

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

We are all journalists

The future of reporting and the role of media development

Geraldine de Bastion / Simon Didszuweit

The most shocking images of 2011 were shot with a mobile phone: one of the world's most feared dictators, mutilated and helpless in the hands of his people. Those closest to the action now have the ability to capture the moment on a simple phone and publish it immediately, without having to wait for a camera team to arrive or a media channel for distribution. Therefore, digital technologies, social media and mobile phones in particular, are changing the way media is produced, disseminated and consumed. They narrow the gap between producer and consumer, author and reader, representative and represented.

When everyone can be a reporter, who are the journalists?

Technically, anyone can publish an article, broadcast a radio feature or make a video documentary. With millions of tweets, videos uploaded to YouTube, Facebook and blog posts published, consumer-produced content today far outnumbers content created by professional media. More video is uploaded to YouTube in one month than the three major US networks created in 60 years¹. With this mass of information available, it has not necessarily become easier to verify information and put it into context. **Journalists** are trained professionals who have the responsibility to tell a story and connect the dots. Or as Justin Arenstein put it during his keynote at the FoME Symposium: *"There is no real role for reporters anymore; citizen journalists do it better. Journalists now have to become sense-makers — we're going to have to take responsibility for audiences making sense of narratives."*²

New media also offer a range of new tools for journalists to help them fulfil their role as sense-makers. **Data journalism** or data driven journalism³ is a new breed of journalism, where reports are based on numerical data or databases as primary sources. Or, as information architect and multimedia journalist Mirko Lorenz put it: "Data driven journalism is a workflow that consists of the following elements: digging deep into data by scraping, cleansing and structuring it, filtering by mining for specific information, visualizing it and making a story."⁴ Even internet founder Tim Berners Lee believes that data journalism is the future⁵ and that the ability to make sense of data, such as Wikileaks cables, government spending and weather data, is one of the key skills needed today. There are a number of tools that help journalists acquire these skills, including visualization and mesh up tools, such as [Scrapewiki](#) and [OpenHeatMap](#)⁶.

However, some quantities of data may simply be too much to handle, even for trained analysers. In such cases, working with a crowd is becoming an increasingly popular method. **Crowdsourcing** is not a new phenomenon in research and product development. It is now also being introduced as a

1 http://www.youtube.com/static?hl=en-GB&template=press_statistics

2 The future of media and journalism was a focal topic at the German Media and Development Forum (Forum Medien und Entwicklung, FoME) 2011 Symposium "Hype or Hope: the impact of digital media on journalism and development.". Some of the conference results are summarized in this article. The quote is taken from Justin Arenstein's key note speech. Bonn, October 25th.

3 For more information on data journalism and data driven journalism, see Wilfried Runde's presentation on "DDJ" at the FoME 2011 Symposium in October 2011 in Bonn at

http://www.slideshare.net/FoME_Symposiu/wilfried-runde-data-journalism

4 <http://datadrivenjournalism.net/about/faq>

5 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/nov/22/data-analysis-tim-berners-lee>

6 <http://blogs.journalism.co.uk/2011/05/03/ten-things-every-journalist-should-know-about-data/>

method in journalism. With the help of open source tools such as “[Help me Investigate](#)”, the power of the people can be harnessed. One of the more prominent examples of crowdsourcing by the media is the [Guardian's](#) effort to investigate the expenses of members of the British Parliament, which caused a huge scandal in the UK in 2009. Citizens were invited to review the thousands of documents released by Parliament regarding MPs’ expenses and identify relevant documents for further investigation.

Print and radio media are experimenting with ways of involving readers in the reporting process via digital media. Citizen journalism is increasingly recognized as a complimentary form of reporting, rather than a competitor. The influential role of bloggers as opinion shapers in countries that lack independent media landscapes was increasingly recognized during the Arab Spring and other protest scenarios by both the international media and authoritarian governments. As a result, government efforts to control digital media are increasing in an number of countries. Therefore, both professional and citizen journalists need to be equipped with the skills to use new digital media securely and protect themselves against surveillance and cyber attacks.⁷

Mobile, digital, independent: media consumption today

Both the production and the consumption of media have changed profoundly. According to research conducted by the Pew Center, US citizens trust in traditional media has fallen over the last twenty years, and citizens with the least trust in the media are also the highest consumers of user-generated news. Today, the brand and image of a newspaper may be less relevant for news consumers, than the immediacy and directness of a Twitter feed when deciding who's news to listen to. New news organizations like the Ireland-based [Storyful](#) are grasping the importance of user-generated content for media production. Storyful acts as a mediator between citizen journalists and news organizations, helping to tell stories based on content generated by social media and reach an audience. Storyful is a good example of how media organizations will have to redefine their role as organizers, presenters and interpreters of information available via digital channels instead of acting as gatekeepers. In order to survive this revolution, media organisations need to embrace the concept of social media, digital innovation and participation.

Even in developing countries, where fixed-line internet penetration is an average of 21%, the spread of mobile phones is connecting the majority of people to internet-based services, thus opening new information channels. A number of innovative mobile services have been developed in countries where the mobile phone is the primary device for internet usage and personal communication. These range from mobile payment services to the free use of social networks in cooperation with mobile operators. Mobile services and language-based services like [FreedomFone](#) are creating opportunities for the unconnected and illiterate. FreedomFone is an open source service created by [The Kubatana Trust of Zimbabwe](#) that makes it easy to build interactive, two-way, phone-based information services using interactive audio voice menus, voice messages, SMS and polls. A number of radio stations have begun to use the service to enable more interaction with listeners and provide additional information services. Although infrastructural challenges remain, the digital is not just a factor that divides people. Mobile media consumption may look very different in Kenya on the one hand on an upgraded version of the popular Nokia 1100 and in the US on the other on an iPad2, but its impact is certainly evident on a global scale.⁸

Training for a new playing field

If the future of publishing is mobile and digital, the providers of infrastructures need to be considered important actors. Internet service providers (ISPs) provide the infrastructure on which internet

7 Fadi Salem and Thaweepon Kummetha spoke about "Security Threats in the Digital Era" at the 2011 FoME Symposium in October 2011 in Bonn, please see <http://training.dw-world.de/ausbildung/blogs/fome2011/tag/security>

8 <http://moreintelligentlife.com/content/ideas/jm-ledgard/digital-africa?page=full>

services are based. While the Western media was busy celebrating the powerful role of social network protest organization, the governments then in charge demonstrated the vulnerability of those networks. "Switching off" the internet, or particular services, is possible, in particular in countries where only a limited number of ISPs or telecommunication monopolies controlled by the government exist. Internet blocking and filtering poses a threat to digital media distribution. Secure and independent infrastructure, in particular open networks, is needed in order to ensure the digital can be used as a platform for independent media. Ivan Sigal, Executive Director of Global Voices, feels that: "media development organizations need to engage with the ISPs, the ITU and technology companies to strengthen open networks."⁹

Media development cooperation should focus on supporting infrastructural development as well as promoting the creation of legal frameworks that consider issues of internet freedom, internet security, privacy, data protection and copyright. There is a lot to be done if we want to ensure everyone can harness the opportunities digital technologies offer to voice one's opinion equally and freely. The true democratic and pluralistic potential that would allow us all to act as citizen reporters can only be unleashed if free and secure access is available.

9 Ivan Sigal during his presentation at the German Media and Development Forum (Forum Medien und Entwicklung, FoME) 2011 Symposium "Hype or Hope: the impact of digital media on journalism and development." . Bonn, October 26th.