

The Rise of the Informal Media

How Search Engines, Weblogs and YouTube Change Public Opinion

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Editorial – December 31, 2007

The media through which news and information are gathered, produced and exchanged have expanded significantly over the last several years. Weblogs, advanced search engines, virtual environments like Second Life, phenomena such as MySpace, Hyves, Flickr and YouTube are offering new tools, communication options, social networks and platforms for public debate. These are micromedia or grassroots media: media that are largely programmed, supplied and broadcast by the user – in contrast to conventional macromedia such as television and the printed press, which are more institutionally determined. And these are 'informal media', used outside the formal protocols and authorized precepts of the old mass media, although, of course, various overlaps exist.

The rise of the informal media also implies the rise of the amateur, of the layperson or 'citizen journalist' making public pronouncements on all manner of social, cultural and political issues. Andrew Keen, in *The Cult of the Amateur* (2007), argues that the ascendance of the masses is a threat to the culture of authorities and experts, with mediocrity becoming the norm. He bemoans a lack of 'gatekeepers', who can determine the value of news and information on the internet. His critique allows no room for considerations of the emancipating, democratizing or subversive effect of the informal media.

Henry Jenkins, in his *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), is more nuanced about the blurring of boundaries between media producer and media user, between the professional and the amateur – a process he calls 'cultural convergence'. He emphasizes that this process is born out of the interaction between the commercial media industry and the user, out of negotiations between the consumer and the producer. The result is dynamic and capricious, has no clear outcome and is devoid of any set ideological programme. According to Jenkins, questions about the control of new internet platforms are particularly relevant.

In order not to be entirely lost or carried away in today's public sphere, in order to be a political, social or cultural player, it seems essential to study the new instruments and platforms that function within that sphere critically. *Open 13* features contributions by theorists and artists who reflect on the implications of the informal media for the public programme, conceived as the whole of public principles and requirements. Questions are raised about the conditions of our everyday media practices and about the opportunities for artists who work in a convergence culture.

Open 13 also includes specific attention to the changing position of conventional public media. Media scholar Oliver Marchart wonders how a radically democratic media policy can be conceived within the information society. The public dimension of television culture is also the focus of the special Hot Spot section compiled by Geert van de Wetering. Hot Spot, an initiative of the Dutch broadcasting organization VPRO, wants to investigate the implications and possibilities of the shifts in media production, distribution and

consumption. How might programme makers benefit from an audience that participates in conceptualization and discussion?

Media philosopher Martijn de Waal assesses the democratic quotient of processes of valorization and systems of collective intelligence within the public sphere of Web 2.0. Internet critic Geert Lovink delves specifically on the expanding 'blogosphere'. He sees blogging as a nihilist enterprise that undermines traditional mass media without stepping forward as an alternative. Henry Jenkins' 'Nine Propositions Towards a Cultural Theory of YouTube' are included in the column. Media theorist Richard Grusin looks at the commotion around the Abu Ghraib photographs in light of our everyday media practices. Art theorist Willem van Weelden interviews web epistemologist Richard Rogers on the politics of information and the web as a discrete knowledge culture. Web sociologist Albert Benschop compares the 3D structure of Second Life with the old, 'flat' web in relation to such aspects as methods of communication and the creation of power. DogTime students Arjan van Amsterdam and Sander Veenhof made a visual contribution. Artist and media researcher David Garcia sees, precisely within a commercial service industry in which media are omnipresent, opportunities for artists to contribute critical services and effective tools.

Artist Florian Göttke created a visual contribution derived from his project *Toppled*, an archive of news and amateur photographs taken from the internet, documenting the toppling of the statues of Saddam Hussein. I have written a text about iconoclasm and iconolatry and the potential of *Toppled* as a shadow archive. Felix Janssens and Kirsten Algera, of the design and communications agency Team TCHM and the makers of PRAudioGuide, produced the contribution *Hollow Model*, a number of templates with text in which they interrogate 'the public of the public' and the role that media and media use play in this. Is the public made hollow if it exists only in the media?

Jorinde Seijdel is an independent writer, editor and lecturer on subjects concerning art and media in our changing society and the public sphere. She is editor-in-chief of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain* (formerly known as *Open. Cahier on Art & the Public Domain*). In 2010 she published *De waarde van de amateur* [The Value of the Amateur] (Fonds BKVB, Amsterdam), about the rise of the amateur in digital culture and the notion of amateurism in contemporary art and culture. Currently, she is theory tutor at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and Head of the Studium Generale Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. With Open!, she is a partner of the Dutch Art Institute MA Art Praxis in Arnhem.

Tags

Media Society, Public Domain, Democracy

This text was downloaded on June 25, 2026 from
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