



## **Media Re:public**

Media Re:public is undertaking an assessment of the state of the field of participatory media, and its position in the overall news and information environment. The research initiative examines historical developments from a forward-looking perspective, with the goal of informing future research, policy-making and other interventions. Based on input from a diverse group from traditional and non-traditional media, and the academic and non-profit research communities, Media Re:public is developing:

- a typology of participatory media forms, from new entities large and small to the expanding range of projects within traditional news media entities;
- case studies of representative projects, to explore the utility of the framework;
- an “issues map” of cross-cutting questions aimed at informing current and future research; and
- an initial assessment of quantitative methods to evaluate the impact of participatory media.

Following a period for online discussion of the work, a forum scheduled for March 27-28, 2008 at the USC Annenberg School for Communication will allow a broader group of stakeholders to give feedback on the research in progress and discuss collaboration going forward. Revised versions of the typology, case studies and issues map will be published in Summer 2008.

The overall aim of this project is to create an analysis of the early years of participatory digital media to inform and encourage productive collaboration among and between researchers, media entities of all kinds and others interested in improving the quality of the information environment.

### *Background*

New technologies have significantly changed how people, especially in the developed world, learn what is happening in their town, their country and the world. As the adoption of new tools continues to spread, the changes become more pervasive. Among the biggest developments over the last decade has been the growing ability of individuals who are neither professional journalists nor computer experts to express their opinions, find and comment on other media, report on events or their lives, and even create entire publications in ways that were previously limited to professionals. A few years into the era of “everyone can be a publisher,” the advent of podcasting tools and simple video uploading and dissemination technologies allowed ordinary people to act as radio, TV, or multimedia producers as well.

This new capacity led to a wave of enthusiasm for the potential of new, non-traditional media to correct a number of deficiencies in the traditional media in the U.S. and elsewhere. Many hoped that the engagement of new populations in media creation would create a richer, more open, more responsive information environment, ultimately better serving democracy. The formerly passive audience of “couch potatoes,” now empowered as authors or editors, would be more engaged in civic life.

A decade after the word “weblog” was coined, the euphoria has subsided. There are well-known examples of the power of participatory media: from the effect of the “Macaca” video on George Allen’s political career and the enormous sales price of YouTube, to the success of local news websites like the Forum in Deerfield, NH and the online communities of activists, parents, and others supporting each other with useful information and personal connections. However, numerous projects aimed at providing new and different information, both commercial and non-profit, have fallen far short of their goals, or failed entirely. Meanwhile, although audiences for the vast majority of these “citizen media” efforts are still small, serious concerns have been raised about the dangers of misinformation spread by authors accountable to no one or the effect on the social fabric of more and more individuals seeing only the news and other information they select.

There is a fundamental need to move beyond anecdotal evidence to an analytical assessment of these new media forms, in particular the many hybrid professional-amateur projects. The growing use of new technologies by traditional media and the fragility of many standalone projects has increased attention to possible synergies between non-professional media creators and traditional media institutions. Most examination of these experiments has been limited in scope, documenting only one or two forms or only media entities of a specific size or type. Neither practitioners nor scholars agree on the definitions of success or failure for participatory media, the conditions or mechanisms that may determine its development, or the right methodologies for addressing these questions.

Media Re:public builds on the success of Berkman's 2005 "Blogging, Journalism, and Credibility" project, which stimulated a multi-disciplinary conversation on citizen journalism and its relationship with mainstream media. Based on input from a group of scholars, journalism and media analysts, and representatives of commercial and non-profit media, Media Re:public is surveying changes in the media landscape since that project, examining possible scenarios for the future, and putting forward a framework for research aimed at informing future activities.

### *Project Objectives*

The project's first objective is to create a typology of participatory media within the context of the overall media environment. This typology will analyze participatory media projects, from small to large, newly created or supported by traditional media organizations. The research will include a literature review, expert interviews, and an analysis of a significant number of content sources, including a small number of international examples and failed projects. The draft typology will be complemented by a number of brief case studies of specific projects. Based on this work, Berkman will propose an "issue map" of topics of interest for future study of the field.

Per Berkman's commitment to an open, collaborative, cross-disciplinary approach, one or more versions of the typology will be presented online for comment and correction leading up to a forum on March 27-28. At the forum, members of both traditional and non-traditional media communities, representatives of journalism and media organizations, as well as scholars and other researchers will discuss the proposed framework and research agenda and explore where existing projects may complement each other.

A second objective is to use the typology and the issue map as a framework for discussing how to evaluate the impact(s) of participatory media. Berkman will use the March event as a forum for launching a discussion of definitions of the negative and positive effects of participatory media and methodologies or tools to measure them. Berkman will demonstrate some experimental tools in order to stimulate discussion.

The discussions around the typology, issues mapping and measurement will lead to new ideas for specific projects and collaborations, including cross-disciplinary research and non-academic projects. Breakout groups at the forum will allow for discussions on thematic issues such as the evolving role of non-profits, the future of public media, technological limitations, external factors such as the need for training or legal support that may determine success or failure, and innovative models, both commercial and non-commercial, for sustaining valuable projects. Based on feedback at the forum and online, Berkman will publish final versions of the typology, case studies and issues map and a report on the project as a whole in summer of 2008.