Stuff That Matters: The Rise and Rise of Open News

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Open Publishing, Open News[1]

Open news Websites such as the sites of the *Indymedia* network, *Kuro5hin*, and *Plastic*, remove the privileged role of site editors, while retaining the sense of trust and identity which their work can contribute to the site. This represents a truly *open* form of collaborative news publishing, and finally puts all power into the hands of users, who become what we might call 'produsers'; it also leads to true unadulterated multiperspectivality[2].

Such publishing models need to break quite decisively with traditional journalistic news reporting models – they need "to develop ways of telling stories which are issues-focussed, without replicating the conflict-based narrative structures of the established media"[3] and without taking on the distanced and detached stance of traditional journalism. As Rushkoff puts it, "the age of irony may be over, not just because the American dream has been interrupted by terrorism and economic shocks but because media-savvy Westerners are no longer satisfied with understanding current events through the second-hand cynical musings of magazine journalists. They want to engage more directly and they see almost every set of rules as up for reinterpretation and re-engineering."[4]

As Meikle points out, sites such as the Independent Media Centers "place the emphasis on the *production*, rather than the *consumption*, of media texts. And they stress the conversational dimension of the Net as the creation of DIY media, rather than just as a means of debating the writings of others."[5] Underlying this, then, is what Gibson & Kelly describe as "a logic of engagement founded upon notions of production and involvement rather than consumption and spectacle"[6], encouraging a "leap to authorship"[7] which turns mere users into produsers of open news Websites.

A number of prominent Websites of this type have now emerged, and chief amongst them are perhaps the Websites of the *Indymedia* network, which consists of several hundred Independent Media Center Websites world-wide; open news also includes sites like *Kuro5hin* and *Plastic* which have emerged from (or as improved alternatives to) the *Slashdot* model. The sites of the *Indymedia* network in particular have gained some significant recognition for their innovative approach to facilitating open news publishing, and as Rushkoff points out, such sites can have a threefold impact:

> transparency in media makes information available to those who never had access to it before. Access to media technology empowers those same people to discuss how they might want to change the status quo. Finally, networking technologies allow for online collaboration in the implementation of new models, and the very real-world organisation of social activism and relief efforts.[8]

In open news sites the principles of open source or, as Stalder & Hirsh call it, 'open source intelligence', are fully applied to the collaborative production of news. For them, "OS-INT means the application of collaborative principles developed by the Open Source Software movement to the gathering and analysis of information. These principles include: peer review, reputation-rather than sanctions-based authority, the free sharing of products, and flexible levels of involvement and responsibility."[9] Indeed, it is not difficult to see such principles reflected in open news approaches (and in fact to some extent also in some of the relatively more 'closed' gatewatching models employed in *Slashdot* and other Websites).

Matthew Arnison, one of the chief developers behind the *Indymedia* open publishing system, provides a useful working definition of open publishing (which has now been accepted as the official definition for the *Indymedia* network):

> Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available. Those stories are filtered as little as possible to help the readers find the stories they want. Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions. If they can think of a better way for the software to help shape editorial decisions, they can copy the software because it is free and change it and start their own site. If they want to redistribute the news, they can, preferably on an open publishing site."[10]

Some key aspects of open publishing, then, are that
- all stories are published instantly,
- as little filtering of stories as possible takes place,
- where editorial decisions are made, they
  - are entirely transparent to users,
  - are made by editorial groups that are themselves made of users, and
- news stories and the entire Website system itself are freely redistributable.

Open News and Open Source

In essence, then, an open news publishing system that adheres to these postulations represents a project management system for news publishing which bears close resemblance to the project management systems for software development that are used by open source project groups. Its "philosophy of open publishing is … entirely consistent with its technical foundations in the open source movement. Both essentially argue that anyone can and should be trusted to be both creative and responsible. … In yielding editorial control in favour of relying on participants to be responsible in their contributions," this philosophy trusts "that a self-selection process will keep the projects on track."[11]

Indeed, it is worth recalling the description of the open source software philosophy on Opensource.org:

> The **basic idea behind open source** is very simple: When programmers can read, redistribute, and modify the source code for a piece of software, the software evolves. People improve it, people adapt it, people fix bugs. And this can happen at a speed that, if one is used to the slow pace of conventional software development, seems astonishing.
> We in the open source community have learned that this rapid evolutionary process produces better software than the traditional closed model, in which only a very few programmers can see the source and everybody else must blindly use an opaque block of bits.[12]

An equivalent statement of principles for open news could read:

The **basic idea behind open news** is very simple: When news produsers can read, redistribute, and modify the representation of a piece of news, the coverage of news evolves. People improve it, people adapt it, people fix bugs. And this can happen at a speed that, if one is used to the slow pace of conventional news reporting, seems astonishing.

We in the open news community have learned that this rapid evolutionary process produces better news than the traditional closed news model, in which only a very few editors can see the source reports and everybody else must blindly use an opaque news story.[13]

Both descriptions represent some of the core principles of open source: they operate from a principle of what Arnison calls 'the least possible filtering' – any and all contributions made to the overall news coverage or software development project are available to all users, and there is a high flexibility in the "degree of involvement in and responsibility for the process that can be accommodated. The hurdle to participating in a project is extremely low. Valuable contributions can be as small as a single, one-time effort – a bug report, a penetrating comment in a discussion."[14] However, these contributions as well as the overall project are also constantly undergoing a process of evaluation and evolution which builds on Eric Raymond's celebrated maxim that "given enough eyeballs" (that is, enough users in quality control roles) "all bugs are shallow" (or in other words, all significant errors will be found and corrected)[15] – and so they also rely on the availability of a large number of users who are involved in varying capacities.

Finally, they also remove any hierarchies between the users of news or software, and the producers – the journalists and editors, or software developers: open source philosophy regards any of these participants as equal, if possessing specific distinctive skills sets. In the case of open news, this model advances beyond common conceptualisations of journalist-reader relationships: Heikkilä & Kunelius note that "one should … be aware of the difference between arguing for dialogue in journalism and arguing for dialogue between journalism and its readerships. It is one thing to see dialogue as a method of finding out or reflecting the variety of opinions, and almost quite another thing to view dialogue as a process, a thing valuable in itself, independently of the outcomes of the dialogue"[16] – and clearly the open news publishing model suggests a dialogue not between journalists as journalists and readers as readers, but between members of either group simply as users (and potential produsers) of news.

While here we are chiefly concerned with open news publishing, it should also be pointed out that the open publishing model has been adopted for other forms of collaboratively edited Websites as well. A particularly prominent development in this genre are wiki sites – online encyclopedias which are prodused through the collaboration of large numbers of (sometimes anonymously participating) users. Stalder & Hirsh describe wikis (and specifically the *Wikipedia*, the best-known exponent of the genre) as a further example of 'open source intelligence' at work:

In this system, writing and editing are collective and cumulative. A reader who sees a mistake or omission in an article can immediately correct it or add the missing information. … This allows the project to grow not only in number of articles, but also in terms of the articles' depth, which should improve over time through the collective input of knowledgeable readers.

Since the review and improvement process is public and ongoing, there is no difference between beta and release versions of the information … . Texts continuously change. Peer-review becomes peer-editing, resulting in what Larry Sanger, one of the original project leaders, hailed as the 'most promiscuous form of publishing.'[17]

The Power of Eyeballs

In striking analogy to the slow but steady take-up of open source software especially for mission-critical applications such as operating systems (Linux) or Web servers (Apache), the

quality control benefits of large and dedicated communities of user-produsers are now also slowly being realized in the news publishing field. A first significant case emerged even through *Slashdot* itself, which, while not truly open news as such (it retains a small group of especially privileged editors), certainly nonetheless commands a significant number of eyeballs. As Chan recalls,

> early in October 1999, Johan Ingles-le Nobel, the editor of the international defence and security journal *Jane's Intelligence Review*, decided to cancel the publication of an article on cyberterrorism planned for its following edition. … The article's retraction … came shortly after Ingles-le Nobel submitted the *Jane's* article for posting to the online technology news discussion and community site Slashdot.org … to solicit feedback from the site's readers on its quality.[18]

The highly critical and generally negative feedback to the *Jane's* article which emerged on *Slashdot* pointed out significant number of errors and inaccuracies.

Similarly, journalist and blogger Dan Gillmor notes that his audience,

> never shy to let me know when I get something wrong, made me realize something: My readers know more than I do. This has become almost a mantra in my work. It is by definition the reality for every journalist, no matter what his or her beat. And it's a great opportunity, not a threat, because when we ask our readers for their help and knowledge, they are willing to share it – and we can all benefit. If modern American journalism has been a lecture, it's evolving into something that incorporates a conversation and seminar.[19]

Again, this points to a fundamental reconfiguration of journalistic practice through open publishing and similar approaches, and indeed Gillmor suggests that "this is tomorrow's journalism, … a partnership of sorts between professionals and the legions of gifted amateurs out there who can help us – all of us – figure things out. It's a positive development, and we're still figuring out how it works"[20] – from our present discussion, we might suggest that at least within the realm of open publishing itself we might expect less of a partnership between professionals and amateur than an almost complete blurring of these roles towards what Charles Leadbeater calls 'pro-ams'.[21]

Such blurring of participant roles into an open publishing (or open software development) community might also lead to a better understanding of that community and its wider contexts by its members, as Rushkoff notes: "members of an open source community are able to experience how their actions affect the whole. As a result, they become more conscious of how their moment-to-moment decisions can be better aligned with the larger issues with which they are concerned."[22] While such consciousness is already beneficial in an open source context, it may turn out to be even more critical in the area of open news since the news items concerned may well strike to the very core of the community's and of individual community members' existence – already, "the experience of open source development, or even just the acceptance of its value as a model for others, provides real-life practice for the deeper change in perspective required of us if we are to move into a more networked and emergent understanding of our world. The local community must be experienced as a place to implement policies, incrementally, that will eventually have an effect on the whole."[23] Open news affords its participants that experience directly, without the detour through the somewhat more abstract and detached world of collaborative software development.

The promise of such experiences is a key motivator behind a large number of participatory media projects, of course, from the severely limited and often inherently contradictory model of public journalism to fully developed open news. As Bowman and Willis point out, "traditional media tend to understate the value of participation journalism, holding that comments, reviews

and content created by 'amateurs' provide little value to their mass audience. As such, they are missing the inherent psychological value of the creative process to the individual."[24] They also note that "involving an audience, either small or large, in the creation of content also gives them a sense of ownership – an affinity with the media brand that they believe they are not getting today – as well as a more intimate relationship with the storytellers"[25], but by now it should be self-evident that the greatest degree of affinity will emerge only from models where audiences can not only enter into more intimate relationships with established storytellers, but can *become* storytellers themselves.

End Notes

[1] An expanded version of this paper will appear in my book *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production*, forthcoming in 2005 from Peter Lang Publishing, New York.

[2] For more on the concept of multiperspectival journalism, see two books by Herbert J. Gans: *Deciding What's News: A Study of* CBS Evening News*,* NBC Nightly News*,* Newsweek*, and* Time. New York: Vintage, 1980. and *Democracy and the News*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003.

[3] Graham Meikle. *Future Active: Media Activism and the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 99.

[4] Rushkoff, Douglas. *Open Source Democracy: How Online Communication Is Changing Offline Politics*. London: Demos, 2003. 22 April 2004 <http://www.demos.co.uk/opensourcedemocracy_pdf_media_public.aspx>, p. 58.

[5] Meikle, p. 87.

[6] Gibson, Jason, and Alex Kelly. "Become the Media." *Arena Magazine* 49 (Oct.-Nov. 2000): p. 11.

[7] Rushkoff, p. 35.

[8] Rushkoff, p. 63.

[9] Stalder, Felix, and Jesse Hirsh. "Open Source Intelligence." *First Monday* 7.6 (June 2002). 22 April 2004 <http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue7_6/stalder/>, n.pag.

[10] Arnison, Matthew. "Open Publishing Is the Same as Free Software." 9 June 2003. 11 Dec. 2003 <http://www.cat.org.au/maffew/cat/openpub.html>, n.pag.

[11] Meikle, p. 108.

[12] Opensource.org (2003). "Open Source Initiative OSI – Welcome." 26 July 2004 <http://www.opensource.org/>, n.pag.

[13] A first version of this statement was published in Bruns, Axel. "From Blogs to Open News: Notes towards a Taxonomy of P2P Publications." Paper presented at ANZCA 2003 conference in Brisbane, 9-11 July 2003. 30 Aug 2004 <http://www.bgsb.qut.edu.au/conferences/ANZCA03/Proceedings/papers/bruns_full.pdf>.

[14] Stalder & Hirsh, n.pag.

[15] Raymond, Eric S. "The Cathedral and the Bazaar." 2 Aug. 2002. 30 Aug. 2004 <http://www.catb.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/cathedral-bazaar/>, n.pag.

[16] Heikkilä, Heikki, and Kunelius, Risto. "Access, Dialogue, Deliberation: Experimenting with Three Concepts of Journalism Criticism." *The International Media and Democracy Project* 17 July 2002. 20 Feb. 2004 <http://www.imdp.org/artman/publish/article_27.shtml>, n.pag.

[17] Stalder & Hirsh, n.pag.

[18] Chan, Anita J. "Collaborative News Networks: Distributed Editing, Collective Action, and the Construction of Online News on Slashdot.org." MIT: MSc thesis, 2002. 6 Feb. 2003 <http://web.mit.edu/anita1/www/thesis/Index.html>, n.pag.

[19] Gillmor, Dan. "Foreword." In Shane Bowman and Chris Willis. *We Media: How Audiences Are Shaping the Future of News and Information*. Reston, Va.: The Media Center at the American Press Institute, 2003. 21 May 2004 <http://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/download/we_media.pdf>, p. vi.

[20] Gillmor qtd. in Bowman & Willis, p. 33.

[21] Leadbeater, Charles. "Open Innovation and the Creative Industries." Guest lecture for the Creative Industries Research and Application Centre, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, 2 March 2004.

[22] Rushkoff, p. 60-1.

[23] Rushkoff, p. 61.

[24] Bowman & Willis, p. 41.

[25] Bowman & Willis, p. 53.