The True Face of Digital Democracy

Sebastian Waisman

Two years ago, Andrew Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur* launched a serious debate about the value of blogs and other technologies that permit ordinary citizens to publish their own content online. Keen's book took aim at the "Web 2.0" enthusiasts who believe that the Internet can and should empower "citizen journalists" and "democratize" the media. He disparaged the self-broadcasting movement for promoting narcissism and mediocrity, and cited the trend as a threat to our moral and cultural integrity. He argued that these tools will diminish respect for the knowledge and experience of journalists and may accelerate the spread of misinformation and partisan spin. In the era of Web 2.0, Keen argued, "kids can't tell the difference between credible news by objective professional journalists and what they read on joeshmoe.blogspot.com."

Even those who applaud the rise of these technologies and reject Keen's criticism of Wikipedia, blogs, and other tools for disseminating user-generated content accept his premise: that blogs run by ordinary citizens will lure audiences away from paid, professional content and thereby undermine traditional journalism. University of Tennessee law professor Glenn Reynolds, the man behind the popular Instapundit blog and the author of *An Army of Davids* (excerpted in these pages in 2006), scathingly mocked Keen as an elitist who believes that consumers should unquestioningly "lap up what their betters in the news and entertainment industries produced." But Reynolds certainly shares Keen's general sense that we are witnessing, as Reynolds has put it, "the end of the power of Big Media."

> *The Myth of Digital Democracy*
> By Matthew Hindman
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Not so fast, says Matthew Hindman, an assistant professor of political science at Arizona State University. His new book sheds light on a fact rarely acknowledged by either the critics or the champions of amateur media: No one is reading Joe Shmoe's blog. *The Myth of Digital Democracy* presents startling evidence regarding the real impact of self-publishing. As it turns out, very few individuals have fled traditional media outlets in search of blogs or other user-generated content; the audience for self-published opinions, for better or worse, remains quite limited.

Hindman draws on extensive data, including actual records of Web usage by nearly 10 million U.S. households, to show that online traffic is distributed in vastly unequal fashion, with a few hugely successful sites receiving the overwhelming majority of the traffic. The five most popular sites, including Google and MySpace, receive nearly a quarter of all Web visits. And among news and media sites, a small number of conventional media outlets—among them CNN and the *New York Times*—dominate the market for online news and commentary. As Hindman notes, "it may be easy to speak in cyberspace, but it remains difficult to be heard."

Hindman shows that audiences don't care much for content produced by ordinary citizens. Internet users rarely read blogs or visit political websites, and they gravitate towards large media outlets even more online than in print. Major newspapers like the *Times* and the *Washington Post* "have online traffic roughly 2.5 times their share of the print newspaper market," Hindman writes, explaining that news consumption is "more concentrated online than in print," with the top ten news outlets controlling more of the total online market than their hard-copy equivalents. The few online self-publishers who can claim to be successful are hardly ordinary; the handful of blogs that attract the lion's share of attention are mostly run by professors, lawyers, and—drumroll, please—actual journalists.

While Hindman's findings challenge the notion that the traditional news media are doomed—which would seem to undermine Keen's predictions of cultural decay—the picture Hindman paints of online behavior suggests that Web 2.0 technologies may present new and unforeseen cultural threats. He reveals that readers are thronging to a small number of conventional news sources as they rely more heavily on portals and gatekeeper sites to filter the information available online. Depending on search engines and links from familiar sources, most users are drawn to material that is familiar, convenient, and immediately gratifying.

Hindman counterintuitively blames the hyperlink, a fundamental element of the World Wide Web, for limiting the content that users see. Unless users know exactly where they want to go, the only way for them to find new content is by way of hyperlinks from established sites or through search engine referrals. Most search engines, in turn, order their results by counting the number of links pointing to a given site (the innovation that first made Google a standout among the search services). This structural reliance on hyperlinks ensures that, despite the vast number of existing websites, users will be directed only towards those sites that are heavily frequented and well known. Hindman dubs the system that funnels traffic to the most popular sites the "Googlearchy: the rule

of the most heavily linked." So long as search engines play a crucial role in directing users to new sites, and so long as search results continue to be ranked according the number of inbound links, Web traffic will reflect "winner-take-all" patterns, where a few highly visible sites draw virtually all of the traffic.

According to Hindman, these "starkly inegalitarian" outcomes persist at every level and in every content genre of the Internet:

> For every clearly defined group of websites, a small portion of the group [receives] most of the links and most of the traffic. Communities, subcommunities, and sub-subcommunities may differ in their levels of concentration; yet overall, online communities [display] a Russian-nesting-doll structure, dominated at every level by winners-take-all patterns.

Even within the comparatively miniscule group of users who take an interest in, say, congressional politics or abortion law, Hindman shows that traffic is directed to a "small set of highly successful sites."

Users are unwilling to invest time or energy in locating sources of information. Their methodology is simple: go to a search engine, type in a few words, and click on the first result. According to Hindman's account, deviations from this model are remarkably rare. A site demoted from the first result to the fourth result on a Google search could lose most of its traffic. The second page of results is a vast graveyard where the link-poor sites are buried alive, never to be seen or heard from again.

Hindman blames the "lack of user sophistication" for the low visibility of non-traditional media. While searches that use more than one or two search terms can produce more finely tailored results, 96 percent of Web searches consist of three or fewer terms, frequently crude or familiar ones, and tend to bring up results directing users to the same old Web-traffic behemoths—quite often the largest and most recognizable old-media outlets.

By documenting user ineptitude and patterns of online traffic concentration, Hindman forces us to reconsider the impact of the blogosphere and other Web 2.0 technologies. Clearly, amateur content has not had the effect that some predicted. "Yes," Hindman writes, "almost anyone can put up a political website, but this fact matters little if few political sites receive many visitors.... [P]utting up a political website is usually equivalent to hosting a talk show on public access television at 3:30 in the morning."

But if Hindman's description of unvisited blogs undercuts the hand-wringing about how Web 2.0 menaces our culture and morality, his description of online media concentration suggests that those cheering

the demise of Big Media may be celebrating prematurely. To begin with, the outsourcing to search engines of the essential task of finding information has dulled the initiative and imagination of users. But search engines can only do so much of the work; at some point users must be willing to read and interpret the news. And the value of that news is vastly diminished if it comes from just a few homogeneous sources. While bloggers are often accused of promoting partisanship and coarsening civic discourse, the truth is that indolent attachment to a handful of sources of opinion is at least as likely to narrow users' horizons as reading too much self-published content.

More significantly, Hindman's evidence indicates that the dynamic of online concentration has harmed local and regional news outlets. Small, independent, and community newspapers now compete with the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post.* A decade and a half ago, those big-name papers were beyond the reach of most readers; an out-of-state print subscription was a luxury in which few indulged. But now that the *Times* and the *Post* are available online at no charge, they are displacing regional standards like the *Dallas Morning News* and the *San Diego Union-Tribune.* Both of those papers have seen sharp declines in readership, and the *Union-Tribune* was sold in March 2009 after trimming more than 15 percent of its workforce and nearly halving the number of pages in its print edition. Two other major regional papers stopped printing in early 2009: the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (which has switched to an online-only format) and the *Rocky Mountain News* (which has closed altogether).

While much of their national and international content may be syndicated, papers like these provide regional and local coverage that the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* cannot. When Web users rely on hyperlinks, or they return time and again to a few widely-read sources, they receive little exposure to local news. To that extent, they disengage from the world around them and take in only the high-profile stories that national media see fit to produce. Regularly reading about our neighbors and neighborhoods helps to shape our identities as individuals embedded in a particular place and time. Local media have long contributed to this process and have helped to strengthen our communities.

To be clear, the decline of small- and mid-sized papers is not simply the result of online competition from national papers; other economic and market realities, including the collapse of print classified advertising, are also to blame. But that does not alter the broader picture. If regional and local papers disappear, with only national and international news sources like CNN left standing, we may regret having nowhere to read about recent city council meetings,

church picnics, school fundraisers, and other matters of the kind of community concern that have long been integral to American civic life. Before modern media brought national news and politics into the home of every citizen, many Americans could be more interested in and affected by the deliberations of the local assembly or the state legislature than by the comings and goings of powerful people in Washington or New York City. That perspective is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

Hindman suggests that online concentration harms our "deliberative democracy" by marginalizing the self-published opinions of ordinary citizens. He would prefer that Joe Shmoe's "voice" be heard by a larger, and more diverse, audience. But Hindman neglects to consider that vast audiences may not conduce to true civic engagement. The challenge, rather, is to find ways for ordinary citizens to experience the joys and attachments of civic participation on a more natural and more manageable scale. Local communities and neighborhoods offer those opportunities by permitting citizens to engage each other directly in smaller and more personal settings. In the past, small newspapers have facilitated these interactions. The most serious consequence of media concentration—both the online concentration that Hindman documents and the decades of concentration in the broadcast business—is that it disrupts these small networks of citizen communication, which attend to local issues and day-to-day affairs. Instead, audiences become part of one gigantic media network dominated by continental concerns. The danger here is not the balkanization but the flattening of the public sphere.

When "news" is defined to include only that which takes place on the national or world stage, it convinces citizens that "politics" is something that happens exclusively elsewhere— in distant corridors of power rather than in their own cities and neighborhoods. It is a recipe for civic disengagement. Hindman is right to be concerned about the failure of Web 2.0 to deliver the democratization it promised. But if the solution lies anywhere, it's not in promoting Joe Shmoe's blog to the world. It lies in finding a way to employ Web 2.0 innovations in the service of local participation and civic life.

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