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How I Learned to Stop Worrying about New Media Literacy and Love the Internet

Essay by Evgeny Morozov, July 31, 2008 in response to Principles of a New Media Literacy

While it offers a useful general perspective on the future of media literacy, Dan Gillmor's essay doesn't fully answer some of the most fundamental questions about the relationship between education, media, and democracy. Let me sketch just a few of them:

1. Can we do anything to provide for better media literacy and more transparency in the digital age?
2. Should we actually do anything about it?
3. How exactly do we go about it, if, indeed, we could and should?

Gillmor's answer to the first two questions is an implicit but unqualified "yes." He broaches the third one –arguably the most important of the three – only in very general terms: "We are doing a poor job of ensuring that consumers and producers of media in a Digital Age are equipped for the tasks," he says and I agree; but how exactly could we do this job better?

The word "we," in fact, recurs almost in every paragraph of this essay (not surprisingly, Gillmor's best-selling book is called *We the Media*) . But who is this "we"? Is it academia? Is it funders? Is it policy makers? Gillmor never says it explicitly, but I assume that it's some combination of the three. If that's the case, I am quite skeptical that "we" are in fact capable of doing anything about these problems or, on some issues, that we should even try.

Take the issue of misinformation. The problems Gillmor alludes to aren't new; we've known for ages that power impinges on media, that journalists are fallible creatures and that what we read in the media is often not true. On a cognitive level, we have already learned how to differentiate between the reliable and the unreliable; few of us confuse the *New York Post* and the *New York Times* .

The yellow press in Britain, for example, repeatedly manufactures dubious truths – and yet the country still enjoys one of the healthiest democracies in the world. Are the Brits really less informed than, say, the Germans because of their yellow press? How does it happen then that the best journalism in the world – as practiced by the *Financial Times* , the *Guardian* or the *Economist* —also comes from Britain? Perhaps, the relationship between media, democracy, and the public is a bit more complex than Gillmor wants us to believe.

Gillmor is certainly right that the blogosphere is no longer the pristine land that it used to be. Corporations, PR agencies, and extremists are taking to it in droves for precisely the same reasons that activists, journalists, and pundits did a few years earlier: blogs are often anonymous, they help with quick mobilization and offer a much cheaper way of campaigning. But didn't the same thing happen with traditional media—television, for example – a few decades ago? Are we really facing genuinely new problems?

Also, wouldn't they soon become non-issues as, thanks to the Internet, consumers now have terrabytes of reference data at their fingertips and they can verify any fact momentarily? Wouldn't new systems for determining one's online reputation – be that Google's PageRank , the

number of Diggs or some other metric— help address the credibility gap? We are only beginning to scratch the surface here, as even Google itself is barely a decade old.

Gillmor's diagnosis of the issue is largely correct – "we are doing a poor job" (and we always were), but his prescription – "let's just do more of it"—seems inappropriate. I don't believe that the Internet would suddenly change our academic, philanthropic, or policy-making institutions, which, armed with their long-term, large-scale and systematic hammers, see everything as a nail. Quite the opposite: the Internet is only making it harder for them to deal with issues that they couldn't handle even in the pre-Internet age. Adding a qualifier like "digital" or "cyber" to the names of their programs is never enough.

Such an over-reliance on conventional solutions looks awkward in today's vibrant era of instantaneous self-publishing and micro-change. Media literacy in the digital age is an ever-elusive and always-moving target; we desperately need flexible, ad-hoc and decentralized ways of zooming in on it on a daily—not yearly—basis. It seems that Gillmor's proposed solution—developing and updating new media literacy curricula—would be ineffective for one simple reason: this would usually take months if not years and make the solution outdated before it even hits the printing press.

Instead, what we – those who belong to some of these institutions – should do is switch from thinking in this anonymous "We"-mode to thinking in a very concrete "I"-mode, where individuals, armed with a panoply of tools like Google or Wikipedia, would play the leading role in solving transparency and literacy problems. We shouldn't underestimate the great changes that such a switch from "We"-mode to "I"-mode could bring. It may just be that there is no other choice; the era of Web 2.0 has proved that today almost anyone can build effective, cheap and beautiful web projects—anyone but most governments, NGOs and policy-making institutions.

So where Gillmor sees "us" not doing a good job of equipping "them" for "a Digital Age", I see something different. I see "us" not doing a good job of equipping ourselves for this age, not learning fast enough from "them"—from the great bottom-up examples like Wikipedia with their own community-based governance and organically changing reputation systems.

Why do we assume that 15-year olds — who spend most of their time reading anonymous blogs and browsing fake Facebook profiles – would be as naïve as their parents when dealing with other media? These "digital natives" know much better than we do how easy it is to produce (not just consume) and manipulate information; this automatically makes many of them immune to the trickiest PR stints. Isn't there a lot that "they" can teach "us" instead?

Gillmor's alarmist tone may just reflect the panic and unease that "we"– academics, funders, journalists– feel about losing our capacity to influence things. I am not sure this is a bad thing, since our influence—particularly on such soft and intangible issues as media literacy—often carried our own biases and outdated thinking, and was not always effective. That today's citizens find their own ways to educate themselves and build their own platforms for increasing transparency should be a cause for celebration, not regret.

Evgeny Morozov is the founder and publisher of Polymeme.com*. He has written for The Economist, The International Herald Tribune, Le Monde, Business Week,* openDemocracy *,* RealClearPolitics*, and other media. Evgeny is on the sub-board of the Information Program at the* Open Society Institute*. Previously he was Director of New Media at* Transitions Online*, a Prague-based media development NGO.*

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