

Proof 2010: Journalists Defending Journalism

Set 2, September 2010 Politics, Postmodern Journalism, and the Public

Come Together: professional practice and radical protest

*Observing the convergence between professional journalists and radical protestors, **Maxine Newlands** wonders whether this is both the future of journalism and the demise of political autonomy.*

The essays in the first set of *Proof* 2010 seem to subscribe to one of two arguments: either the future of journalism will be dominated by unprofessional forms of citizen journalism; or professional journalism needs to up its game in order to be sure of having a future. My contribution sets out a third way for the future of journalism, in which citizen journalism and professional standards are combined. In discussing the changing orientation of citizen journalism or user generated content (UGC) towards a professional style of production, I will draw on the recent shift by environmental activists, who have begun to combine citizen journalism with professional journalistic content. This is especially interesting in that the move from social media towards professional media, which entails the conflation of citizen and professional journalistic practices, also raises an interesting question over the future of political activism. If activists are becoming increasingly professional media operators, can they also be offering an 'alternative' source of news? Indeed, how can there be any kind of alternative if even 'alternative media' are using standardised journalistic techniques and expectations in order to ensure mainstream coverage? It seems plausible to suggest that convergence between citizen and professional is likely to benefit journalism, but there may be negative consequences for politics. Media compromise will surely result in a compromised message.

Framed as a Pyramid

When referring to 'citizen journalism', I mean journalism *without* professional markers. Citizen journalism has been characterised by arbitrary angles and shaky footage of the incidents it depicts. The material has often looked more like a sea of mobile phones held aloft than a clear depiction of important events. Most instances of citizen journalism will have been generated from mobile phones and handheld camcorders, and it is this kind of technology that activists are utilising more and more. But without professional journalistic standards, the footage produced tends to be less appropriate for serious news broadcasts and more suited to comedy television shows such as *You've Been Framed*.

Occasionally some user generated footage has made it onto national news channels, where it is shown repeatedly, e.g. film of the Glasgow airport attack (2007), or of newspaper vendor Iain Tomlinson being pushed over by a riot police officer during the aftermath of G20 protests in London (2009). But such footage is repeated (and repeatable) only, I suggest, because it exhibits some familiar journalistic patterns. In footage of both Glasgow and the G20 incident, the images are framed well. A narrative is at least implied in shots of the car which is seen to explode at the entrance to Glasgow airport. Footage of a riot cop pushing a man over in the street, juxtaposed to other officers in riot gear set against G20 protesters, offers a framework which resembles the classic journalistic structure of the inverted pyramid.

Thus it seems that the UGCs with the greatest chance of being picked up are those which follow or at least acknowledge the simple inverted pyramid framework, largely in line with established journalistic practice. Campbell (2009) suggests that the inverted pyramid is an approach now favoured by radical political movements in their attempt to gain greater coverage of their cause. If so, and if this approach is adopted more widely, it would suggest that the days of shambolic amateurism are already numbered – as outdated as the calls people used to make to show that they had a mobile phone to make the call with; instead the user is now expected to generate content that is considered presentable and watchable according to professional or semi-professional criteria.

Doing Our Own Thing

The most prominent example of citizen journalism meeting professional journalism is the coverage of climate camp protests (2006 - present). The Camp for Climate Action (August 2009) was a week-long camp aimed at raising awareness of climate change. Significantly, the camps house a 'media tent', where fellow activists are encouraged to attend workshops on producing a one-minute piece of journalism. Activists are then given three different pamphlets, each setting out how to record a one-minute news item following the inverted pyramid structure. Not only do the templates prove that activists are adopting professional journalistic standards, as opposed to relying on shaky footage, but they also signal a shift in the relationships between radical protest movements and mainstream media houses. Traditionally, radical activists' movements have had a limited relationship with media houses, preferring to engage with alternative, independent media. Yet in a mediated world, Web 2.0 technology has led to some activists engaging with both alternative and mainstream journalism.

Previously, the relationship between activists and the mainstream media has been tempestuous, partially because of their differing ideological approaches. The ideological foundation of many activist movements rejects forms of mainstream media and politics which involve working with institutions. The collectives and individuals of UK activist movements reject the formal, hierarchical organisation of politics, in preference to an 'informal network and grass roots' politics (Martell, 1994). Activist groups prefer instead to take direct action and adhere (if they adhere to anything) to a form of cultural politics (Martell, 1994). National newspaper journalists and broadcast news editors have been seen as representing the hegemonic position of major institutions up to and including national government, and, accordingly, protest movements have previously tended to reject them. Moreover, many protesters further rejected the mainstream media because of a continual framing of protest movements (1968 to present) in negative discourses (Halloran *et al.*, 1971), in which activists are often labeled as aggressors, violent and deviant (Hall, 1968; Newlands, 2009). However, one-sidedness on the part of mainstream media has been matched by that of activists, whose relationship to journalists is often prejudiced by their outright dismissal of all formal structures.

Many collectives lack formal cohesion, partly because of the "social movement perspective [which] emphasises a lack of hierarchy and formal organisation" (Jordan and Maloney, 1997:47). The lack of cohesion often results in a conflict of practice between journalists and activists. Without a formal hierarchical structure there is no spokesperson, no single representative, no sound-bites or figurehead to speak on behalf of the activists. The autonomous nature of such endogenous groups means that no spokesperson or individual is representing the whole. There is no singular voice; instead, to quote Paul Kingsnorth's book title, there are *One No, Many Yeses* (2004); and this kind of plurality does not lend itself to the exclusive and excluding idea which news reporters have been trained to identify in their stories. Given the incompatibility of their working methods, it's perhaps not surprising that journalists have displayed a tendency to frame radical protest groups in unfavourable terms. Coupled with competing ideological pressures, the lack of engagement between the mainstream media and each cycle of protest formulated a media framework which relied on deviance and violence in representing radical protesters – at least, until recently. This historic framework has led to many collectives refusing to co-operate with journalists. However, in a mediatised society, today's protest collectives understand that a conscious lack of engagement with professional journalists is detrimental to representation of their own activism.

Activating Promotional Culture

By engaging with professional journalistic practices, the internet and associated technologies offer a way of altering mainstream media representation of radical protests. Today, activists are utilising the internet and Web 2.0 technology to play the role of gate-keepers and produce their own news reports through citizen journalism. Since the late 1990s the internet has offered the opportunity to produce 'alternative' news sites, away from the mainstream media. The internet and Web 2.0 technology can circumvent traditional gate-keeping routes. Hutchins and Lester show that rather than challenging the protesters' need for access to traditional forms of news media, the internet provides an opportunity to "bypass corporate, multinational media" and to "become another device in the strategic toolbox of the environmental movement for gaining mainstream news media access" (2009: 580-581). The rhizomatic nature of the internet and new technological developments in modes of communication, I suggest, opens up a *gap* between mainstream and alternative media forms. The correlation between the 'non-hierarchical' (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2004) and the 'hyper-textual architecture' (Kahn and Kelner, 2003) of the internet and new social movements makes for a symbiotic relationship between new forms of communication. The most obvious example is Indy Media, an autonomous internet site where users are both producers and consumers of news and events. Websites such as Indy Media act as "communication nodes for political resistance on both local and international issues" (Downing, 2003:243).

From the early days of Indy Media (1999) until the mid-2000s, collectives have used the internet as their main source for publishing news stories. IMC reports and footage of the Seattle protests (1999) came from around "100 independent videographers [who] roamed the streets during the confrontations... and so were able to capture the reasons people were there in their own words... not the 'violent anti-trade flat-earthers' story that widely circulated in mainstream accounts" (Downing, 2003:251).

However, the recent combination of the internet, Web 2.0 technology, and the adoption of professional journalistic standards on the part of activists, suggests yet another field for activism alongside some possibilities for the future of journalism. As Martin Sims notes in the first set of *Proof 2010*, every generation seeks alternative ways of communicating. The favoured form of the new generation of activists may turn out to be not so much its own independent channels, separate from the mainstream, but the deployment of new media technology and the adoption of newly professionalised techniques in order to engage more closely with mainstream media outlets.

Climate Camp activists seem to have experienced a 'bolt moment' (to steal a term from another *Proof*-er, Richard Sharpe) during the anti-G8 protests (2005) at Gleneagles, Scotland. The activists moved away from only using the internet and flyers to communicate, and began inviting journalists to engage with activists. Activists felt that ignoring the mainstream media was a "luxury that we [activists] could not collectively afford" (CSC, 2005:322). The Camp[s] for Climate Action makes full use of social media by organising its protests through social networking sites, (Facebook, Twitter and SMS messages). At the Camp for Climate Action (2009) in Blackheath, South London, text messaging was used to co-ordinate a 'swoop'. Prior to the camp, interested parties signed up to an emailing list and were requested to give their mobile phone numbers. Activists were encouraged to gather outside pre-determined companies around London, who were targeted for their environmental record. Activists were then told to await instructions for the location of the camp, via text messaging and the social networking site Twitter. Using mobile phones and a social networking site opened up the event, enabling anyone with an interest to be part of the 'swoop', either physically or at a virtual level. Not only interested individuals utilised Twitter, 'Tweets' weren't just coming from camp participants; news organisations, local politicians, local residents and the Metropolitan Police were all using Twitter as a communication tool. *The Guardian* and *The Times* newspapers ran with live commentaries and blogs as events unfolded. The Sky News website had an

overall view of different 'Tweets' on their front page.

The success of the 'swoop' shows how new technologies can offer a wider range of news sources. Technological developments and the internet are easily adaptable by both mainstream news agencies and protest movements. Television news footage of the Heathrow Climate Camp (August 2008) and the G20 Meltdown protest (April 2009) were sourced by the mainstream media from traditional pieces to camera and also mobile phone footage. Satellite news channels, Sky News and the BBC News reports were backed up with footage from protesters' mobile phones or Twitter. Web 2.0 and the internet signal a major shift by giving the activists a media voice. This form of "tactical media – an imaginary exchange of concepts outbidding and overlaying each other" (Lovink, 2002:254) is a 'here today, gone tomorrow' means of communicating, which means that activists can flourish in the "public part of cyberspace" (ibid.). This position, between the state and the market, is currently demonstrated as the point where workshops on citizen journalism and editing mobile phone footage became prominent features of the Camp for Climate Action's media tent. Environmental activists have attempted to change the representation of the movement by engaging with journalists and appropriating professional journalistic standards. The Camp for Climate Action marks an engagement with new technologies and social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook as an alternative to other forms of social media (e.g., Indy Media). Activists have also adopted the PR stalwart of a 'press centre', but presented as a 'media tent'. The Climate Camp also took on the role of gate-keepers by restricting the source of information, and by advising fellow activists and participants at the camp on how to produce citizen journalism that is likely to be picked up by the mainstream.

The most explicit representation of the shift on the activists' part remains their leaflet recommending adoption of the inverted pyramid form in order to maximise the chances of radical content being aired in mainstream media. However, this shift comes at a price: it may also entail the loss of an autonomous, alternative form of journalism.

If the 'media tent' is designed to act as a form of gate-keeping and the camp participants are encouraged to follow the inverted pyramid, what happens to the autonomous nature of such protests which claim to adhere to the new social movement paradigm of endogenous, informal, non-hierarchical cultural politics?

I want to make it clear that I accept that protest groups have to somehow find a voice or, as suggested, mainstream journalists will continue to position environmental protest in a negative framework. However, the introduction of a series of spokespersons and commentators speaking on behalf of the entire activist movement necessarily negates the idea of the alternative, individualised nature of radical protest collectives. They are referred to as collectives precisely because they are a collection of like-minded people with similar interests, who reject relations with the mainstream media or political parties in favour of an autonomous and *alternative* approach. The media tent, whilst signalling a change in the relationship between activists and professional journalists, also negates the idea of alternative media, and even, perhaps, the very idea of the alternative that activists have been trying to mediate.

The media team were advising that "TV crews and press photographers are allowed in the camp between 10am and 7pm, so long as they have a friendly guide from the media team" (Campbell, 2009:12). Media spots can be arranged outside of these hours providing "[journalists] are accompanied on and off the site" (ibid.). This form of gate-keeping focuses around a nine page handbook (ibid.), which covers the "key message and general guidelines" and advises activists on questions about "the Camp", "the economy and workers", "policing" and "solutions". Activists, when speaking to journalists, are advised to "take control of the interview by bridging the key message", which links political economy with climate change. The adoption of professional journalistic standards, through a media tent, or 'press centre', and the controlling of journalists' movement around the camp, or 'gate-keeping', suggests there is no escape from promotional culture ('spin'), and no alternative way of producing and disseminating media content. Although on one level I can see the logic underlying the convergence between radical activists and professional journalists, politically I find this problematic.

I agree that a media strategy is needed to try and prevent news reports of protest falling into a negative representation. There is a sense that Climate Camps, for example, must engage with the mainstream media in order to prevent negative reporting. Yet taking the gate-keeping approach can only be to withdraw from the new social movement paradigm of non-hierarchical, no spokesperson, no one voice speaking for all etc. Moreover, once a journalist leaves the camp, members of the media tent have no control over which 'preferred meaning' (Hall, 1990) is given by the journalist. It seems short-sighted to sacrifice the autonomy of protest for temporary, totally reversible gains in gate-keeping.

It is clear there has to be some form of voice to counter the negative discourse, and citizen journalism combined with professional standards gives this opportunity. However, activists lack the same resources as large media houses and so there is no guarantee the appropriation of professional journalistic standards will change the mainstream representation of activists' movements. As the pamphlets say: 'Stick to the Template' (Campbell, 2009); not the template for DIY spin, but the principle of autonomous protest.

Maxine Newlands is Senior Lecturer in Journalism at the University of East London. Her research focuses on media coverage of environmental activism, and she is an active participant in the environmental movement Critical Mass.

Bibliography

Burstein, P. (1995). "What do interest groups, social movements and political parties do? A synthesis", Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago.

Campbell, H. (2009). "Media Q&As: Camp for Climate Action Leaflet". Available on-line at <http://visionon.tv/mobile>, accessed August 2009.

Downing, J. (2003). "The independent media centre movement and the anarchist social tradition". In: Couldry, N. (2003). *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World*, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, pp.243-259.

Counterspin collective (2005) *Media, Movement(s) and Public Image(s): Counterspinnng in Scotland*, in Harvie, D. Milburn, K. Trott, B. & Watts, D. (Eds) *Shut them Down! The G8, Gleneagles 2005 and the movements of movements*, Leeds, Dissent! And Autonomedia.

Grant, W. (2005). "Pressure politics: a politics of collective consumption?", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 58(2), 366-379.

Halloran, J., Elliott, P. & Murdock, G. (1970). *Demonstrations and Communication: A Case Study*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.

Hall, S. (1968). "The hippies: an American moment", occasional paper, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham.

Hutchins, B. & Lester, B. (2009). "Power games: environmental protest, news media and the internet", *Media, Culture and Society*, 31, 579-595.

Jordan, G. & Maloney, W. (1997). *The Protest Business? Mobilising Campaign Groups*, Manchester: University of Manchester.

Kahn, R. & Kellner, D. (2003). "Internet subcultures and oppositional politics". In: Muggleton, D. & Weinzierl, R. (eds.) (2003). *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, London: Berg Publishers, pp.294-309.

Kingsnorth, P. (2003). *One No, Many Yeses: A Journey to the Heart of the Global Resistance Movement*, New York: Free Press.

Lovink, G. (2002). *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Martell, L. (1994). *Ecology and Society: an Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Newlands, M. (2009). *Protesters as the new gatekeepers?* SNF Research Project, Protest as Medium Culture conference paper, October 2009. Available online at http://www.protestmedia.net/cms/front_content.php

Van Aelst, P. & Walgrave, S. (2004). "New media, new movements? The role of the internet in shaping the 'anti-globalisation' movement". In: W. van de Donk, B.D. Loader, P.G. Nixon & D. Rucht (eds.) (2004). *Cyberprotest: New Media, Citizens and New Social Movements*, London: Routledge, pp.97-122.