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Principles of a New Media Literacy

Essay by Dan Gillmor, May 16, 2008

The democratization of media is no longer in doubt. Digital media tools, increasingly cheap and ubiquitous, have spawned a massive amount of media creation at all levels, most notably from the edges of networks. These networks have provided vast access to what people have created — potentially a global audience for anyone's creation.

But the expanding and more diverse media ecosystem, which includes various kinds of citizen media alongside traditional forms, poses some difficult challenges alongside the unquestioned benefits. A key question: In this emergent global conversation, which has created a tsunami of information, what can we trust?

How we govern ourselves on the Web depends in significant ways on the answers. To get this right, we'll have to re-think, or at least re-apply, some older cultural norms in distinctly modern ways.

It comes down, in significant ways, to some principles, both for media consumers and creators. They add up to a 21st Century notion of what we once called "media literacy." But media literacy has generally lacked the kind of participatory piece that is so essentially a part of digital media.

Even those of us who are creating a variety of media are still — and always will be — more consumers than creators. For all of us in this category, the principles come mostly from common sense. Call them skepticism, judgment, understanding and reporting. More specifically:

Be skeptical of absolutely everything. This means not taking or granted the trustworthiness of what we read, see or hear from media of all kinds, whether from traditional news organizations, blogs, online videos or any other form.

*But don't be **equally** skeptical of everything*. We all have an internal "trust meter" of sorts, largely based on education and experience. We need to bring to digital media the same kinds of parsing we learned in a less complex time when there were only a few primary sources of information. A news article in *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal* starts out in strongly positive territory on that trust meter. An anonymous comment on a random blog, by contrast, starts with negative credibility. Anonymity is an important thing to preserve, because it protects whistleblowers and others for whom speech can be unfairly dangerous. But when people don't stand behind their words, a reader should always wonder why and make appropriate adjustments.

Understand and learn media techniques. Teenagers and children already know how to create media; they are digital natives. Older people are learning. But younger and older alike are, for the most part, less clear on how communications are designed to persuade if not manipulate. It's fine, if not essential, to know how to snap a photo with a mobile phone. It's just as important to know — and to teach our children — how media creators push our logical and emotional buttons.

Ask more questions. This goes by many names: research, reporting, homework, etc. The Web

has already sparked a revolution in commerce, as potential buyers of products and services discover relatively easy ways to learn more before the sale. We need to recognize the folly of making any major decision about our lives based on something we read, hear or see — and the need to keep reporting, sometimes in major ways but more often in small ones, to ensure that we make good choices.

All of the principles above are part of the toolkit of every responsible journalist. So are a few more, including the ones that every traditional journalist of any honor would embrace, namely thoroughness, accuracy, fairness and independence. They boil down to simple but important notions: Get as much information as possible. When you say something, be sure your facts are correct. Be fair to people and interests from all angles. And be as independent as possible, especially as an independent thinker who knows how to listen, not just lecture.

In the digital world, even more than the analog one, we need to add transparency to that list, because the thinking behind the media deserves exposure in addition to the work itself. Nowhere will this be more important than with citizen journalists — though the traditional media need to adopt more transparency as well, for their own sakes. They may be paid, individually, not to have conflicts of interest. But that doesn't mean they work without bias.

Transparency in the traditional ranks has scarcely existed for most the past century. It's difficult, in fact, to name a business as opaque as journalism, the practitioners of which insist that others explain their actions but usually refuse to amplify on their own.

Scandal, for the most part, has forced open the doors to a degree. The Jayson Blair debacle at *the New York Times* led the newspaper to describe in lurid detail what had happened. It also led to the creation of a "public editor" post — also called ombudsman in other cases.

Bloggers, through their own relentless critiques, have made traditional-media transparency more common as well. However unfair bloggers' criticism may often be, it has also been a valuable addition to the media-criticism sphere.

Bloggers, too, need to adopt more transparency. Some, to be sure, do reveal their biases. That gives readers a way to refract the writers' world views against the postings, and then make decisions about credibility. But a distinctly unhappy trend in some blog circles is the undisclosed or poorly disclosed conflict of interest. Pay-per-post schemes are high on the list of activities that deserve readers' condemnation — and, one hopes, less readership.

All these principles — for audiences and creators, who are often the same people — lead to an inevitable reality. We are doing a poor job of ensuring that consumers and producers of media in a Digital Age are equipped for the tasks. This is a job for parents and schools. Yet in America, a teacher who teaches critical thinking risks being fired as a dangerous radical.

If we really believe that democracy requires an educated populace, we're starting from a deficit. These are dangerous times to push conformity and routine acceptance of what others say. Are we ready to take the risk of being activist media users, for the right reasons? A lot rides on the answer.

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