

Global Information Society Watch 2009

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*Dedicated to A.K. Mahan - an activist who valued
intellectual rigour and concrete outcomes.*

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Open culture

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Introduction

At the end of every year, since 1927, the United States (US) news magazine *TIME* does a profile on the person or persons who the editors believe “most affected the news and our lives, for good or ill.” In 2006, in a change from past features on presidents to scientists and judges, *TIME* editors chose “You” as the person of the year. In 2006, “the World Wide Web,” according to *TIME*, “became a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter.”¹

What *TIME* editors recognised was that a seismic shift in access to technology has meant that millions of people across the globe now have a voice and an audience for their ideas. This is revolutionary because, unlike previous media such as television and radio, access to the means of producing messages – of having an active voice on the network – has extended to everyone with access to a computer or mobile phone connected to the web.

Perhaps unlike ever before in history we have seen a major democratisation of the means of producing and distributing information. We are no longer limited to being mere consumers of information, but now have the potential to become active producers of information. This power is no small thing. According to *TIME*, “It’s about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes.”

This revolution has had a major impact on the way that we produce culture and media. With millions joining the marketplace for producing information, ideas and entertainment, all with very different incentives to create than the established media, we have seen a major realignment in the power of the many versus the few.

Computation, storage and communications capacity – increasingly the basic physical capital means necessary for producing information, knowledge and culture in the 21st century – are in the hands of practically everyone connected: some 600 million to a billion people around the planet.

The rise of the amateur

In recent history, the term “amateur” became negatively associated with “someone who is unqualified or insufficiently skillful”,² but originally the term came from the French to

mean a “lover of something”. Today, the world’s greatest free encyclopaedia (Wikipedia), the million-channel YouTube network, and the millions of blogs around the world are all fuelled by amateurs: people who create, not primarily for money, but for the love of it.

This has not gone unnoticed by those who previously had the monopoly over information and entertainment publishing. As with any revolution, there are always victims of the new age – as powers realign themselves, business models become defunct and grand industries, incapable of keeping up with change, topple to make way for the new.

One of the major “issues” in which this struggle is being played out is in the debate between what has been called “citizen media” versus the established media.

Citizen media versus traditional media

According to many from the traditional media, people who produce news and analysis outside of traditional media organisations (“citizen media”) cannot produce the same quality of news as professional journalists. They often point to the lack of gatekeepers who are able to edit and fact-check their work, as well as the fact that amateurs who are not being paid a salary for their writing are not able to spend the time necessary for doing the in-depth investigative reporting and analysis that paid journalists are able to.

Others have recognised the power of citizen journalists (including bloggers, Twitterers and podcasters, to name a few) to give voice to news and opinions that are often ignored by the mainstream media. Without relationships with advertisers (and sometimes governments) and operating outside of the economies of scale that might prevent them from covering less mainstream or time-consuming, niche, investigative subject matter, citizen journalists have been able to produce raw feeds that have surpassed the mainstream media’s often pre-digested reporting.

Citizen journalism by the Iranian people in the aftermath of the recent election has kept the world informed of the repressive regime. According to *The Washington Times*, “Well-developed Twitter lists showed a constant stream of situation updates and links to photos and videos, all of which painted a portrait of the developing turmoil. Digital photos and videos proliferated and were picked up and reported in countless external sources safe from the regime’s Net crackdown.”³

It is clear that there are a host of good and poor quality news sources out there, both from the traditional and citizen media fields. As users and participants of such information, we are quickly recognising the value of consuming diverse

1 *TIME* (2008) *TIME*’s Person of the Year 1927-2008. www.time.com/time/coverspoy
2 Wiktionary definition of “amateur”: en.wiktionary.org/wiki/amateur

3 *Washington Times* Editorial (2009) Iran’s Twitter Revolution, *The Washington Times*, 16 June. www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jun/16/irans-twitter-revolution

viewpoints in order to make up our own minds – especially in a society where we are often called to present our own opinion on blogs, Twitter lists, forums and other networked channels.

Open and remixable versus closed and proprietary

As people started producing and connecting with one another online, a number of projects were formed out of loose affiliations between those with similar interests and passions.

Arguably the most productive of these affiliations are driven by people who share the intellectual property of their contributions with one another. In coding this phenomenon has been called “open source” – with the term “open content” a more recent extension to describe any kind of creative work, or content, published in a format that explicitly allows copying and modifying of its information by anyone.⁴ The largest open content project is Wikipedia, where anyone reading the resource has the ability and permission to also edit (or remix) it.

Lawrence Lessig is the founder of Creative Commons, an organisation that was started to develop a set of copyright licences available to creators to choose the freedoms under which they can release their work. Lessig believes that systems like Creative Commons are necessary because copyright law criminalises the kind of remixes that amateur producers are creating today.

Today there are more than 150 million objects marked with Creative Commons licences. From the 35,000-plus songs on Jamendo, a music-sharing platform that enables artists to share their music using Creative Commons licences, to Flickr’s 60,000-plus images that are available for others to remix and share, to Connexions, an open learning platform that enables educators and learners to build courses out of modular learning elements, people around the world are building an alternative to proprietary culture that enables them to co-create that culture, rather than being told to “look but not touch”.

Creative Commons has not evaded criticism. Some have criticised it for aligning itself with the privatisation of culture by using the framework of copyright law to develop a complicated system of semi-private cultural “goods” that are often incompatible with one another.⁵ According to David Berry and Giles Moss, “We need political awareness and struggle, not lawyers exercising their legal vernacular and skills on complicated licences, court cases and precedents.”⁶

Others have argued that, unlike the free software and open source movements, there is no standard of freedom for Creative Commons licences, and that the Attribution-Share Alike licence is the only true “copyleft” licence.⁷ In an effort to define a standard of freedom, Benjamin Mako Hill

developed a “Definition of Free Cultural Works”⁸ that applies to only two of Creative Commons’ six licence combinations: Attribution and Attribution-Share Alike.

The future?

It is no longer controversial to say that the future of cultural production will be open. The fact that open models that rely on the unpaid contributions of users are surpassing proprietary models in terms of usage and even quality, means that industries that rely on proprietary business models are feeling increasingly threatened. As Wikipedia surpasses Encyclopaedia Britannica and Linux outperforms Microsoft on servers around the world, these industries are struggling to adapt.

The two strategies that have been employed by proprietary industries in the face of this threat have been to lobby for greater enforcement in what has been called the “copyright wars”,⁹ and to adopt open source principles for parts of their business. In early 2009 Encyclopaedia Britannica invited members of the public to write articles for its online edition,¹⁰ and Microsoft has been experimenting with open source since 2004.¹¹ Although members of the proprietary music, film, software and publishing industries continue to fight distributed ownership of intellectual property, it is becoming clear that we are moving closer to open rather than closed models.

Charles Leadbeater, in a 2005 Technology Education and Design (TED) conference talk, explains: “The reason why – despite all the efforts to cut it down, to constrain it, to hold it back – why these open models will still start emerging with tremendous force, is that they multiply our productive resources. And one of the reasons they do that is that they turn users into producers; consumers into designers.”¹²

Open models will prevail because they are a more efficient way of producing and creating cultural and scientific works. But they are not only more efficient. They also respond to a deep need in us to connect with one another – not for economic gain, but to meet very human needs such as the need for recognition, respect and the joy of co-creation.

If the future of cultural production is open (in its many forms), then the new debates will certainly be around the levels of openness adopted by different producers and communities of producers, and their effect on productivity, democracy and scientific and cultural advancement. ■

4 Wikipedia definition of “open content”: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_content

5 Creative Commons-licensed “goods” are licensed under different terms and so often cannot be shared and “remixed” with one another. They are still private in some sense because they use copyright law to enable copyright holders to retain rights.

6 Berry, D. and Moss, G. (2005) On the “Creative Commons”: a critique of the commons without commonality, *Free Software Magazine*, Issue 5, 15 July. fsmsh.com/115

7 Myers, R. (2008) Noncommercial Sharealike Is Not Copyleft, 24 February. robmyers.org/weblog/2008/02/noncommercial-sharealike-is-not-copyleft.html

8 Mako Hill, B. (2005) *Towards a Standard of Freedom: Creative Commons and the Free Software Movement*. mako.cc/writing/toward_a_standard_of_freedom.html

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GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH (GISWatch) 2009 is the third in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society *from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.*

GISWatch has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of the field of information and communications technology (ICT) policy at the local and global levels
- **Encouraging** critical debate
- **Strengthening** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

Each year the report focuses on a particular theme. **GISWatch 2009** focuses on *access to online information and knowledge – advancing human rights and democracy.* It includes several thematic reports dealing with key issues in the field, as well as an institutional overview and a reflection on indicators that track access to information and knowledge. There is also an innovative section on visual mapping of global rights and political crises.

In addition, 48 country reports analyse the status of access to online information and knowledge in countries as diverse as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico, Switzerland and Kazakhstan, while six regional overviews offer a bird's eye perspective on regional trends.

GISWatch is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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2009 Report

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