

## Lowering the Cost of Journalism

Clay Shirky, Jeff Jarvis and others highlight the fact that we need to look at alternatives beyond just throwing money at the problem. While the rise of the Internet has often been blamed for many of the current struggles in the news industry, the same aspects of the Web that have undercut the traditional newspaper business have also allowed a new wave of newsgathering and reporting operations to emerge. As noted above, the growth of personal, issue and community blogs has dramatically changed the information ecosystem. The people who were once traditional sources for the news — academics, analysts, politicians — now speak directly to people on blogs and social networks. As access to the means of publishing expands, new voices and new outlets are becoming important players in our national political discourse.

The rapidly dwindling cost of distribution is at the root of many of the nonprofit and for-profit models discussed on this site. Yochai Benkler, author of *The Wealth of Networks*, points out that in addition to enabling new institutional models like nonprofit news and investigative journalism centers, one of the most profound ways the Internet is reshaping the Web is by facilitating the connection of individuals in networks. Benkler writes in *The New Republic*: "Less prominent than the large collaboration platforms like Daily Kos, individuals play an important role in this new information ecosystem." Beyond opening up our national political discourse to a new class of experts who can weigh in on important debates in unprecedented ways, the Internet also opens up political debates to individuals "who by happenstance [are] at the right place at the right time — like the person who made the video of John McCain singing 'Bomb Iran,' or the people who are increasingly harnessed by forward-looking organizations, like the BBC or now CNN iReport, to share their stories, images, and videos." Benkler argues that we should not look to foundation or

government funding that would simply prop up "older establishments that still depend on much higher ratios of organizational, financial and physical capital," but should instead seek out new funding streams that leverage the "lighter, networked models" that the Internet makes possible.

One of the most interesting outgrowths of the Internet's ability to lower the barrier to entry has been the emergence of new forms of "citizen journalism" and "pro-am" (professional amateur) reporting efforts that combine paid editors and novice reporters. A prime example of this trend was the "OffTheBus" project sponsored by *The Huffington Post* and Jay Rosen's NewAssignment.net during the 2008 election. OffTheBus engaged 12,000 people in a collaborative journalism effort designed to tell the local campaign stories that mainstream media missed. With a small editorial team of Web-savvy organizers, OffTheBus managed a variety of reporting projects, including distributed research projects like a 227-person-led investigation into the role of "superdelegates" in selecting the Democratic nominee. Amanda Michel, the project's organizer, says that OffTheBus democratizes news and information. She acknowledges that this model is insufficient to provide our communities with all the news and reporting they need, but she argues, "If taken seriously and used properly, this pro-am model has the potential to radically extend the reach and effectiveness of professional journalism." Noting that more than five million people read OffTheBus in October 2008 alone, even though the budget for 16 months of nationwide collaborative journalism was just \$250,000, Michel sees an opportunity for these models to forge a "new social contract between the press and the public."

Whereas many new policy ideas focus on raising money to support the future of journalism, it is vital to also support efforts to lower the costs and barriers to entry for new people and voices. While the Internet facilitates publishing, there is still the need for better tools

to help journalists, citizens and experts in producing, organizing and sharing the news. One model for this might be JSeed, "a project aimed at developing new digital tools for reporting local news." Chip Kaye, the developer behind JSeed, wants to "build tools that can further enable and energize local news reporting." He is seeking to bring the Web's best tools, like feeds, blogging platforms, rich media management, social networking and real-time updates, into one central hub, a Web site designed specifically for local reporting. Another example of this sort of endeavor is the Banyan Project being developed by Pulitzer Prize-winner Tom Stites. The project seeks to "to revitalize journalism and help mend our frayed democracy by serving a significant segment of the huge population of less-than-affluent Americans." It would do this in part by equipping "reader/users with bottom-up Web tools that enable them to organize in pursuit of their interests as well as to participate in Banyan journalism by contributing many forms of information and feedback." Tools such as JSeed and the Banyan Project could help both traditional media outlets and new citizen journalism projects, allowing these entities to invest in newsgathering rather than overhead.

#### **READ MORE**

- Yochai Benkler, "A New Era of Corruption?" *The New Republic*, March 4, 2009.  
Sometimes referred to "user-generated content," a number of variations on this theme have been attempted over the past decade. The public and civic journalism movements also strike similar themes. More recently, "crowd sourcing" has emerged as a proposed solution to newsgathering.
- Amanda Michel, "Get Off the Bus," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 2009.
- Chip Kaye, "jseed overview," [jseed.org](http://jseed.org).

Tom Stites, The Banyan Project, <http://www.banyanproject.com>