization of control over the Internet that may restrict its ultimate impact on civic discourse" (Cooper, 2002, p. 34). Changing this picture would require government policies regulating corporate media and offering incentives and resources to other ownership models for media (Beers, 2005; Cooper, 2002).

In the current realm, therefore, exposure to independent media requires the citizen to be a proactive seeker. Educators may enhance their students' motivations to do so by explaining the structural and financial advantages corporate media enjoy, examining the biases inherent in corporate (and all) media, and discussing the value to the person, and society, of seeking out more diverse information and views. Having done so, the educator then is afforded many opportunities to deepen media literacy because independent online media not only expand the definition of what is news but directly violate commonly held assumptions about how journalism should be practised. Exploring and evaluating independent media begin with so basic a question as this: What is news? How does one judge news to be legitimate?

New York Times editor-in-chief Bill Keller recently provided his definition, while defending the news culture of his organization. He declared that his paper epitomizes the journalism of "verification" rather than "assertion," its trained expert reporters suppressing their biases by obeying "a rigorous set of standards." Reporting on the world this way is essential "civic labor," but the expense can only be borne by large

organizations with much capital, said Keller, citing the $1.5 million dollars a year it cost to maintain a bureau in Baghdad. "Bloggers recycle and chew on the news. That's not bad. But it's not enough" (quoted in Fine, 2005).

Keller proudly stated that his news organization presents journalism that is "transparent" because "we show our work" (quoted in Fine, 2005). Checking that work (while assuming *New York Times* stories are anything but transparent) is exactly what many bloggers do with zeal, often from more clearly transparent ideological starting points. Indeed, much independent online media, particularly blogs, are deliberately personal or idiosyncratic in perspective. Or, in open publishing settings, content is assembled in a seemingly randomly aggregate way, as various people contribute what they can to the commons, unfiltered. Therefore, a virtue or vice (depending on your point of view) of much independent news media on the Internet is its postmodern shift away from the omniscient official and expert voice adopted in the news pages or broadcasts of most corporate media in North America. In much independent media, the audience instead is either more explicitly cued to the biases of the voice, or else a caveat emptor spirit prevails, in which the audience is expected to graze the information without assuming credibility of the source.

As previously discussed, this presents problems for conducting a civic conversation in which members may broadly agree at least on the legitimacy of facts presented. However, in its defense, the irreverent personal voice that tends to thrive on the Internet is well suited to puncturing claims of authority designed to suppress debate. It probably is no coincidence that at the same moment Internet usage is fast rising among the young, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that 21 per cent of people aged 18 to 29 turns to a television satire of news media, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, for its understanding of world events (Bauder, 2004, para. 2). In skewering official hypocrisy, Stewart's "fake news" employs techniques similar to those used by bloggers: gathering, cutting, pasting, and juxtaposing recently recorded events and official statements so as to show up contradictions and outright lies. This ridicule is not to be confused with detached sarcasm. A better descriptor would be "engaged irony" – irony used to deepen

and further awareness and discussion among justice-oriented citizens (Beers, 2001). In fact, Stewart, on his show and in other settings, has argued for more probing journalism and sophisticated analysis from corporate news media, slamming CNN and others for instead serving up warring sound bites (Hines, 2004).

All this presents a rich opportunity for the educator of citizens to examine questions about how we come to know, trust, and exchange news, and what communicative techniques are appropriate for widening and deepening public discourse. The interactive nature of the Internet is further grist for that discussion about democracy, citizenship, and the potential nature of the public sphere. In comment threads like those found on *The Tyee*, visitors are able to share their insights and critique the assumptions inherent in our articles, as well as the thoroughness with which our reporters present the facts. But given the relative unaccountability that anonymity affords our comment posters, the derisive tenor of "flame wars" (Dery, 1994) easily takes hold; the civic space *The Tyee* provides is quickly occupied by the most assertive and harshly judgmental citizens. Acknowledging and examining this dynamic offers an opportunity to move students towards a refined understanding of how democratic discourse is affected by the structure within which it is conducted. Compare the opportunity to bully that arises in an online comment thread, for example, with the far more intimate, accountable, and regulated environment of the classroom. And then ask: Should online discussants be encouraged, or policed, to avoid flame culture, and if so, how?

LEARNING CITIZENSHIP BY DOING MEDIA

In conclusion, here are some ways I would suggest educators of citizens can draw from and work with independent media:

- Critique corporate media, using independent media sources like e-zines, blogs, and open publishing to highlight and sharpen competing definitions of democratic discourse.
- Critique independent media, focusing on aspects problematic for democratic deliberation, including credibility and flame culture.
- Draw on independent media to spark conversations about justice issues and alternative visions of the good society of the future.

- Feed independent media: Encourage students to check media reports or conduct original research, then post their own related articles or comments to sites and see how the democratic conversation modeled there evolves.
- Create independent news media: Supply students with online tools and train them to create blogs or other media, allowing them a taste of the invigorating opportunities and challenges this era presents the engaged citizen journalist.

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