CITIZEN JOURNALISM

Citizen media will change the media landscape in Sri Lanka in the next decade

Driving the New Media Revolution:
An introduction to Citizen Media

By Sanjana Hattotuwa

Many journalists in Sri Lanka will think I am quite mad if I tell them that within the next decade, they will compete with content produced and distributed by citizens , and may even lose their job because of it. To them, the technologies and websites shown in the diagram above are alien - they are ignorant of the ways in which new media and their millions of devoted producers & consumers are changing the journalism landscape as we know it.

Within the next ten years, content produced by ordinary citizens, with no prior training in professional journalism, using PC's and mobile devices, will vastly overshadow the content created by traditional newspa-

pers and electronic media. Driving this media revolution is the world wide web & the internet. As more and more citizens connect to the internet using broadband, the content produced by them - ranging from personal diaries posted online to short videos made from mobile phones - will continue to attract and inspire many more to produce and view similar content on the web. This i content that's fresh, edgy, hip and engaging - and markedly different from the content produced by old media.

Citizen journalism, also known as "participatory journalism," is the act of citizens "playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and dissemi-

nating news and information," according to the seminal report *We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information.* As is noted in this report "The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires."

Citizen journalism should not be confused with Civic Journalism, which is practiced by professional journalists. Citizen journalism usually involves empowering ordinary citizens -- including traditionally marginalized members of society - to produce content bypassing journalists, that is in their and their community's interest.

Citizen Journalism buzz
What the heck do New Media, Web 2.0 mean?

It's easy to get confused with the terms surrounding citizen journalism. Indeed, many who produce content that is later labelled citizen journalism don't quite themselves understand what all the fuss is about. But then, they are the children of the information age, born and raised in a world that's increasingly connected to the web & Internet. They do not know a life before email, the Internet, mobile phone and SMS. For them, creating media content is a means of self-expression or a past-time.

Journalists need to learn the new buzzwords of citizen journalism. It is, simply, a matter of preparing for the future and the radical changes that the growth of media produced *by citizens for citizens*. In this article, ***citizen journalism is defined as the act of a citizen, or a group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysis and disseminating news and information.***

A lot of citizen journalism is made possible by the advent of broadband web and internet access, even in countries like Sri Lanka. Greater access at lower costs lead to more citizens participating going online, and realising the potential of information to address community issues. Journalists today need to understand two key buzzwords that support citizen journalism - New Media and Web 2.0.

What is New Media?
New media usually refers to a group of relatively recent mass media based on new information technology. Most frequently the label would be understood to include the Internet and World Wide Web, streaming media and interactivity. The term is used in relation to "old" media forms, such as print newspapers and magazines, that are static representations of text and graphics. New media includes:

- Interactive websites
- streaming audio and video
- chat rooms
- online communities
- Web advertising
- DVD and CD-ROM media
- virtual reality environments
- integration of digital data with the telephone, such as Internet telephony (VOIP)
- digital cameras
- mobile computing, including SMS & MMS

What is Web 2.0?
Essentially, this is a set of web technologies that allow for users to create, view and disseminate content interactively and in large social groups. Sites like del.icio.us and Flickr, two companies that have received a great deal of attention of late, have pioneered a concept that some people call "folksonomy" (in contrast to taxonomy), a style of collaborative categorization of sites using freely chosen keywords, often referred to as tags.

For instance, a mobile video of a suicide bombing in Colombo can be tagged as "bomb", "suicide", "Colombo", "violence" etc - allowing other citizens / users to add or link to the same tags.

Web 2.0 is what powers most New Media content generation and dissemination. It's not important for a journalist to understand Web 2.0, but it's essential to realise the potential of radically new ways of seeing, accessing and sharing information on the Internet & web. No longer are journalists the only reporters of news - they are now competing with millions of citizens, connected to the web, with their own perspectives.

The professional journalists of tomorrow, even in Sri Lanka, will be challenged to respond to alternatives and opinions coming from citizens that are as influential as their articles. This is a new dimension to journalism as we know it, and Sri Lanka is just waking up to the possibilities.

So what's the bottom line?
With new web & Internet technologies, journalists can now avail themselves of tools and technologies that enable them to frame and report

VOR Radio an **internet radio station for civil society in Sri Lanka (created by the author) generates over 4,000 hits a day!**

http://radio.voicesofpeace.lk

issues in a manner that constructively engage readers, viewers and listeners far more than what was possible with Old Media.

Journalists need to train themselves in the uses and potential of New Media. With more and more newspapers, radio stations and TV channels globally losing their audience dramatically to those who consume content online, it is not a question of if, but when, Sri Lankan media will wake up to the potential of new media. A simple reminder to those still unconvinced of New Media - citizens around may know more about it than you!

Join the global revolution!
Today, there are over 34 million blogs, over 500 million users and consumers of new media. Websites such as YouTube.com get over 65,000 new citizen media generated videos each day! In every country, websites that are bringing together communities - such as orkut.com in Brazil and myspace.com in the US - are by far exceeding the level of consumers in comparison to mainstream print media. Recently over 170 newspapers joined Yahoo! To aggregate their content online, realising their print readership was dropped significantly.

Sri Lanka May take a while to fully realize the potential of citizen media, but the increasing access to mobile phones with cameras, PC's, the Internet and the Web guarantees that citizens as well as journalists are going to be exposed to the potential of social networking, new media and citizen journalism in the near future.

Prepare for the revolution !

Groundviews.lk is Sri Lanka's first tri-lingual citizen journalism website. Featuring content from civil society and concerned citizens in support of peace, reconciliation, good governance and democracy,

Problems and opportunities
Fostering citizen media in Sri Lanka

In response to many requests from INGOs, humanitarian aid organisations including sections of the UN, CSOs, local and international journalists as well as members from the diaspora to have a better idea of conditions on the ground in Sri Lanka, the Media Unit of the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) based in Colombo, Sri Lanka launched the visionary www.groundviews.lk website in December 2006. *This website is Sri Lanka's first citizen journalism website, operating in Sinhala, Tamil and English.*

The website will encourage submissions of a personal nature, pithy, provocative, bear witness to the denial of justice and human rights violations and essentially humanizes and critiques conflict & peace through alternative cultural, social, economic and political perspectives.

There will be a minimum of moderation and editorial input will be low. All content will be archived and indexed, making this website, over time, a valuable repository of alternative / citizens perspectives on conflict and peace in Sri Lanka. Noted civil society and press freedom activists, young bloggers, academics and professional journalists have been enlisted to feed content to this website on a regular basis.

Several challenges were faced in the creation of this website, and will continue to throttle the development of citizen journalism and new media in Sri Lanka (especially blogs).

Lack of Sinhala support
Sri Lanka does not, to date, have a UNICODE standard for Sinhala. Much is said and written on the development of such a standard, but since it doesn't exist today, initiatives such as Groundviews have to use what's available to facilitate content genera-

tion in Sinhala. Most often, this requires the installation of software that requires expert knowledge in computing, which many citizens and journalists do not have.

Furthermore, the lack of standardised ways to view and generate content in the vernacular alienates the majority of citizens in Sri Lanka. Currently, New Media and Citizen Journalists is largely limited to those who can read and write English, which severely restricts the opinions and ideas that need to fertilise a vibrant citizen journalism culture.

Lack of emphasis on content generation

Bi-lateral donors give millions of dollars to set up the infrastructure to access the web & Internet. This is important. However, regrettably, there is no awareness or effort by the Government or these donors to promote the development of content, in English, Sinhala and Tamil, that support development and its corollaries, peace & reconciliation. Millions of dollars are thus spent on cyber-cafes, laying wires and providing connectivity to those who then don't know what to use this connectivity for!

Cost of access

The success of citizen journalism on the web & internet is deeply linked to the availability of cheap and reliable broadband. However, Sri Lanka is years behind comparable Asian countries in the cost of broadband internet access. The quality of service, even in urban areas, of broadband access remain extremely poor, with the associated costs of connectivity extremely high. This is a perverse situation that prevents many journalists and citizens from access the web and Internet on a regular basis, especially from Provinces

that do not (yet) have access to ISDN & ADSL connectivity.

Politicisation of ICT strategies

Successive governments in Sri Lanka, instead of recognising ICT as a national priority, have adopted partisan and parochial approaches to IT and ICT development in Sri Lanka. What this means is that access of the web and Internet to citizens on cost-effective basis and with high quality of service, remains elusive. Corruption is high - individual Ministers their favourite contractors prefer monetary gain in the deployment of ill-thought out and ill-managed strategies to promote ICTs in Sri Lanka, resulting in sub-standard national policies that are worthy of ridicule when compared to the progressive policies of some of our South Asian neighbours.

The resulting confusion, and the lack of any coherent, holistic and sustained ICT development, leaves citizens and journalists without any certainty on how they can use the web and Internet to truly empower themselves to safeguard democracy and good governance.

Civil society's parochialism

If citizen journalism fostered through Groundviews is to be successful and sustainable in the long term, significant barriers to information & knowledge sharing between civil society organisations will need to be broken. Today, civil society organisations, including the UN, donors and national level NGOs, operate in information silos - no one wants to share information with each other.

Citizen journalism is premised on the Freedom of Information - that each and every citizen has a right to know the workings of gov-

ernment and of NGOs working on their behalf an in their interests. If the NGOs and their staff who are part of Groundviews don't wish to share freely their perspectives , the website will suffer from a lack of real alternatives to mainstream media.

Copyright issues

The local and global regime of copyright stifles the growth of creativity and innovation, key pillars of citizen journalism. The evolution of ideas such as Creative Commons licenses for content generated in the public interest by ordinary citizens needs to be further encouraged. As long as citizens who inadvertently breach existing copyright laws and are held accountable under legal systems ill equipped to deal with the evolution of media and the web, their voices will be stifled online. We need to find ways through which intellectual content and innovation is safeguarded and celebrated online, and not just held in outdated modes of proprietary ownership - we also want a system that balances the rights of creators with the rights and needs of the larger society.

Donor mentality

Citizen journalism and related initiatives to support peace and development in Sri Lanka aren't going to self-funded. For all their talk on CSR, the business sector in Sri Lanka is still averse to supporting projects that to them are "controversial" since they deal with peace. Same with donors, who often are utterly ignorant on the potential of new media to strengthen their work.

It's an uphill struggle to find seed funding for innovative approaches to peace-building. Citizen media is a hostage to this inertia and resistance to democratic innovation.

Opportunities & the future

The exponential growth of new media in Sri Lanka is inevitable. With mobile phone companies starting beginning to go into television content, with television companies beginning to go into mobile content, with a steady growth of bloggers, the introduction of new websites such as VOR Radio (radio.voicesofpeace.lk) and Groundviews that allow for the growth of citizen media, the potential growth of citizen journalism in Sri Lanka is huge.

Consequently, more and more citizens will generate content. Government censorship on media is going to be extremely difficult in an age when every citizen with a mobile phone or PC is a potential reporter and witness.

Mainstream media will wake up to the revolution - papers will cease to be products, instead, newspapers online will become places for citizens to interact. MyDay.lk, by Wijeya Newspapers Group, is a harbinger of more initiatives that encourage interaction between readers. This shift from readers to community involves the recognition of citizens are equals in the gathering, production and dissemination of information.

New conversations, importantly in Sinhala and Tamil, will create new ways to hold politicians to account for their deeds and misdeeds. Citizens with mobile phones

"Recognising the potential of citizen media, we must also be careful that citizen media that is irresponsible, unprofessional, partial and inaccurate - does not hinder the growth of free voices on the web."

Dan Gilmore, Director of the Center for Citizen Media in an interview with the author. See http://tinyurl.com/y5ypl3

will become the guardians of human rights and democracy, exposing Police corruption as well as highlighting issues ignored or marginalised by mainstream media. The growth of provincial citizen journalism websites is inevitable. We are already seeing the growth of mobile content - from videos to photos - that are uploaded to the web. The tsunami showed early signs of the future in the use of SMS for emergency operations and humanitarian aid. As in the Philippines, SMS can be a powerful force in democratising Sri Lanka if its potential is fully realised.

The rewards for citizens and journalists quick to use and adopt new media will be in the form of new voices that are respected for their insight by a new generation of consumers who, even in Sri Lanka, have grown up in a world of technology. Those who are still skeptical about the potential of new media and citizen journalism do so at their own peril.

Journalism, news and media as we know it is dying. It is better to be prepared for the future than face guaranteed obsolescence.
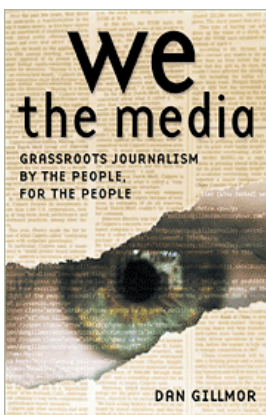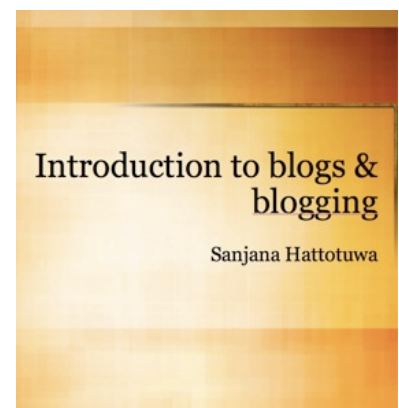

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