

# INTERNATIONAL NEWS:

Bringing About the Golden Age

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## INTRODUCTION: WHERE IS THE GOLDEN AGE?

In 1997, James Hoge, Jr., the editor of *Foreign Affairs*, offered a panicked warning in the *Columbia Journalism Review* about the decline in coverage of international news in American newspapers and magazines. In his memorably titled article, “Foreign News: Who Gives a Damn?” Hoge notes, “Except for the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989–90, the coverage of such international news in American media has steadily declined since the late seventies, when the Cold War lost its sense of imminent danger.”

Hoge offers a wealth of statistics that support his contentions about a drop in international news coverage between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, and a set of explanations for the shift in focus. One set of reasons proffered is economic. Hoge cites Seymour Topping, the former managing editor of the *New York Times*, who notes, “The great threat today to intelligent coverage of foreign news is not so much a lack of interest as it is a concentration of ownership that is profit-driven and a lack of inclination to meet responsibilities, except that of the bottom line.”

Much of Hoge’s analysis, though, focuses on the audience’s dwindling interest in international news. Audiences are less interested in international news, Hoge proffers, because “a world less threatening to America is less newsy, as the newsweekly editors put it. Or in the more colloquial words of television veteran Reuven Frank, sunshine is a weather report, a raging storm is news.”

The sunny days in which Hoge wrote his piece are long gone. The dramatic attacks of September 11, 2001, followed by additional attacks in Bali, Riyadh, Casablanca, Jakarta, Istanbul, London, Madrid and Mumbai, and by long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, have shattered any illusions of a peaceful post-Cold War world. A widespread economic slowdown is tightly connected to the economic rise of developing nations and the security situation in oil-producing nations. Emerging threats to human survival, such as global warming, are global in scope and thus demand global solutions.

Just as global events have shattered post-Cold War complacency, a technical revolution has transformed communications, connecting people around the world to an unprecedented degree. In 1997, 70 million people—approximately 1.7% of the world’s population—were connected to the Internet. Current estimates point to 1.4 billion people online, or 21.1% of the world’s population.<sup>1</sup> Growth of mobile

phone ownership has been even more dramatic, expanding from under 200 million in 1997<sup>2</sup> to 3.3 billion today,<sup>3</sup> an astonishing 49% penetration rate.<sup>4</sup>

The Internet and the mobile phone provide a different form of connectivity than broadcast media like FM radio and television or print media like newspapers and magazines. In those media, the equipment required to create and distribute content is vastly more expensive than the equipment needed to receive content. Both mobile phones and the Internet are inherently participatory technologies—they allow anyone connected to send messages as well as to receive them. As these tools have become widespread, people around the world have begun creating content for public consumption, vastly expanding the pool of people able to share information locally and across borders.

The dramatic political events of the past decade suggest a need for news, information, and opinion from all corners of the world. The rise of the Internet, the mobile phone, and recently citizen media, suggest that this reporting could come from a new, and much larger, set of correspondents. These two factors suggest that we should be living in a golden age of international news.

And yet we are not. Alisa Miller, CEO of Public Radio International (PRI), took the stage at the TED conference in February 2008<sup>5</sup> and shocked the audience with the information that television coverage of the death of Anna Nicole Smith in 2007 eclipsed U.S. television news coverage of every country except Iraq. Noting that the major TV networks have eliminated all bureaus in Africa, India, and South America, she reports that network television news programming focuses on international stories only 12% of the time, as compared to 35% in the 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

Miller has a vested interest in transforming the media landscape to include more international news, as PRI has rebranded itself as a distributor of global content for U.S. public radio. But she argues that the decrease in international news coverage is serving public demand poorly, as the percentage of Americans who tell survey teams that they closely follow international news has grown from 37% to 52% over the past twenty years. Miller diagnoses a disconnect between supply and demand, suggesting that newspapers and TV networks are not covering international news because “covering Britney is cheaper.”

Research at the Berkman Center confirms some of Miller’s concerns. Global Attention Profiles, a project that

performs simple statistical analysis of online news sources, suggests systematic over-coverage of a small set of nations at the expense of most of the world's population. Very wealthy nations, and nations where the United States is militarily engaged have a much higher chance of receiving media attention than poor nations. On average, Japan is featured in eight times as many CNN stories as Nigeria, despite the fact that the nations have roughly the same population. Not only is US media coverage focused on domestic issues—when it turns its attention overseas, that attention is quite narrowly focused.

There is little evidence that U.S. bloggers are any more globally focused than mainstream media. Mapping the references to non-U.S. nations in blog posts reveals a very similar map to mainstream media maps. The main difference is that bloggers' maps feature wealthy nations, nations with U.S. military involvements, and nations that are frequent vacation destinations. What explains the similarity of these maps? Are mainstream media doing an excellent job of meeting the interests and needs of bloggers and by extension the people they write for, or are blogs highly derivative of mainstream news coverage? John Kelly's research on the relationships between blogs and the online sites of mainstream media suggests that the latter is the more likely explanation.

## DOES INTERNATIONAL NEWS MATTER?

It is worth considering whether it makes sense for ordinary Americans—that is, people who are neither financial professionals nor public policy advisors—to pay attention to international news. A memorable television ad, promoting CNN's increased local coverage, shows a viewer dismissing stories about international and national issues, until a story appears about food poisoning at a local deli. The point: CNN gives you the news you need, which is news that affects your everyday choices, not news about insurgency in Somalia. Why would the average American citizen need to know about the Kenyan election or the Indian economy?

Historical arguments over the importance of a free and high-functioning press have centered on the idea of popular sovereignty, pioneered in the United States. As Paul Starr notes in his epic "The Creation of the Media": "Traditionally, the state obtained knowledge about its individual subjects but disclosed little about itself, except what served the interests of those in power. But if the people were to be sovereign they

had to have the means of understanding their government, keeping up to date about distant events, and communicating with each other."<sup>7</sup> CNN's helpful simplification, eliminating all but "news you can use," might be understood as a reflection of a changing understanding of American citizenship. (Or it might be an abdication of the public interest function of journalism in favor of commercial motives.)

But in the post-9/11, global economy world, there are compelling reasons why U.S. citizens might want to pay close attention to international news:

- A wave of globalization has transformed the U.S. economy and employment market. The rise of China as a manufacturing powerhouse has caused steep job losses in U.S. industrial sectors, and the rebranding of India as a center for global outsourcing is a cause of anxiety for some service-sector workers. At the same time, the rise of a consumer class in developing nations suggests new markets for goods and services. Whether an assembly-line worker or an entrepreneur, an understanding of global economics is increasingly relevant to understanding one's personal economic prospects and the government policies that affect them.
- The rise of terrorism as the leading national security fear (displacing Cold War fears of nuclear war) points to a need to understand the politics and cultures of nations and groups throughout the world. The shock of 9/11 briefly created an interest in formerly esoteric topics like the politics of the Fergana Valley. The Cold War habit of watching a single, massive rival should be shaken and replaced with a sense that what we do not know might hurt us, as well as a shift toward global curiosity.
- Migration, which has emerged as a major topic in American political debate, is one that is fundamentally connected to the politics and economics of other societies. Whether readers view this as an economic or a security issue, an understanding why migrants come and why they stay or leave requires more than a purely domestic perspective. For communities trying to integrate

large migrant populations, international issues tie directly into domestic ones.

- Problems like global warming are simply unsolvable without global actions. Political stalemates over issues like carbon emissions caps show that it is impossible for single nations to make progress, despite the fact that the United States will not do so until countries such as India and China make similar commitments. Meaningful work on issues like climate change involves global understanding which in turn leads to global cooperation.

- The shameful inaction of the United States, the EU and the UN during the Rwandan genocide was a reminder that governments do not and will not intervene to prevent gross human rights abuses without public awareness and pressure, as Samantha Power argues in “A Crime from Hell.” Natural disasters like the Sichuan earthquake and the Boxing Day tsunami are reminders that even prosperous societies need international aid in times of crisis. International news allows citizens to know what crises they should engage with and whether to raise funds or to raise voices in protest.

The five factors listed are all a subset of a more basic argument: to be an engaged citizen in a democracy, you need to understand the issues your government is engaged in and the issues it fails to engage. Whether making decisions about voting, contributing to a candidate, supporting a movement, or writing a letter to a legislator, understanding the basic economic, political, environmental, and human rights issues that face the United States today requires global understanding and knowledge. Offering citizens only “news they can use” at best limits their influence to small, local issues, or their personal consumer choices, and at worse refocuses them on the triviality, celebrity, and scandal that are the heart of that marvelous American invention, “infotainment.”

## WHAT WE NEED, AND WHAT WE GET

Are we getting more international news in the era of global communications networks, or less? The shift from a media

environment of daily newspapers and local television broadcasts into an environment that includes satellite television and the Internet forces us to reexamine how we answer this question. Are we concerned with how much news is produced worldwide? How much is available to an interested citizen? Or how much a less-engaged citizen is likely to encounter in an ordinary day?

At the center of these questions is a shift from a media environment where content is a scarce resource to one where content is abundant and attention is scarce. All the transformations the digital age has brought to journalism—changes in business models, distribution channels, and working methods—relate to the challenges of this paradigm shift.

In absolute terms, there is vastly more information created worldwide than in decades past (see the University of California’s ongoing “How Much Information?” research series), and almost certainly more journalistic information. In 1996, Claude Moisy, the former president of Agence France Press, reported that adoption of satellite technology and computerization in the 1980s raised productivity of journalists dramatically: “At AFP, for instance, no foreign language service had less than a 40% wordage increase in five or six years with a smaller number of journalists.”<sup>8</sup>

Though there is an explosion in the production of content as a whole, the production of some types of content has decreased compared to years past. *Christian Science Monitor* correspondent Jill Carroll reported in 2007 that small newspapers have shrunk their foreign bureaus by 30% and large papers by 10% since 2000, contributing to a fall in international coverage in these papers.<sup>9</sup> Carroll argues that foreign correspondents provide an essential contextualizing function, reporting stories in terms that local audiences understand and making connections to local issues that a wire story would be unable to make.

Because wire services produce hundreds of original stories a day, it is easy—and cost-effective—for papers to run the wire stories rather than performing original reporting, especially of international events. Although this allows papers to focus resources on local coverage, it may decrease overall diversity in journalism. The Project for Excellence in Journalism’s 2005 “A Day in the Life of the News” suggests that reliance on wire services leads to enormous duplication between news sources: “The level of repetition in the 24-hour news cycle is one of the most striking features one finds in examining a day of news. Google News, for instance, offers

consumers access to some 14,000 stories from its front page, yet on this day they were actually accounts of the same 24 news events.” Most of those accounts are reprints or cosmetic rewrites of stories reported by AP or Reuters.<sup>10</sup> In other words, simply counting the foreign news stories available through Google News is not a valid metric—a more sophisticated metric, which looks for unique stories, would be a better way to determine whether the amount of professionally produced international news is actually decreasing as compared to a 1970s benchmark.

If the amount of professional international coverage produced is decreasing, there are countervailing forces leading toward the availability of at least as much international news as in years past. More and more news outlets around the world are publishing online, and this content is available internationally shortly after publication. A reader interested in news from Ghana doesn’t have to rely on her local newspaper, or even the *New York Times*, to cover Ghanaian news—she can access the websites of half a dozen Ghanaian newspapers, the online presence of radio stations like JoyFM, and dedicated Internet news sites like GhanaWeb. Via web streaming, several Ghanaian television stations can be viewed over the Internet, including the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation.

The availability of such content online is both a reflection of the desire of news outlets around the world to reach new markets—young users, who naturally seek content online and readers who no longer live in the geographic area of their preferred publication—and the result of targeted efforts to increase availability of this content. AllAfrica.com, the leading aggregator of professional media content from the African continent, has been working with newspapers in Africa since 1997<sup>11</sup> to ensure that locally produced content is available globally. This content is a boon to Africans living abroad and Afrophiles tracking their communities of interest, but it also serves as raw material for U.S. reporters looking for African stories to cover.

The rise of citizen media has been another major factor contributing to the growth of available international news content. At present, the impact of citizen media is felt more strongly in developed than in developing nations. The 1.4 billion users of the Internet are heavily concentrated in wealthy nations, whereas regions like Africa and South Asia have penetration rates below 10%. Barriers to wider adoption of the Internet include the cost of access to computers and bandwidth, the unavailability of electrical power in much of

the developing world and language barriers. Northwestern University researcher Eszter Hargattai suggests another divide—a participation divide,<sup>12</sup> which suggests that content creation is dominated by highly skilled users who tend to be better educated than the average user.

Despite these barriers, there has been an explosion of nonprofessional media creation around the world. Technorati founder David Sifry released a set of “State of the Blogosphere” reports between October 2004 and April 2007, documenting a growth from four million weblogs tracked to over 70 million—his statistics suggest that the blogosphere may have doubled in size since his last report, which would imply the participation of one in ten Internet users in blogging. This figure is intriguingly close to a figure reported by the Pew Internet & American Life’s 2008 Home Broadband Adoption study, where 12% of American users surveyed reported creating and posting to blogs.<sup>13</sup> An earlier version of the study, published in 2006, reported that 35% of all American Internet users had posted content to the Internet.<sup>14</sup> This figure suggests that an accurate count of “media creators” on the Internet should be significantly higher than the number of bloggers, possibly as high as half a billion total.<sup>15</sup>

It is very difficult to determine where in the world these media creators are located, because most citizen media is posted on shared platforms like Flickr, Blogger, or YouTube. Although all three of those platforms are hosted in California, the content posted on them can come from any corner of the globe. An analysis by Mathew Hurst of MSN Spaces, a blogging platform hosted by Microsoft, discovered that 33% of bloggers who provided information about their location reported that they were blogging from China.<sup>16</sup> LiveJournal, a popular blogging platform founded in San Francisco, features over 600,000 journals from users in Russia;<sup>17</sup> Fotolog, founded in New York City as a social photo sharing site, boasts nearly a million users in Brazil and in Chile.<sup>18</sup> Between the use of U.S.-based tools to produce media in other nations, and the rise of social media platforms in countries like China,<sup>19</sup> it is safe to say that there is a large number of citizen media creators outside the United States.

Is the rise of citizen media around the world contributing to the supply of international news? On average, the answer is no—the overwhelming majority of these blogs are filled with the daily trivialities that also characterize American blogs. As Clay Shirky argues in his book *Here Comes Everybody*, it is a mistake to characterize the output of a system that publishes

first, then edits, in terms of the average submission. As with their American counterparts, bloggers, photographers, and videographers throughout the world sometimes “commit acts of journalism,” and these acts can be useful contributions to the supply of international news.

Content created by ordinary citizens is sometimes useful simply because observers are in the right place at the right time (or the wrong place, as the case may be). Early coverage of the London train bombings featured mobile phone photos and videos from transit users who briefly became journalists, documenting the experience first for family and friends and later for news networks. In other cases, creators have had to make the decision to engage in journalism. Thai blogger Gnarlykitty turned the focus of her blog<sup>20</sup> from shoes and fashion to military government and media coverage when troops occupied downtown Bangkok. Her photos from downtown Bangkok helped reveal that more reporters were appearing at some rallies than aggrieved citizens, an interesting counterbalance to media coverage of the events.<sup>21</sup>

Some media creators have taken on risks comparable to the risks reporters take in covering breaking events. Blogger Daudi Were took to the streets during opposition protests to the 2007 elections in Kenya and offered photojournalistic coverage of confrontations between police and demonstrators that rivaled work done by AP and Reuters photographers. Daudi and friends also helped challenge the notion that citizen reporting is spontaneous and disorganized. Kenyan bloggers launched Ushahidi, an ambitious effort to allow citizens throughout the country to report election violence via mobile phone or the Web and visualize patterns of violence on a Google Map—the effort yielded a journalistic platform that is now being used to document xenophobic violence in South Africa and which will be released to the Open Source Community for worldwide deployment.<sup>22</sup>

Citizen media doesn't need to be journalistic to be interesting to international news audiences. Much of the recent angry blogging from China in reaction to international media coverage of violence in Tibet has been far from balanced, neutral, objective, or fair. On the other hand, it has been tremendously important for anyone who wants to understand attitudes and opinions within China. This sort of opinionated blogging is not a substitute for international reporting. It is, however, critical raw material for reporting, and useful background information for readers wanting a thorough understanding of how issues can be perceived very differently by different audiences. The

rise of sites like anti-cnn.com is a useful illustration of another principle of journalism in the digital age: there is no such thing as purely local media. When Jack Cafferty described Chinese authorities as “a bunch of goons and thugs,” it is likely that he was not thinking about the reaction to his comments by Chinese viewers, some of whom later sued CNN. CNN was forced to offer an apology to the Chinese people, though the lawsuit is still pending.<sup>23</sup>

Although much citizen media is of little interest to journalists, a special subset of citizen media—activist media—frequently covers topics of international interest. This content can pose a challenge to journalists—it's often well produced and relevant, but is written with an agenda in mind. Tunisian activists use videosharing sites like Dailymotion to counter government propaganda with their own witty, well-produced videos, some of which have become so popular that they're available in pirate video stores in Tunisia.<sup>24</sup> Activists with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, shut out of most mainstream media, turned to blogs as an alternative media space, using a blog as a digital newsroom for reporting on the persecution and imprisonment of Brotherhood members.<sup>25</sup> In China, blogs have become essential spaces for reporting and advocating on issues like the environmental impact of real estate developments; corruption within local governments; and financial scandals, like the Tianxi Group's ant farming pyramid scheme.

Though these three phenomena—local news accessible across international borders, citizen media generally, and activist media particularly—potentially offer millions of international news stories to a global audience, there is a problem shared by all three: The news reported through these channels may be incomprehensible to American audiences. This is hardly a surprise—American audiences are not the intended audiences for most of this media. But it presents a real challenge for anyone hoping that Internet media can fill the gaps in international news coverage.

The first sense in which this content may be incomprehensible is a literal one. If you read only English, there is a huge linguistic barrier preventing you from understanding perspectives and opinions expressed in Chinese blogs and newspapers. In the early days of the consumer Internet, it seemed that English might emerge as a lingua franca for online communication, a great benefit for native English speakers, and a key component of the digital divide for non-English speakers. What's becoming increasingly clear this decade is that we are facing a polyglot Internet. Although the amount

of content an English speaker can access on the Internet increases every day, the percentage of the Internet she can comprehend shrinks as more users create content in Chinese, Hindi, and Malagasy.

Machine translation is a problem that computer scientists have been promising to solve within five years for the last fifty years. Though the current generation of tools is vastly better than its predecessors—at least for translating between Romance languages—it is a difficult and frustrating experience to read a newspaper article or blog post through machine translation systems. Many contemporary systems translate by extrapolating from a large corpus of documents translated manually. There are excellent English/French translation systems based on corpora of Canadian government documents, and many translation systems rely on UN documents. An odd consequence of this is that careful bureaucratic speech is much easier to translate than the informal speech of a blog or a chat room. And language pairs that are infrequently translated by hand—Hindi/Spanish, for instance—present a difficult problem for system designers, as there are few documents from which to extrapolate.

Systems that have focused on “distributed human translation” may be better positioned to solve the problems of translation in the international news space than machine translation systems. Veteran China-watchers have become deeply dependent on the work of Roland Soong, a Hong Kong-based author and researcher who posts several detailed English translations from Chinese media and blogs each day on his site, EastSouthWestNorth.<sup>26</sup> Chinese activist Oiwan Lam invokes the idea of creating a “distributed Roland” in explaining her project, Interlocals.net, which uses volunteers throughout Asia to translate regional media. Global Voices uses distributed human translation to make some of its English-language content available in more than fifteen languages. Wikipedia can be thought of as a vast translation project, though much of the content in most encyclopedias is original, not translated from the vast English and German Wikipedias.

Beyond comprehending the words used, understanding a story requires context. All media are created with an audience in mind. A blog post intended to be read only by family and friends will not bother explaining that Joe is the author’s friend, a 23-year-old software developer and a martial arts expert—the readers already have that information. Similarly, headlines in a Ghanaian newspaper will not explain that John Kufuor is the president of the nation and that he is

not permitted to stand in the upcoming elections, which take place later this year. But for an American reader with little knowledge of Ghanaian politics, a story about election rivalries requires context to make sense.

This sort of context is exactly what foreign correspondents provided when covering international news—a correspondent for the *Baltimore Sun* presumably understood how to make a story on African politics understandable, interesting, and relevant to a local audience. Unable to presume anything about their audience, correspondents for news wires can do little but contextualize their stories for a generic audience, which may contribute to a dry, just-the-facts tone in much of that reporting. Contextualization is also the key strength of bridgebloggers, a small subset of bloggers consciously writing for an audience that does not share their culture, or sometimes, their mother tongue. These bloggers frequently have experience crossing cultures due to their background as “third-culture kids,” or in living or working in different countries. Their blogging is intended, wholly or in part, to make a culture understandable to someone outside that context. (See “Meet the Bridgebloggers.”<sup>27</sup>)

A key aspect of contextualization is authentication. Understanding the biases of a partisan newspaper is a critical hermeneutic strategy for reading a story correctly. In the same way, understanding a blogpost may require knowledge of how a blogger relates to her peers politically and socially. This context is usually well understood by the audience of a paper or a blog, and the audience adjusts the factual assertions of a story around that context in a way that can be very difficult for a reader without context to do. Authentication is not always critical in finding a story valuable—a wholly false story that is getting amplified by mainstream media or bloggers can offer valuable insights on the opinions and biases of a community—but it’s critical to understand whether the viewpoints expressed in a story are widely held or marginal.

## SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Because translation and contextualization are so labor-intensive, a critical precursor to either activity is filtering. Of the thousands of news stories and millions of blog posts created each day in the languages of the world, only a tiny subsection will ever be interesting to a broad audience. Subscribing to an aggregator of all African blogposts (like Afrigator) or rich

in African news stories (AllAfrica.com) is not always very interesting, even for readers who can comprehend the stories and have sufficient context to understand them. The vast majority of what is written today is uninteresting to all but a small, intended audience. (One hopes that this content is interesting at least to that small group.) There is no amount of context that will make someone's description of a night out drinking with friends interesting to a global audience. In a world where everyone publishes, we desperately need editors.

The move from professional to citizen publishing has revealed a scarcity of attention. With millions of people around the world creating content for a potentially global audience, that content is abundant. Unfortunately, there has been no meaningful increase in the capacity of humans to digest this information. Most material published in a content-rich environment is destined to remain obscure, deservedly or otherwise. (See Tim O'Reilly's maxim "Obscurity is a far greater threat to authors and creative artists than piracy" in "Piracy Is Progressive Taxation."<sup>28</sup>) The tools that help readers choose which news to read are more important than ever, and help govern what gets read and what remains obscure.

In a one-to-many media model, the content made available to national or global audiences was closely controlled by editors, who carefully programmed the evening's news broadcast, or laid out the front page of a newspaper, featuring some stories, burying some, and failing to publish countless others. In one sense, this function is absent from the Internet—if someone publishes, and you know where to look for it, you can find it, if not prevented from doing so by a government or network censor. In another sense, this function has devolved to search engines, which have tremendous editorial power in their results ranking algorithms. (Just ask anyone who has seen their sales shrink when Google changed the rank of their page in search engine results.)

There is hostility to this filtering function apparent in certain corners of Internet culture, a sense that one of the key benefits of the Internet is the way in which it has freed us from traditional gatekeepers<sup>29</sup> like editors and publishers. This hostility can extend to newly emergent gatekeepers as well. As blogging entered public consciousness in 2003, a sometimes fierce conversation developed about the emergence of an "A-list" of bloggers who were significantly more widely read and influential than others.<sup>30</sup> Clay Shirky, in an influential essay titled "Power Laws, Weblogs, and Inequality," argues that the emergence of such inequalities are inevitable: "Diversity

plus freedom of choice creates inequality, and the greater the diversity, the more extreme the inequality."<sup>31</sup> The essay was poorly received by the A-list bloggers, the people Shirky said would inevitably emerge. No one likes to be termed a hegemon.<sup>32</sup>

This bias against editing and gatekeeping may help explain why there has been such an explosion of Internet tools designed to make media authoring easier, but less creativity around tools that help people discover new and different information, and even less attention to systems to allow human editors to repackage existing content in useful ways. Most innovation in this space has focused on two models: search engines and recommendation systems. Both models present interesting challenges for those hopeful that the Internet will increase public interest in international news.

A recent ethnographic study carried out by the Associated Press, which studied news consumption behaviors of young readers, suggests that those readers encounter online news via aggregators like Yahoo! News or the websites of their local newspapers, and then search for additional information using search engines. Though this method works well for some stories, it relies on aggregators like Yahoo! News to alert readers that a story is worth following. Some readers are frustrated by the perceived bias—political or commercial—of these aggregators and are looking for other ways of discovering new stories.

News recommendation sites like Digg and Reddit promise to help users find stories they would not otherwise encounter on their own. The systems operate by inviting a community of users to submit stories, found throughout the Internet, and allow community members to vote on the stories, raising a subset to the front page and to the attention of the system's users. These systems are democratic in the sense that they rely on their users, not on professional editors, to prioritize stories. But these systems have a problem—self-selection. If you are interested in libertarian politics, you will find a lot of content on Reddit . . . which suggests that you will return to the site, and perhaps suggest libertarian stories you have found interesting. If readers like your stories, they will vote them up and your karma will improve within the system, giving you more power to suggest stories. A nonlibertarian (or nongeek, or non-Linux user) may conclude that the content on Reddit is not especially interesting to them, and will choose to participate in a different community.

This self-selection problem is true in systems that



do not have a formal voting mechanism as well. If you are interested in left-wing politics, you are likely to find more that interests you at Daily Kos than on Red State, and you are more likely to participate in conversations or become an active member of the community. This is not a new phenomenon—Cass Sunstein anticipated it in his 2001 book *Republic.com*, where he critiqued Nicholas Negroponte’s vision of a futuristic newspaper, “The Daily Me.” In a fully customizable news environment, Sunstein feared, you would get news only on subjects you knew you were interested in, and would hear only political viewpoints similar to your own. In a later book, *Infotopia*, Sunstein argued that such “echo chambers” would lead to political polarization, where people’s views would move from moderate to extreme through reinforcement of like-minded voices.

Sunstein’s analysis focuses almost exclusively on left/right politics in America. It is possible, though, that his analysis is even more pertinent for questions of how people find—or do not find—international news. Search engines or personalized news feeds demand that you express an interest in international news to find relevant stories. Recommendation systems and subject-focused community sites demand that members of the community have an interest in international news if you are going to find international news. If you, or your selected community, are not interested in Somalia, you are far less likely to find news on Somalia through these tools than you were through a high-quality newspaper.

Meanwhile, as newspapers remake themselves online, they seem to be abdicating their traditional role of determining what news is important for a general audience in favor of giving readers more choice. The front page of the *New York Times* contains, on average, references to roughly 20–25 stories inside the newspaper. These references can be thought of as hyperlinks—readers may follow some or all of them to access content elsewhere. The front page of the online edition of the *New York Times*, by contrast, contains more than 400 links from which a user can choose. The information accompanying these links in the paper edition is quite rich, offering from 20 to 400 words to persuade a user to pursue a story; the links on the online edition include a maximum of thirty words. The print version of the *Times* is a persuasive technology—it is designed to persuade you to read a small number of stories, chosen by the editors. The online edition forsakes this persuasive role—it trusts you to follow your own interests and find the content you are interested in.<sup>33</sup>

## GIVE THE PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT?

The rise of the Internet has made it easier for professionals, amateurs, and activists to publish international news. Much of that news is incomprehensible to a global audience due to linguistic barriers or lack of context. The remaining material might well be interesting to audiences, but they’re likely to find it only if they’re looking for it, or by following the recommendations of people looking for it. This scenario, if accurate, raises a key question for believers in the importance of international news: Are readers interested in international news?

This is a difficult question to answer well. Surveys like those conducted by the Project on Excellence in Journalism ask readers whether they are following international news closely—it is impossible to evaluate whether respondents are answering accurately or whether they simply do not want to be perceived as disinterested dullards. A recent news quiz from the Pew Center suggests that the median news information most readers have is pretty basic—the twelve-question quiz includes stumbers like correctly choosing Condoleezza Rice’s job title from a list of four, or identifying Sunna as the other major branch of Islam alongside Shia. The median online reader answered only half the questions correctly.<sup>34</sup>

One way to assess user interest would be to gain access to the server logs of search engines and major media providers. Google’s logs can tell us what users want to know about, and when they make an unprompted choice. The logs from the *New York Times*’ website can quickly tell us which stories published by a news organization are most interesting to an online audience, based on which links they click. This information, unfortunately, is interesting to advertisers and search engine spammers, as well as to academics, and companies are understandably reluctant to offer it up. As a result, we look for proxies that help us guess at reader interest.

Blogs are one promising proxy. If a blogger chooses to write a post about a particular topic, it is a pretty good proxy of interest in that topic. If another blogger links to her post, it is a proxy that the post generated interest. Analyzing the content of the top-rated blogs, determined in terms of incoming links, offers a possible picture of topics most interesting to bloggers. That list—the Technorati top 100 or similar—tends to be dominated by three topics: U.S. politics, technology (especially information technology), and celebrity news.<sup>35</sup>

A different experiment with blogs looks at all stories

published online by a media outlet—the BBC, for instance, or the *New York Times*. Five days after each story is published, we can search for links to the story via Technorati—the results will tell us whether a story captured the interest of bloggers and how many bloggers chose to write about the story. This analysis finds a slightly different pattern from a content analysis of top blogs. Within five days, the vast majority of stories have been blogged by someone, if only by a search engine spammer. The stories most often blogged cluster around certain topics: U.S. politics, terrorism (anywhere in the world), technology, or health stories with implications for personal behavior (such as “drink red wine to avoid heart disease”). International news unconnected to U.S. politics or terror is one of the least-blogged categories, alongside local news. (Local news stories are unlikely to appeal to a wide audience outside a local area, and as the blogger population is global, it makes sense that they will be less likely to be amplified.)

These proxies suggest that there is not a huge, pent-up demand for international news currently going unfulfilled on the Internet. They suggest, instead, that only a small subset of the Internet audience—quite possibly a specialist audience—is consciously interested in and seeking out international news. Other audiences may find international news stories interesting when they run across them, but there is little evidence to show that they are demanding or seeking out this coverage. Perhaps news outlets that have chosen to focus on local and U.S. news, as well as soft news, have made an intelligent choice based on an accurate understanding of their audience.

No existing audience interest metrics can measure what demand for international news might be like in an environment rich with that news. For the most part, bloggers amplify stories reported in mainstream outlets—measuring their interest in international news measures the presence or absence of international news in mainstream outlets. Asking viewers whether they follow international stories suffers from the same problem. More accurate metrics might arise from asking audiences that are well aware of international stories—expatriates in America, for instance, or readers of ethnic media—whether they feel stories they are interested in receive sufficient coverage in American press.

Those of us who believe in the importance of international news in creating an informed citizenry that is capable of making decisions in a globalized world face a difficult challenge. We need to persuade an audience that is blessed with an unprecedented level of freedom and choice in

what media they pay attention to that it is in their best interest to pay close attention to international news. Alternatively, we need to persuade existing traditional media outlets, which still largely determine the news agenda to leverage the wealth of international news content available, and incorporate more international news into the offerings they make available in both traditional and online formats.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH, STRATEGIES FOR INTERVENTION

We know surprisingly little about what different kinds of information media consumers actually want. We also face unanswered questions about the receptivity of Internet audiences to different types of stories. And we have very little understanding of how stories move from online media into mainstream media, where we would expect them to reach much larger audiences, or how mainstream media may set the agenda for citizen media.

Possible approaches to a better understanding of user attitudes to international media include:

**Behavioral data:** Partnerships with media providers, search engines, and commercial research firms to study what information people are seeking, versus what information is available. This data is extremely difficult to obtain, but it is possible to imagine research partnerships between academics and corporations that guarantee that raw data will not be widely released. A simple study might look at the total content published by a paper like the *New York Times* versus online access of that content and searches for content. The study might confirm suspicions that international news content isn’t sought out online, or might show a previously unknown demand for compelling international content online.

**Media diaries:** Understanding of old and new media would benefit from close study of detailed media diaries, including both voluntary and passive reporting. We need users to track their offline media consumption, but we can use tracking methods to monitor their online media consumption. Ideally, such studies would closely replicate earlier research so that we can compare the amount of international news readers

encounter today to earlier, pre-digital times.

**Search data:** Media diaries can tell us which information readers encounter, and search data can be a useful proxy for information sufficiently compelling that a user sought more information. A detailed profile would attempt to construct flow diagrams, looking at the set of stories a user encountered, then the subset she chose to learn more about and a smaller subset she chose to follow over time, perhaps by seeking out specialist sources of information. What sorts of stories compel readers to seek more information and follow stories over time? Can we learn from these stories and develop other strategies to package news so that it is compelling to different audiences?

**Content analysis:** Supporters of citizen media argue that blogger and other amateur reporters can break stories that mainstream media is reluctant to cover. One critique of citizen media is that much of the content generated is commentary on stories reported by mainstream sources. (Evgeny Morozov's [Polymeme.com](http://Polymeme.com), which tracks the sources linked to by bloggers in certain subject areas, seems to confirm this theory.) Who sets the media agenda in a digital age? A close topical analysis of mainstream and citizen media—as proposed by Harvard's MediaCloud project—could track the emergence of certain topics in the mediasphere and track whether they're moving from mainstream sources to citizen ones, or vice versa. It could also provide insights on what topics different types of media are good or poor at amplifying.

**Nutritional information:** Conversations about international news do a poor job of answering the question: “How much do we need?” Many conversations posit a past golden age when newspapers provided adequate coverage of international affairs—it is unclear whether this golden age was during the height of America's involvement in Vietnam, or goes back to pre-revolutionary days, when newspapers routinely carried 75% foreign news. The sort of research conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and proposed as part of the MediaCloud idea suggest a “nutritional information label” for media, documenting how much coverage is of hard news versus soft news, of international versus national versus local stories. These information labels would be much more helpful if they included a “recommended daily allowance” of different types of news. Obviously, setting these recommendations is at least as fraught as redesigning the USDA food pyramid.

Research might look at the distribution of different types of news in different markets, consumer satisfaction with news coverage, and possible relationships between the emphasis of media coverage and citizen involvement in political and civic issues.

For projects that see citizen media as the key to a better informed citizenry, we can offer a few suggestions independent of any research performed. Many early projects focused on creating more citizen media. Given the supply and demand problems outlined in this chapter, this seems like an incomplete solution. Simply increasing the amount of citizen media produced is unlikely to change the dynamics identified here. Strategies that increase the supply of citizen media also need to focus on making this content accessible and interesting to new audiences, connecting this content with distribution channels, and increasing interest in international news, both citizen and professionally produced.

Efforts that bring international news to U.S. audiences need to consider strategies for filtering, translating, and contextualizing. Specifically:

**Translation:** Although a great deal of research has been performed by military and intelligence groups on the problems of automated translation, very little work has been done on the dynamics of distributed human translation. Translators at Global Voices talk about the need for an open source translation memory system—such a system would analyze original posts and resulting translations and create database entries for each phrase previously translated. A future translator can consult the translation memory for advice on translating a particular phrase, eliminating the effort of duplicate translations and standardizing the translation of difficult colloquialisms and phrases.

A number of translation ideas have been proposed to reward translators of international news. An ambitious idea put forth by James Cann of Nativetext is a “translation marketplace,” where translators could build their reputations by translating international news on a voluntary basis. Translators with better reputations would be more likely to receive paying offers for their translation services.

Translation, in general, hasn't received the same media attention and hype as activities like blogging. It might be worthwhile to build a strategy that concentrates on building communities of translators, celebrating translation as an essential component of a media ecosystem and trying

to aggregate some of the best citizen media available via translation.

**Contextualization:** For most international news to connect with U.S. readers, an author or editor has to add substantial context to a piece of content. At least three possible strategies exist for contextualization. A professional editor can choose pieces she thinks might be most relevant for a global audience and add content to make the pieces more comprehensible. In the case of a large media organization like the BBC, this may mean leveraging preexisting content like backgrounders on a topic. For smaller online media outlets, a simple tool that links uncommon terms to Wikipedia articles might help add a small amount of context to unfamiliar stories, though human editing will likely be required to make a story comprehensible and relevant.

Bloggers who have context in two or more cultures are well placed to contextualize international news. These bridgebloggers include students from the developing world studying in American and European universities, aid workers, volunteers, teachers, and missionaries working and living in the developing world, and international businesspeople who've crossed cultures in search of economic opportunity. Projects like Global Voices have tried to amplify the work of these bloggers, but few projects have focused on recruiting foreign students to explain news in their country to their fellow students, for instance.

Authors with deep expertise in a specific topic—Professor Larry Lessig writing about copyright issues, or Professor Marc Lynch writing about Arab media—are extremely talented at contextualizing international news for local audiences. Though some media outlets have learned to lean on these experts to contextualize international news, it could be interesting to build a formal network of these experts, or to aggregate their efforts at contextualization online. It also suggests a potential for increasing the focus on international news by encouraging subject experts to include more international perspectives in their blogging and writing.

**Filtering:** Creating new ways to navigate, discover, and filter the flood of media being generated by professional and amateur authors is a space filled with opportunities, as the tools that currently exist are quite poor, at least from the perspective of international news. It is important to understand that individuals and tools that filter the world of available media are the new

gatekeepers, whether they are television producers, popular bloggers, or users of Reddit with high karma scores—working with these powerful people build interest in international media is a likely strategy for future success.

Existing “democratic media” systems like Reddit and Digg are unlikely spaces for substantial interest in international media. Parallel structures, like Polymeme, may be more promising. It would be exciting to see a group with deep expertise in international news build a Reddit-like system for users interested in international news—the authors of the excellent Foreign Policy Passport blog would be terrific caretakers for such a system.

Any strategy for increasing the coverage of international stories in citizen or traditional media needs to consider the basic dynamics of the supply and demand problem we've identified in this chapter. Four areas may be fruitful to explore in some detail:

**Push versus pull:** Internet media operate on a “pull” model—users choose what they're interested in and pull it from the Internet. One of the benefits of the traditional media's push model is that it could expose listeners and readers to content they did not think they would be interested in. In a digital age, it is worth remembering that most people still consume most of their media by push, not pull. It is quite possible that people's agendas in choosing which media to pull are heavily dictated by what stories are being pushed in mainstream media. Any strategy for increasing interest in international news needs to focus on getting more, and more compelling, international news into one to many outlets.

Traditional media are beginning to realize that citizen media and other kinds of audience-contributed content can be an inexpensive—if sometimes controversial—method of obtaining content. These partnerships are worth encouraging and nurturing, as they've got benefits for both parties. Unfortunately, many early efforts in this space suffer from organizational culture clash between broadcasters and bloggers. Additionally, initial efforts by U.S. media are understandably focused on engaging their existing audiences rather than figuring out how to use content created in other countries.

**Marketing broccoli:** If celebrity media is chocolate cake, and international news is broccoli, there is a need to educate audiences on the importance of good nutrition. International news may need a marketing effort, making the argument that

readers need rich international news to have the information they need to make political and economic decisions—this might mean replicating strategies used by publications like the *Economist*. In the same way that groups like MTV have tried to make election reporting cool, it might be worth considering how young reporters could help develop youth interest in international media. It is also important to educate editors at existing media, many of whom would like to include more compelling foreign stories but are unaware of ways to do so aside from the expensive foreign correspondent model.

**Storytelling and personal connection:** One of the most exciting potentials of citizen media is the way in which media like blogs can help individuals make personal connections. If you are personally invested in an individual and her stories, you are more likely to pay attention to her in the future, and to the issues she and her country are facing—Riverbend, a female Iraqi blogger, continues to be the subject of Internet discussion long after she stopped blogging. Her readers had connected with her through her stories, and remain invested in her after she’s stopped producing new content. International news may need to focus more on individuals and their stories as a way of solving “the caring problem” to which Joi Ito and others allude.

**Serendipity:** Not everyone is going to develop a systematic interest in international news. Others encounter international news when a story catches their eye, aligning with one of their pre-existing interests. Serendipity can be the function of careful editorial control—editors work hard to lay out the front page of newspapers, pulling readers into stories featured in the “serendipity box” in the lower-left corner. Strategies to increase the possibility of serendipity in digital media could include both careful editorial structures, and the development of new tools designed to put content that’s unexpectedly useful in front of users on an automated basis.

## CONCLUSION

At this moment in time, there are more reasons than ever for Americans to be informed about events and attitudes around the world. There are also more opportunities for Americans to encounter news, views, and opinions from around the world. The apparent disconnect between the need for Americans to be informed, the availability of information, and the low

level of interest in that material presents both challenges and opportunities for research.

Researchers focused on American attitudes towards international media have to move beyond simple analysis of how much international coverage appears in various media and simplistic questions of whether Americans are interested or disinterested in international news. Close attention needs to be paid to the ways in which readers discover international stories, the ways in which they follow these stories over time, and especially, how they decide to find information on stories they feel insufficiently informed about.

Given the decreasing coverage of international stories in commercial media, it’s a poor idea to wait for research to begin exploring new strategies for presenting international news to American audiences. Media outlets—commercial and otherwise—concerned with delivering international news need to experiment with new strategies in storytelling, connecting personal stories to international events, and presenting international stories in conjunction with stories more likely to catch the viewer’s eye. Those who believe that international news is important for citizens in a democracy need to make the case for this content even in cases where it’s not obviously profitable.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.internetworldstats.com/emarketing.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.electronicweekly.com/Articles/1997/08/20/4557/what-i-want-what-i-really-really-want.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/newslog/Global+Mobile+Phone+Users+Top+33+Billion+By+End2007+.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/newslog/Global+Mobile+Phone+Users+Top+33+Billion+By+End2007+.aspx>. The use of per-capita figures to measure mobile phone availability is the currently accepted method, even though it fails to account either for individuals with multiple phones, resulting in penetration rates of

over 100% in some developed countries (see [http://communities-dominate.blogs.com/brands/2006/03/phone\\_for\\_every.html](http://communities-dominate.blogs.com/brands/2006/03/phone_for_every.html)), or for shared phone usage in developing countries, where one phone may serve an entire village.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/alisa\\_miller\\_shares\\_the\\_news\\_about\\_the\\_news.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/alisa_miller_shares_the_news_about_the_news.html)

<sup>6</sup> Claude Moisy, “The Foreign News Flow in the Information Age,” Harvard University Kennedy School of Government, November 1996,

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<sup>7</sup> Starr, “Creation of the Media,” p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Jill Carroll, “Foreign News Coverage: The U.S. Media’s Undervalued Asset,” Joan Shorenstein Center, Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government, March 2007, [http://www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/research\\_publications/papers/working\\_papers/2007\\_1.pdf](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/research_publications/papers/working_papers/2007_1.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2006/narrative\\_daymedia\\_intro.asp?media=2](http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2006/narrative_daymedia_intro.asp?media=2)

<sup>11</sup> <http://allafrica.com/whoware.html>

<sup>12</sup> Eszter Hargittai & Gina Walejko, “The Participation Divide: Content Creation and Sharing in the Digital Age,” 2008, <http://www.webuse.org/papers?id=participation-divide>

<sup>13</sup> John Horrigan, “Home Broadband 2008: Adoption Stalls for low-income Americans even as many broadband users opt for premium services that give them more speed,” Pew Internet & American Life Project, July 2008, [http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/257/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/257/report_display.asp)

<sup>14</sup> John Horrigan, “Home Broadband Adoption 2006: Home broadband adoption is going mainstream and that means user-generated content is coming from all kinds of internet users,” Pew Internet & American Life Project, May 2006, [http://www.pewinternet.org/ppf/r/184/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/ppf/r/184/report_display.asp)

<sup>15</sup> That’s a naïve extrapolation based on applying the 35% figure from the Pew study to the 1.4 billion total Internet users. It is likely unwise to assume that as many net users, proportionately, in Uganda are creating content as in the U.S. On the other hand, there appear to be nations like Japan where participation occurs at higher rates than in the U.S., extrapolating from Sifry’s data on language distribution of blogs.

<sup>16</sup> <http://ethanzuckerman.com/meetthebridgebloggers/ezuckermanbridgeblog122305.html>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.livejournal.com/stats.bml>

<sup>18</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fotolog#Usage>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.oo.cn/web2.0top100.asp>. (this site provides a list of the 100 top web 2.0 platforms in China, as determined by the Internet Society of China).

<sup>20</sup> <http://gnarlykitty.blogspot.com/>

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca MacKinnon & Ethan Zuckerman, “Gathering Voices to Share With a Worldwide Online,” Nieman Reports, Winter 2006, <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/06-4NRwinter/p45-0604-mackinnon-zuckerman.html>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2008/06/20/kenya-citizen-media-in-a-time-of-crisis/>

<sup>23</sup> Alexi Mostrous, “CNN apologizes to China over ‘thugs and goons’ comment by Jack Cafferty,” Times Online, April 16, 2008, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article3756437.ece>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2008/03/08/the-cute-cat-theory-talk-at-etech/>

<sup>25</sup> Marc Lynch, “Brotherhood of the Blog,” Guardian.co.uk, March 5, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/mar/05/brotherhoodoftheblog>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.zonaeuropa.com/weblog.htm>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.springerlink.com/content/7812h54766014436/>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.openp2p.com/lpt/a/3015>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.tcw.utwente.nl/theorieenoverzicht/Theory%20clusters/Media,%20Culture%20and%20Society/gatekeeping.doc/>

<sup>30</sup> See Seth Finkelstein, including <http://sethf.com/infothought/blog/archives/000585.html>, <http://sethf.com/infothought/blog/archives/000586.html>, <http://sethf.com/infothought/blog/archives/000588.html>.

<sup>31</sup> [http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw\\_weblog.html](http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html)

<sup>32</sup> A memorable comment from Dave Winer on the topic: <http://joi.ito.com/weblog/2004/01/17/inequality-and.html#comment-8322>.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2008/06/09/the-architecture-of-serendipity/>

<sup>34</sup> <http://pewresearch.org/newsiq/>

<sup>35</sup> <http://technorati.com/pop/blogs>