

The Future of Journalism in Cyberspace

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1. The Internet and Journalism : Two Genealogies

Since about 1995, online journalism, cyber journalism, and new media journalism have become trendy terms in computer magazines and real scenes of mass media. In this, we can observe two genealogies for the challenge of publishing journalism in the Internet.

First, there has been a grass roots oriented phenomenon of emerging information editorships in the Internet by ordinary citizens. The past few years have seen the appearance of numerous activities to make public spheres that transcend private chats and can be shared by expanding numbers of persons. Some of them have evolved from the myriad of interactions by e-mail, mailing lists, and home pages of the World Wide Web (WWW). It means that editorships capable of networking untold amount of information like stars, in the galaxy, have emerged simultaneously at many places on our planet. A raft of social groups, such as hobby circles, citizen movements, tiny magazines, academic associations and institutions, and volunteer groups, are now demonstrating their editorial functions. Accordingly, these editorships have become new forms of journalism in the Internet.

Second, we find the advancement of informatization in mass media firms. For example, since the 1970s, newspapers, as printed form of media, have introduced electronic information technology to their production repertoire for the purpose of industrial development and streamlining management. It began with computerized typesetting (CTS), then progressed to the editorial aspect. In the late 1980s, reporters started writing their reports by word processors, sending them via computer network and generally all the sectors in newspaper production was computerized except for sales and distribution. The Asahi Shimbun, one of leading newspaper in Japan, called this period the “General information industrialization of newspapers.” And to cap it, the Internet has emerged as a major tool of information distribution.

The first current is citizen-based, outside the mass media. The next one emerged from within the media, apart from citizen activities. Both have evolved in close context with the advance of information technology.

The important point is that the two trends in Japan are not interconnected, at least not until now. Those engaged in grass roots oriented editorships share the intention to change the mode of information flow, heretofore almost fully controlled by traditional newspaper and television media, and they generally agree that the arrogance of these firms cannot be tolerated. Conversely, mass media professionals sneer at their amateurish media production and tend to assume that journalism in the Internet is their specialty. The hostility between citizens and the mass media appears to have become serious. This conflict has caused many problems with respect to the Internet journalism. Let us review the situation by establishing two main groups.

2. The Internet Becoming Mass Media

The first problem is the danger of the Internet becoming a form of mass

media like newspapers or television. The birthplaces of personal computers (PC) and computer networks were not within giant information firms like IBM or Microsoft. Rather, they stem from the novice counter-culture represented by the curiosity of brilliant youngsters. The Apple and the Internet, for instance, were symbols of this phase. This culture, as nurtured in the current of counter-culture during the 1960s and 70s, took citizen information technology from the giants, supported by the idea that they had to compete with the nation and the establishment and change their society.

The network of citizens increase rapidly after the Internet was opened to the masses in the 90s. However, the most powerful newcomers were former members of the mass media and information industries. Newspaper and broadcasting firms, news agencies, and computer and network organizations started to develop their own services on WWW. After that, using the Internet took on the meaning of receiving the home pages on WWW. This phase appeared clearly in the mid-90s in America and Japan. Today, the Internet, as a means of interactive communication, has virtually transformed itself into a one-sided form of mass media.

Online journalism is one of the typical form of mass media. Newspaper firms and the information industry started to devise marketable ideas for developing and applying push technologies and attracting viewers.

This kind of treatment would change the Internet into a simpler medium and make it more varied and convenient, which in turn would lead to the spread and popularity of new information technology called the Internet. On the other hand, though, this new medium has become established as part of the mass media and it, dealt a severe shock to the networkers and buffs who saw the Internet as a new means of expression. Consequently, many individuals grew hostile toward the media firms trying to cash in on the Internet.

3. New Media and Journalism

The second problem is one of the identity of traditional mass media. In the 80s, newspaper companies aggressively began to diversify their information distribution channels and expand their sphere of business. Ultimately, however, almost all their new business endeavors either failed or went unfinished. Most critical in the result – and this cannot be stressed too strongly – the lack of the imagination in media studies, despite the existence of many industrial and organizational factors.

Newspaper people then naively believed that they could distribute information via paper, teletext, facsimile or any other format once they had built a huge database. Now, it is clear that they neglected to realize that the form of media is as important as its content for readers. Japan's newspapers, with their nationwide, door-to-door daily delivery and having a unique layout featuring three kinds of Japanese characters, Kanji, Hiragana, and Katakana, developed over an entire century, thus naturally have special meaning for readers, even if the contents are the same as presented in other forms. Each medium has its own format and has become constructed through socio-historical circumstances. It is not simply a case wherein messages are readily accepted irrespective of media type.

In this regard, understanding of media has greatly changed. In 1995, a number of Japanese newspaper firms began to present home pages in WWW. At first, most of them followed the design and format of printed newspapers. They prepared them electronically, retaining their traditional reporting style, headline design, editorship, and layout. The most typical example is the website composed by data scanned directly from a printed newspaper.

However, this has changed rapidly. Evidently newspapers found that they should not confuse the Internet journalism with the printed form.

Too, they have had ample opportunity to realize the difference between online magazines oriented from grass root network culture and their own products, that have changed greatly when compared with the so-called New Media of the 80s when there was nearly no grass roots activities.

Seeking a new form of journalism suitable for the cyberspace presents an important task for both media firm management and the development of a new format for citizen media expression. But we should remember that this movement at the same time has caused an identity crisis in journalism simultaneously throughout most of the world.

4. What is the Identity of Journalism?

The identity crisis of newspapers in Japan might be termed three-dimensional.

The first dimension shows how hard it has become, day by day, to distinguish journalism among entertainment and database service on the Internet. Most online media have begun to introduce movie and audio functions aggressively. They also have stressed database and search engine functions. It is ironic that the outline of so-called journalism has grown more and more ambiguous compared with info-tainment when trying to apply new plug-in technology. Should we view this as the first step of journalism gaining a new form in cyberspace, or as a symptom of melting down its classic form in mass media?

In the second dimension, the hyperlink function of WWW has effected the identity crisis. "Good journalism" is composed of approaching many different information resources and multi-dimensional analyses. Making links among information sources on the Internet, however, has the danger of easily tapping low-grade information of the type that caused the decline in the trust of journalism, even though this new function potentially can reach all nations a worldwide web of information. There are also

possibilities of oneway linking by malicious websites. We never needed to worry about such danger during the generations when journalism was secured by a bundle of papers physically or by a sequential textile of programs in wireless technology. The Internet may erode the quality and intentions of journalism that have developed for centuries and drive them to oblivion in the century to come.

The third and deepest dimension of this crisis is that the first two are closely related to the structural change of the media industry. Contemporary information industries, Microsoft being one of the biggest symbols, have dominated the socio-information and communication world with their extraordinary power of technology and money. Compared with them, traditional mass media industries that, even though not satisfactorily, have practiced journalism down through the decades, have become 'like ants in front of elephants'. We must not forget that the tendency of the Internet to become a mass medium was caused not only by the newspaper, magazine, and broadcasting industries, but also by the development of the new business of giant information industries.

The printed newspaper, for example, becomes independent, even for but a short time, from media capital physically and technologically when delivered to the reader. Conversely, online newspapers on the Internet cannot exist without cyberspace. And cyberspace comprises a number of unit technologies produced by the information industries. At this point, we can say that the Internet belongs to some special capital, institution and/or nation, and especially to the United States because it could not exist as but a single form of information technology. But at the same time, we can describe it as a free and public utility that has been oriented from counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s.

Is there a possibility that independent journalism can develop under these circumstances in the Digital Age?

5. The Possibility of Journalism in the Internet

It follows that the voyage of the Internet journalism will never be a peaceful one. A close look at the Internet journalism will show that whether or not it succeeds is not a problem of new peripheral business in mass media, but an issue that will seriously affect the future of journalism itself. Nevertheless, few executives in Japan's mass media understand this salient point. Most of them still regard the Internet as a new kind of 'toy' that may yield some profit for them.

I wish to propose two points that could turn the great potential of the Internet journalism into a reality.

Firstly, we should develop educational systems for new media journalists. We need the emergence of many new media expressionists who can report news and criticize authorities with the classical mind of journalism, but at the same time they should be able to use new information technology freely, without indulging in technology. The appearance of eminent new media journalists should be the very factor that activates the Internet as a new platform for journalism. It is of vital importance to strengthen the training systems in today's mass media. In Japan, however, it is more urgent to review the journalist educational systems of universities and develop media literacy more actively.

Secondly, we need loose networks and flexible interconnections between grass roots-oriented editorships and the Internet as a form of mass media business. It is regrettable that ordinary citizens and mass media professionals are in conflict in the digital information age. These networks and interconnections most certainly will become an important strategic center for preventing cyberspace from becoming corrupted as a lawless zone of privacy and information ethics.

Those who believe in the future of journalism must not neglect to

respond accurately to these challenges which could well drown in the tidal waves of rapidly changing information technologies.

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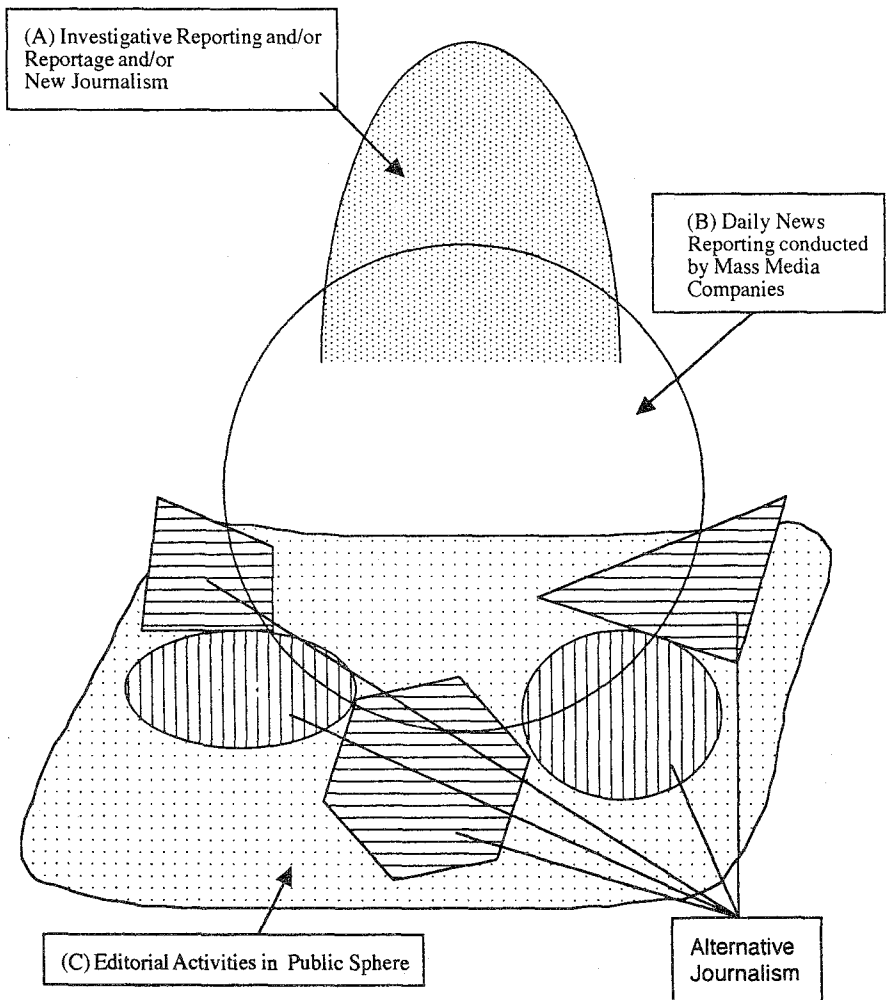
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**One Experimental Classification of "Journalism"
stimulated by the advent of the Internet**

Traditional Mass Media Institutions in Japan have focused too much on (B)Daily News Reporting, neglecting the potentiality of (A)Investigative Reporting and the linkage to (C)Editorial Activities in Public Sphere.



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