

**Gender Perspectives on the Information
Society
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GENDER, COMMUNITY AND CITIZEN'S MEDIA

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The Hoot

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Gender, Community and Citizen's Media

All gender initiatives involving communication technologies don't have to be poverty, development or employment related. They can also be about equipping communities to generate media that puts them, their localities and their problems on the news map. Thereby you change the nature of what constitutes news, and who qualifies as a newsmaker or news reporter. Thereby you also broaden the base of those whose interests get reflected in a news medium. The very passivity of being a news subject goes when you start using the internet, radio technologies and mobile phones to generate what is increasingly becoming known as citizen's media.

Citizen's media is a term popularised by an Internet publication titled "We Media." But here in India, as I travel around collecting material for a book on local news I am discovering that we have had citizen's media for years, only it's not called that. When your unpaid stringer in thousands of Indian habitations files small news happenings from his village or locality he is essentially generating citizen's media. But because he uses a fax machine, and pen and paper, not necessarily a computer, or because he gives his copy to the interstate bus driver to drop into a mailbox that his newspaper installs in the state bus transport terminal, and does not send it over a modem, he is not in the ICT business and therefore would not come into the purview of this meet.

I've been using the term 'he' because that is what citizen's media in India is today: a completely male preserve. Village women do not go to the local thana to find out what petty crime bulletins have emerged that day. They do not go to the local petty official to get news to send. They may attend a local political meeting but are unlikely to hang about with a male politician to write about what he is saying and doing.

The only kind of female citizen's media that has come into existence in India is in places which are experimenting with community radio, using time bands on All India Radio. Whether it is in Pastapur or in Daltonganj or here in the area where Voices is working, women are involved in deciding what constitutes subjects fit for broadcast.

However you have something else happening in a parallel way: parts of this country are dotted with experiments in seeding the countryside with internet kiosks, some of them intended to be run by women. The intentions behind each of these experiments have to do with getting women to use Internet applications to track their self employment ventures, and access development-related information. Nobody may have thought as yet of deploying increasingly available rural internet access or simply land line telephone access via modem and computers, to get women into a media network which enables them, their problems and their concerns to register on a wider radar.

So we need to look at a hierarchy of possibilities:

First, can women learn to communicate their concerns by being given skills of expressing themselves.

Can they be then taught to use a means of dissemination that is Internet-related.

Third, can they use the communication and dissemination skills to network with other women tackling problems related to similar issues, be it child care, health, credit, markets for produce or crafts, and so on. And when they seek to network can they create media that other women like them can access?

The alternate use of the same communication and dissemination skills would be, can they be trained to tap into a news network so that they can become citizen reporters, putting out a grassroots perspective. Today rural news is finding its way into the two largest read newspapers in the country, the Dainik Jagran and Dainik Bhaskar. I have actually come across a 19 year old boy in a village in Rajasthan who used a digital camera and a modem to create a news story which he then sends to the local four page district pullout of Dainik Bhaskar. This is in Dungarpur district. He sends stories on illegal felling, water logging, electricity theft, local crime, and what have you. He sneaks up behind people felling trees on forest land, takes their pictures, feeds it into his computer and sends it off. This is citizen media, using ICTs. There is no internet node near that village, so he simply uses a file transfer protocol with a modem and phone line.

He happened to be a boy, an educated lad from a shop owning family, it is not totally inconceivable that you could have an educated girl in a village doing much the same thing. She might send altogether different stories related to health, or rural credit or whatever.

There is one more medium that lends itself to community networking, self expression, news generating, the works. It is weblog technology, and while it is the simplest thing in technological terms, it does need internet access to put the weblog into cyberspace where it can be read.

Setting up a blog is quite simple. You go to a site like [Blogger](#), and it will let you have your own blog up and running at no cost in literally a few minutes.

You log on to [blogger.com](#) and create an account.

You create a unique title for your blog and provide a brief description that will let others know what you're all about.

You choose your template, and you start blogging.

Now blogging is a fairly self indulgent phenomenon on the Net. It is essentially a personal diary on which you can keep posting your observations. But weblogs have also proven to be effective collaborative communication tools. They help small groups (and in a few cases, large)

communicate in a way that is simpler and easier to follow than email lists or discussion forums.

For example, a project team can collaboratively produce a weblog, where many individuals can post information (related Web site links, files, quotes, meeting notes or commentary). that might be useful or interesting to the group or to inform others outside the group, on the same blog. A collaborative weblog can help keep everyone in the loop, promoting cohesiveness in the group.

So you take this technology and this pattern of communication and apply it to a women's network, spanning scattered locations, and it works quite well in posting developments which everybody else in the group can read. Imagine panchayat women posting blogs on how they deal with issues and problems, and other women members of other panchayats being able to read them.

When you become technologically more advanced you can have a Moblog: take photographs on a fancy mobile phone and uploaded them to your weblong using T-Mobile Internet .

Then there is Wif Fi, which someday in this region may not seem as unthinkable as it is now. So they women merely have to have computers in a community room, come use it and update blogs.

There are states like Andhra Pradesh where you have broadband laid connecting district towns.

If you look at the content end, you can have different kinds of citizens' media. You have Ohmynews.com which is a news website fed by a very large number of citizen reporters. You have the slashdot.org kind of citizen media where news is what people choose to post on it, and is usually some kind of user friendly technology news.

You already have womens groups like Sewa and DDS use video cameras, you can post their feeds on the Net for other womens groups to look at.

Blogs are about communication, citizen reporters are about generating information from the grassroots. The tsunami blogs represented a coming together of both. What you were seeing was ordinary people reporting on what was going on around them in their blogs. And it gave you feedback from areas where conventional media was not able to reach.

Additional reading:

Case study: OhmyNews.com

Oh Yeon Ho is a lean, intense journalist who came of age during turbulent political unrest in Korea in the mid-'80s—and a media environment in which old-line and often conservative newspapers dominated the national scene. For a decade, Oh worked as a conventional magazine journalist, but in early 2000 he launched his own news site—just before the bursting

of the Internet bubble. But unlike many startups, Oh's OhmyNews.com not only survived but thrived, based on the simple notion that "every citizen is a reporter." And now Oh's Internet creation has attracted the attention of media giants around the world who wonder: is this Korean start-up the future of journalism?

OhmyNews employs 25 trained reporters who cover the major news stories of the day. But the twist comes with another 10 editors who review and post as many as 200 articles written daily by nearly 33,000 "citizen journalists"—anyone who registers can submit a 750-word piece in exchange for a few dollars per story. If the article makes the "Top News" section, the payout is about \$11.

"They are writing articles to change the world, not to earn money," says Oh. His contributors must agree to a code of ethics and eschew racism or pornography. Every story is posted instantly to the site. There is, however, an editorial hierarchy to the site's visual design. Hard news (by the site's professional journalists) and the most carefully edited citizen pieces are front and center, followed by softer stories like entertainment, quick community updates and finally, toward the bottom, stories not yet edited by OhmyNews. Most stories are also accompanied by rich and densely populated message boards.

OhmyNews has become one of the most influential news and information sites in Korea, with more than 750,000 unique users per day—this during a period when the leading newspapers' circulation dropped by a third. The site was widely credited with influencing South Korea's election of President Roh Moo-hyun; Roh granted his first postelection interview to OhmyNews. The later protest rallies that came with Roh's impeachment trial were covered in minute-by-minute detail, in text, photography and even video, by dozens of citizen reporters. Oh explains, "OhmyNews is a kind of public square in which the reform-minded generation meet and talk with each other and find confidence. The message they find here: we are not alone. We can change this society."

OhmyNews reached profitability last fall, driven primarily by advertising (ranging from small merchants to Samsung) with additional revenue from conferences, content licenses and voluntary donations from users. Although ad revenue is expected to grow 50 percent this year, Oh suspects that remaining profitable will remain a challenge. "I have to make money," he says, "but I am not an expert in that. Deep in my heart, I am still a reporter."

Critics from traditional news publishers in Korea charge that OhmyNews confuses message board posting with news, and that getting to the truth in any story requires painstaking reporting and editing by trained professionals. But OhmyNews's audience—primarily in their 20s and 30s—may not agree. When some Yonsei University students recently met with a visiting reporter to discuss the future of news, one psychology major put it simply: "How can you ever get truth from one source? The Internet allows us to check multiple sources, to explore message-board postings, to debate issues with others—that is the only way to find truth.

And besides, what good is information if you can't react to it?" "We're not stupid," added a business student. "We know that there is a difference between a message board, a traditional journal and OhmyNews. But by putting them together, our understanding is better. We can piece together truth." Oh is quick to point out that in four years, Ohmynews has had to publish only four retractions and has never had any significant legal issues.

In some ways, Oh says, OhmyNews is a "special product of Korea." Koreans had relatively little public access to open and free dialogue and a large portion had grown dissatisfied with the mainstream conservative media. In addition, Korea's small size makes news coverage more manageable—one of Oh's professional journalists is rarely more than a few hours away from where a citizen journalist is reporting. Korea is also, in Oh's words, "a unipolar society, where the entire country can be engulfed by just a couple of issues." And finally, the nearly 70 percent penetration of broadband Internet access in Korea allows users to engage more readily; Oh can also experiment in multimedia offerings such as OhmyTV and Web radio. Despite these unique factors in Korea, Oh strongly believes that there is a global need to broaden the definition of news consumption and has recently launched OhmyNews International in English.

Will he find a willing audience in the United States? American television audiences are already familiar with "citizen witnesses" supplying news footage, from Rodney King to September 11. Online, from eBay to Craigslist.org, individuals are self-publishing commercial enterprises, and Weblogs have become a national hobby. On a more organized scale, About.com offers how-to advice from hundreds of self-posting experts around the nation, and Wikipedia.com is a self-posting encyclopedia where more than 6,000 active contributors have submitted 600,000 articles on countless topics.

So is a more active participation and interaction with news far behind? Oh thinks so. But he is quick to caution: "Technology itself cannot change society. Korean citizens were ready to participate. Only prepared people, who can use the merits of technology, can make a difference."

Taken from: "Is this the future of journalism?"

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5240584/site/newsweek/>