

THE WORLD-WIDE CONVERSATION

Online participatory media and international news

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Prologue

This paper marks the beginning of a personal quest. After working for CNN in Asia for over a decade, I stopped to take stock. I asked myself: Did my job as a TV news correspondent remain consistent with the reasons I went into journalism in the first place? My answer was “no”.

When I decided to pursue a journalism career at the age of 21, naturally I did not want to work for free. But my primary reasons for wanting to become a foreign correspondent were idealistic and public-service oriented. I believed that a democratic nation such as the United States could only have responsible foreign policies that truly served the people's interests – and intentions – if the public received quality, objective international news. I wanted to make a difference.

To say that I have made no difference covering China, Japan, Korea, and other parts of Asia to viewers in the United States and around the world would be overly cynical. But by early 2004 I concluded that my ability to make a difference on issues that I felt were important was diminishing. In November 2003 I interviewed Japanese Prime

Minister Junichiro Koizumi, focusing primarily on his decision to send Japanese non-combat forces to Iraq despite widespread public opposition. Despite being a close ally of U.S. President Bush, Koizumi said Bush should be doing more to cooperate with the international community.¹ While this interview was broadcast repeatedly on CNN International, not a single sound-bite ran on CNN USA, the version of CNN available to most Americans. Producers in Atlanta said there hadn't been time to tell American viewers what Washington's closest Asian ally thought of the Bush administration's foreign policy. On the day Koizumi spoke with me, it was a busy news morning in the U.S. Show producers found other news to be of higher priority: an interview with Private Jessica Lynch, an interview with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, a court ruling on gay marriage and updates on the Michael Jackson trial. I understood the CNNUSA producers' perspective: they are not paid to serve the public policy interest. They are paid to boost the ratings of their shows, and thus make choices every day in favor of news stories they feel will keep viewers from changing the channel to competitors such as Fox News.

Around the time I started my Shorenstein Center fellowship in early 2004, I had a conversation with my bosses about my job as Tokyo Bureau Chief, which I was expected to return to when my semester ended in June. I was told that the priority of all internationally-based correspondents should be to find ways to get more stories aired on CNNUSA's prime time shows. We needed to "serve their needs" better in order to continue to justify our existence financially. I was told that the main "problem" with my recent reporting was that my depth of knowledge about Northeast Asia was "getting in the way" of doing the kind of stories that CNNUSA is likely to run. It was after this

conversation that I began to wonder whether I should return to the job that was so generously being held for me. I had no direct beef with my employers – they’ve always been good to me and supportive of my career. It was a great job in many ways, with decent pay and an enviable lifestyle. But I did not feel that the job remained consistent with my reasons for becoming a journalist in the first place. Nor were my concerns limited to CNN exclusively; in fact, most TV journalists I knew at other U.S. networks harbored similar sentiments. Having no debt or dependents of any kind, I was in a better position than most people to take risks. In March, I took a deep breath and resigned. I have gone from being a well-compensated foreign correspondent to being an independent writer, researcher, and blogger.

Introduction

This is not a paper about what is wrong with American journalism.² Nor is it an analysis of the shortcomings of the American media’s international news reporting. The American public’s growing distrust of news media is well-documented.³ Much has also been written about the way in which the pressure to derive profits from shrinking audiences has caused most media outlets to “dumb down” their news content.⁴ According to the latest survey of American journalists by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press: “Roughly half of journalists at national media outlets (51%), and about as many from local media (46%), believe that journalism is going in the wrong direction, as significant majorities of journalists have come to believe that increased bottom line pressure is “seriously hurting” the quality of news coverage.”⁵ As the work of numerous scholars and professional journalists has shown, American newspapers,

magazines and TV news outlets have a limited “news hole” for international news – a news hole that has continued to shrink in recent years, if one discounts for war coverage.⁶

This paper is an exploration of how – and to what extent – the Internet and new interactive forms of online media might provide solutions to these serious problems: lack of international news in the mainstream media, lack of incentives for commercially-driven media outlets to provide international news, the apparent lack of public interest in international news, and lack of public trust in what news does wind up being provided.

The World Wide Web provides a place for people who want more information about world events to find it – and a cheaper way for news organizations, interest groups, or amateur enthusiasts to deliver it. But the Web does more than simply provide a new, more cost-effective and convenient vehicle for news and information from all kinds of sources, from all over the world. New forms of participatory media, using interactive techniques and weblog software tools, are changing the relationship between the broadcaster/publisher and the reader/viewer from that of “lecturer” speaking to a passive “audience” into a two-way conversation.⁷

People who are not trained news professionals can become more directly engaged with news events than ever before. More radically, the relatively low cost of new media-creation technologies means that acts of media-creation and news reporting have ceased to be the exclusive domain of journalists or media professionals. Any literate citizen in any corner of the globe who has a computer or mobile computing device with an internet connection can create his or her own interactive news media. This new kind of media has become known as “online participatory media.” It includes weblogs as well as internet chat-rooms, wireless communications systems and mobile phones. (In Japan, millions of

people receive news content via mobile phones, and in some Asian countries young people use mobile phones as their primary vehicle for going online.)⁸

The journalism created by this new kind of media – when it is creating journalism – as opposed to opinion or entertainment or fiction – has become known as “participatory journalism.”⁹ What is the purpose of journalism as opposed to other forms of communication? As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel argue in their recent book, *The Elements of Journalism*, “the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing.”¹⁰ This is most consistent with the reasons why I and many of my colleagues became journalists in the first place. It is also most consistent with public expectations.¹¹

The need to bring journalism back on track with its *raison d’etre* comes at a point in time when media is being transformed by new technologies – a transformation that will lead to the inevitable loss of control by professionals over news reporting and dissemination of information about events around the world. Coming at a time of public distrust about professional journalism’s motives, professional loss of control over the practice of journalism is not likely to be mourned by the general public. Still, it is by no means guaranteed that this loss of control will lead to more accurate information being provided to the public on matters of national interest, or to a more open and enlightened society. We must actively work to ensure that the new forms of media emerging from this transformation will bring us closer to – not further away from – journalism’s fundamental purpose. In the realm of international issues, responsible journalism must contribute to citizens’ ability to understand, consider and debate whether their representative government’s foreign policies are truly in their interest.

How do we do this? There are no clear solutions, but trends are emerging which can inform our future actions. Over four months of reading, research, and running my own weblog focused on one thorny international news topic – North Korea – I have sought to gain a better understanding of how online participatory media works, the relationship between non-professional and professional forms of journalism, and how this relationship plays out in the realm of international news. This process has led to several conclusions:

- 1) The media paradigm is in the process of shifting, creating a new model in terms of the way in which information flows. Interactive participatory media transforms a one-way conversation between media and “audience” into a conversation with an “information community”. While information flows through traditional media in a linear fashion, information flows through online participatory media in a multi-directional, self-replicating viral fashion.
- 2) Online participatory media enables professionals and non-professionals alike not only to keep commercial or government-sponsored media honest in recounting far-away events and issues, but also to fill “coverage gaps” on events that would not be discussed or covered otherwise.
- 3) Online participatory media enables more people in different countries to communicate with each other more easily and directly than ever before – without depending on governments or the professional media to enable and mediate this conversation. However this cross-border

conversation will be challenged to cross significant cultural and digital divides.

- 4) Interactive participatory media makes possible a wider range of non-commercially motivated journalistic activity than is possible under the traditional media model. Given that international news is generally considered less profitable both to collect and to disseminate than other forms of information, this creates more opportunities as well as new challenges for citizens to inform themselves and each other about international events.

THE PARADIGM SHIFT

The weblog is at the forefront of a media paradigm-shift toward a new interactive, participatory model. Thus this paper focuses primarily on the weblog form, although it is not the only form of participatory media currently in existence, and many new forms – yet to be named – are likely to be created in the future. There are many definitions of the weblog but the best I have found so far is from Wikipedia, the online, user-written and user-supported global encyclopedia:¹²

A weblog (often web log, also known as a blog, see below) is a [website](#) which contains periodic, reverse chronologically ordered [posts](#) on a common [webpage](#). Individual posts (which taken together are the weblog) either share a particular theme, or a single or small group of authors.

The totality of weblogs and blog-related webs is usually called the [blogosphere](#) [1]. The format of weblogs varies, from simple bullet lists of hyperlinks, to article summaries with user-provided comments and ratings. Individual weblog entries are almost always date and time-stamped, with the newest post at the top of the page. Because links are so important to weblogs, most blogs have a way of archiving older entries and generating a static address for individual entries; this static link is referred to as a permalink. The latest headlines, with hyperlinks

and summaries, are offered in weblogs in the [RSS](#) XML-format, to be read with a RSS feedreader.¹³

According to a recent Pew Research Study on the Internet and American Life, two percent of internet-users surveyed said they had created and contributed to their own weblogs, also known as “blogs.”¹⁴ While the most popular weblogs (ranked by such factors as number of visits per day, number of other blogs and websites linking to them, etc.) tend to focus on technology, politics, current affairs, and socio-cultural issues, the vast majority of blogs are highly personal and are produced for the benefit of a very small circle of the author’s friends, relatives and acquaintances.¹⁵ A study by the Perseus software and services company estimates that 4.12 million weblogs have been created worldwide on eight major blog-hosting services, although only about half of those are active (the others being “abandoned” or left “dormant” on the web after the creator stops adding new content). Over 90 percent of the people who have created weblogs were found to be under 30. Perseus predicts that the phenomenon is growing fast, and that the number of weblogs will increase to 10 million by the end of 2004.¹⁶ While the majority of these weblogs will remain personal and will not gain widespread attention, a significant minority known as “power blogs” will continue rising to the surface, generating web-traffic exponentially and virally as more and more blogs comment upon and link to them.¹⁷

In the United States, weblogs have begun to have an impact on the news cycle, occasionally “breaking” news, but more often calling attention to events and issues overlooked or under-emphasized by the mainstream media. In late 2002, several bloggers, including the anonymous blogger called “Atrios”, Joshua Micah Marshall of Talkingpointsmemo.com and Glenn Reynolds of Instapundit.com called attention to

segregationist remarks made by then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, remarks which had largely been ignored by the mainstream media. The ensuing buzz-storm they created helped lead to Lott's resignation.¹⁸ While Lott's controversial remarks were originally reported by mainstream media, they were not treated as significant at the time they were made. It was the weblogs that picked up on what had been a fleeting media mention of Lott's controversial comments. The weblogs continued to insist that these comments required public attention, igniting a public debate which eventually fed back into the mainstream media. Media professionals and political analysts agreed that this debate was unlikely to have been ignited if it had not been for the weblogs, because the professional media had moved on to other stories – and because of the way in which the media works in “news cycles,” it is not in the habit of revisiting “old” stories if those stories failed to generate controversy when initially reported.¹⁹

People who follow weblogs are still an elite minority of early-adopters. One of the most popular U.S.-based weblogs is Instapundit.com, which averages 117,624 visits per day – “visits” meaning the number of times a weblog is accessed by different computers. Andrew Sullivan's “Daily Dish” averages 47,033 visits per day.²⁰ This is a small fraction of the readership of major national dailies: *USA Today* has a daily circulation of 2.2 million, the *Wall Street Journal's* is about 1.8 million. It does compare more favorably to smaller-market newspapers, however: the daily circulation of the medium-market *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* is 389,580.²¹ Unlike the newspapers, these “power blogs” achieve their numbers largely without marketing and advertising.

In a recent survey of 17,159 weblog readers, the online advertising company Blogads collected some interesting data about the people (at least the Americans) who

take blogs seriously: “86% say that blogs are either useful or extremely useful as sources of news or opinion. 80% say they read blogs for news they can't find elsewhere. 78% read because the perspective is better. 66% value the faster news. 61% say that blogs are more honest. Divided on so much else, blog readers appear united in their dissatisfaction with conventional media and their rabid love of blogs.”²²

Other than the fact that weblogs are online, often run by non-professionals, and require technical language to explain, what makes this new medium so different from anything that has gone before?

In an upcoming book titled *We the Media*, Dan Gillmor of the *San Jose Mercury News* – one of the first professional journalists to start a weblog – points out that new interactive forms of media have blurred the distinction between producers of news and their audience.²³ In fact, some view the term “audience” to be obsolete in the new world of interactive participatory media. In the similarly-titled “We Media,” a treatise on participatory journalism, Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis suggest that the “audience” should be re-named “participants.”²⁴ After several months of blogging, I prefer to think of them neither as an “audience” nor “participants,” but as an “information community.”

There are several reasons why I choose to replace the term “audience” with “information community.” One is that the term “community” implies a web of multi-directional relationships and exchanges. An important difference between traditional media and interactive participatory media is the way in which information flows. Within traditional media, information flow is linear and uni-directional (see Fig.1): the information goes from original sources, to journalists, to editors, to publication/broadcast, and then to the audience. (News reporters, in striving to be objective, are expected to try

as hard as possible to keep their opinions and biases out of their reporting; opinion is brought into the mix separately by editors and commentators, under separate headings, sections and segments.)

On the other hand, interactive, participatory journalism creates a non-linear and multi-directional information flow (see Fig. 2). Information and opinion – generally mixed together, with openly-declared biases – goes from the original blogger/journalist/web-publisher (or group of such people) to an interactive media site. The information is then consumed by members of the information community, many of whom react to the original “post” and add their own contributions in the form of comments at the bottom of that “post.”

The “comments” feature is a common aspect of most weblogs, enabling any community member to post reactions or supplementary information with minimum effort or technical ability: all a person needs to do is type text into a comment box provided, and click on a “send” button. Popular weblogs tend to receive a lot of comments. Comments appended to any given post on the popular “Daily Kos” weblog, which provides left-of-center political commentary and links to stories of interest to its community, can number from a few dozen to several hundred.²⁵

The use of hyperlinks directs information community members away from the original media site to websites that contain either the original information and/or opinions serving as the “source” for the author’s post, or sites that provide useful additional background information on some of the subjects, places, and people discussed. Weblogs link frequently to other weblogs, commenting upon each others’ information, analysis

and opinion, and exchanging information and ideas with one another by cross-linking in this way.

Thus information flows through the weblog, a form of participatory media, in multiple directions. But that is not the only major difference between traditional media and participatory media: traditional media forms an “information silo,” while participatory media forms an “open web.” Traditional media outlets (including non-interactive, non-participatory news websites) seek to keep their audiences largely within their own boundaries by creating an “information silo.” They derive benefit – higher circulation, and advertising dollars – by keeping their audiences inside that silo. They do not link to or cite similar stories they think may be of interest to their readers and viewers (or stories containing information or angles it failed to report) found in other media outlets. They do not benefit from doing so, as one outlet risks losing audience eyeballs to other media outlets by calling attention to those alternative outlets. Media outlets only cite the work of others when this cannot be avoided because the stories in question become part of the news cycle. For example, when President Bush appears in an interview on NBC’s “Meet The Press,” his remarks in that interview will be widely cited by the *New York Times* and many other media outlets because those remarks in themselves have become “news.” However the *New York Times* website will not routinely link to NBC stories on matters the *Times* finds important or of supplemental interest to *Times* readers – or, alternatively, to call attention to stories on NBC that the *Times* wished it had covered in retrospect but did not cover for whatever reason.

For weblogs, on the other hand, citing and crediting the work of others is not only natural, it is vital. Weblogs and other forms of interactive participatory media derive their

value – and increase the volume of their visitor “traffic”– by being part of an open information-sharing community whose members exchange both sources and information with one another. Weblogs such as Instapundit.com and Andrew Sullivan’s “Daily Dish” are valuable to their communities for their rich daily supply of new hyperlinks that direct community members to other websites and weblogs – showing people where they can find new ideas, information and opinions about a wide range of subjects, introduced with commentary on why the authors find the linked sources to be interesting.

Thus the weblog is more than just a source of “alternative” information, analysis, or grassroots opinion that the mainstream media missed or chose to ignore (and some editors might argue for good reason). What is really new about participatory media is its capacity to do the following:

- quickly link, aggregate, and share information from a vast number of sources,
- derive meaning from this jumble of information through commentary ,
- spontaneously generate online discussion communities around any given piece of information,
- enable discussion communities concerned with a particular issue to multiply and mutate in a rapid, self-replicating viral manner across the internet.

The information flowing through such participatory media may originate in any number of places: in the mainstream professional news media, on another weblog, or through a blogger’s original information-gathering – otherwise known in the news world as “reporting.” The information may or may not be accurate or reliable. It may or may not have been fact-checked. It tends to be presented with clear biases. While community feedback and triangulation against other sources of information provide some check

against fabrication, the implications of this internet-driven de-professionalization of news and information remain a serious concern to many who study the relationship between media and democratic government.²⁶

Whatever those implications may be, however, the fact remains: Interactive participatory media represents a major media paradigm shift in the way that information can be distributed and spread. The internet and new web-based tools have caused the transmission pattern of information and ideas to evolve from a linear pattern to a multi-directional, self-replicating viral pattern. But while the paradigm has shifted, there ought to be room within it for everybody. Weblogs feed off traditional media by linking to them and commenting on their reports. Old-fashioned professional journalism is an essential component of the information web that participatory media builds for its information community.

The NKzone experiment

What are the cross-border implications of this new medium? As a journalist covering international news, I have watched with concern over the years as many significant events and issues outside the United States have gone largely uncovered by the mainstream U.S. media because this news was not deemed sufficiently of interest to a large enough number of viewers or readers. The emergence of interactive participatory media potentially provides us – journalists and non-professionals alike – with a new, inexpensive tool to fill that “information gap” for niche audiences. But how effective is this new tool? Can Americans and others in the English-speaking world be convinced to care more about events not covered in the mainstream U.S. media if they are given the

chance to have a dialogue about their information, instead of passively receiving a lecture about it from remote “authorities” and strange people in distant lands to whom they cannot relate? To what extent can weblogs provide reliable, responsible information about faraway events and to what extent do they reinforce rumor, conjecture, or set opinion? If our efforts are successful, how do we sustain them over the long term?

I decided that the best way to discover the journalistic strengths and weaknesses of the weblog format would be to become a blogger myself. Thus “North Korea zone” was born in early February.

North Korea zone at www.NKzone.org is a weblog devoted to one topic and one country only. The Western media has very limited access to North Korea. It is led by one of the most oppressive, suspicious and secretive regimes on earth. No Western media organization has a news bureau in North Korea. While some European journalists whose countries have diplomatic relations with Pyongyang are able to visit the “hermit kingdom” from time to time, American journalists have been shut out of that country since relations between Pyongyang and Washington soured in late 2002.²⁷ Thus many non-journalists have greater access to more first-hand information about North Korea than professional journalists do. *North Korea zone* seeks to tap into the knowledge and expertise of non-American businesspeople, diplomats, aid workers, tourists, scholars, and others who have spent time in that country by inviting them to contribute. The three most common ways in which they can do so are: e-mailing their information to me which I then post on the blog, posting directly to the blog’s main column as guest authors (under the current setup, I must invite them and set up my blog-hosting software to “allow” them to post), or by posting information in the “comments” section – something which

anybody can do from any computer without prior invitation, although I do have the ability to block the computer IP addresses of people who post “spam”, solicitations, or overly offensive material. *North Korea zone* also seeks contributions from South Koreans interested in airing South Korean perspectives on North Korea and sharing information about North Korea that is usually only available in the Korean language.

All of these contributions could potentially, form the raw materials for a reporter’s TV, radio, or print story, if the story is deemed of sufficient interest to the editors and show producers of that reporter’s media organization. However these perspectives would be used in snippets or quotes, filtered through the journalist’s “story angle” and length limitations. *North Korea zone*’s community can have access to these perspectives directly, not only in their raw, original voice but also in the full context of people’s original statements, descriptions, and points-of-view.

Using the Typepad Weblog-hosting service – one of several commercial Weblog tools available that require no previous Web-design, HTML, coding skills or programming knowledge – I was able to set up *North Korea zone* by myself in less than two hours. Typepad’s weblog authoring software tools enable me to quickly and easily post daily updates to *North Korea zone*. I hyperlink to information about North Korea, focusing on English-language articles from non-U.S., specialist, and obscure media sources containing more extensive information and analysis about North Korea than one would get from reading *The New York Times* and watching CNN. I provide my own insight and analysis of North Korea-related news developments based on my experience as a journalist who has worked in Northeast Asia for over a decade. (I covered the North Korea story as part of my beat, and had the rare opportunity to visit that country five

times.) Most importantly, I invite anybody who has traveled to North Korea or who has engaged in the study of that country to contribute their own information and analysis.

While it was easy to set up quickly, and while posting new information onto the weblog is technically very simple, it takes a substantial amount of constant daily work to run a credible weblog on a serious foreign policy issue, and to build that weblog's information community. In order to build and maintain a community, a weblog must be updated on a regular basis. The amount of time spent working on North Korea zone on any given day varied from an hour or so on weekends or days when I was busy with other things or when there was little North Korea-related news, to a full day (8 hours) when there was a lot of North Korea-related news going on (such as when a train exploded killing hundreds of people on April 22nd), or when I was working to learn new technical tricks to improve *North Korea zone*'s design, layout, and supplementary content features.

At my first opportunity during the day (usually but not always first thing in the morning) I would check email for information from community members, check news websites based in South Korea and elsewhere that cover North Korea on a daily basis, and check my newsfeed aggregator to see what other news media and blogs around the world might be mentioning North Korea (see Figure 3 for an example of what a newsfeed aggregator looks like). I also subscribe to a number of specialist email information lists related to North Korea, in addition to a Google News email subscription that sends me all media mentions of North Korea available to Google News. I would then decide what items from this mix were noteworthy and/or new to my community, thus meriting being linked-to or reproduced in a blog post. When I thought the information would benefit from extra comment or clarification from my diplomatic, congressional, or military

contacts I would seek extra information by email or phone when possible. I would supply my own analysis about the way in which different pieces of information and news events likely related to one another. I also used the help of a South Korean graduate student, employed as a work-study assistant, to check on Korean language sources that might add information and insight not otherwise available in English. To this end she provided translations and summaries of relevant Korean-language press stories two or three times a week. When it was possible for me to attend and report on North Korea-related events taking place here in the United States – such as hearings in Congress on the North Korean Freedom Act – I tried to do so. I also conducted original online and in-person interviews with people who have recently been to North Korea or who are considered experts on North Korea.

As I continued to build *North Korea zone*, I found that a story like North Korea benefits from the “information web” model of participatory media. This “information web” is strengthened by sharing and crediting the work of others. Here is an example: If a British journalist from the *The Guardian* gets into North Korea, spends a week there, and writes an in-depth first-hand account, the *Washington Post* and other newspapers will generally not reprint it, cite it, or link to it from their own websites.²⁸ The story does not exist as far as they are concerned, unless it becomes part of such a large, breaking story that it cannot be ignored. However, as part of an “information web,” *North Korea zone* will link to that story and to any others its authors believe might add to people’s understanding or discussion of North Korea. The ability to link to the story (rather than copy the full text directly onto the weblog itself) avoids issues of copyright infringement while also bringing readers to *The Guardian*’s news page – readers who might otherwise

not have visited *The Guardian*'s website that day, if ever at all. Thus, everybody wins: *The Guardian* wins by gaining extra "hits" on its webpage which are useful in attracting advertisers, and *North Korea zone* wins because it has served as a useful resource to its information community.

Information community members visit the weblog in part because it helps them find information they would not otherwise come across if they just read a couple of newspapers and watched TV news – that is, unless they want to spend time searching Google and Yahoo! news for information they want. Members of the information community know that if they visit weblogs whose discernment and judgment they hold in high regard, they will be pointed towards information they are likely to find useful or interesting. (The next section will explain further how and why the members of *North Korea zone*'s community came to hold it in relatively high regard.)

Discussion comments posted by members of the information community on a weblog are another important part of the "information web". Anybody visiting *North Korea zone* could join an online discussion in the "comments" section following each blog post about the information and views on the site. Opinions have ranged from extremely pro-engagement to hard-line pro-regime change. Occasionally there are strong online arguments. I once had to admonish people who traded personal insults in the comments section, and I have had to delete a couple of posts by a Nigerian soliciting funds, but other than that I have not censored a single comment or post.

Why is it useful or important for people to be able to read other people's views on the news – and perhaps debate it themselves? There are two reasons, one is that – judging from the comments traffic on popular weblogs – large numbers of people do want to be

able to hold these discussions and contribute their own information and insights in a more public and direct way than they can do through conventional media. Another reason is that, as college professors know, it is one thing to consume a piece of information and then move on. A person absorbs and processes that information on a much deeper level if he or she can also become engaged in a discussion about it, and even more so if he or she takes the further step of articulating one's thoughts in writing for a public forum.²⁹ As Stanford Law professor Lawrence Lessig, author of *Free Culture* puts it: "As more and more citizens express what they think, and defend it in writing, that will change the way people understand public issues."³⁰

A final reason why community participation and discussion of the news is important has to do with a fundamental article of faith in participatory media: the idea that the collective information community is smarter than the individual weblogger or journalist. As the journalist-turned-blogger Dan Gillmor puts it: "It's a great opportunity, not a threat, because when we ask our readers for their help and knowledge, they are willing to share it — and we can all benefit."³¹ More than half of the information appearing on *North Korea zone* — and definitely the most original content compared to what I can find myself — comes from other members of the site's information community. The vast majority of all information coming directly from the community arrives unsolicited, sent to me as email or posted directly in the "comments" sections following each post. After *North Korea zone* had been up and running for about a month, I began to receive frequent, almost-daily emails from people who had either been to North Korea at some point and wanted to share their experiences, or others who had come across

interesting information about North Korea which they hoped I would share on the site.

This information has included:

- Online North Korea travelogues by non-Americans who have recently visited North Korea on business or as tourists;
- An account by a British diplomat who set up the U.K. embassy in Pyongyang;
- Anonymous accounts from an NGO food aid worker who lived in North Korea;
- Information and accounts from academics and professional groups about their exchange activities with North Korea;
- Information from various human rights organizations and activists about human rights abuses in North Korea and efforts to help North Korean refugees;
- Information from Capitol Hill staffers in Washington about North Korea-related policy debates and proposed legislation.

Such contributions have been key to *North Korea zone*'s value to its community, providing unique information, insights and photographs about North Korea not found anywhere else.

If there is any doubt about the accuracy of any facts or figures in any given post, community members immediately speak up. In a description of recent North Korea Freedom Day activities in Washington D.C., I initially provided an overly high estimate of the number of participants. The estimate was made in good faith based on conversations with the organizers and my own "eyeballing" of the numbers of people

who showed up at different activities, but in retrospect, after receiving information from other participants, I realized that my estimate had been too high. Somebody very quickly posted a comment accusing me of lying. Other members of the community rose to my defense, while others who had been present provided their perspective on the number of people they believed had attended the event. This is one example of how the information community tends to keep a blogger honest and accurate – at least as long as the information posted can be in any way verified or disputed, or if there were counter-witnesses, which of course is not always the case.³²

Community members also use the comments section to add information to a story or discussion thread. In one discussion, reacting to the full transcript I had posted of a talk at Harvard given by Korea expert Don Oberdorfer, two former U.S. servicepeople conducted a detailed debate about the specific capabilities of U.S. troops in the Demilitarized Zone, North Korea's specific attack capabilities, and recent incidents of espionage – all information I did not have and could not obtain easily, and which I would have no basis for judging – that is, until a person who was clearly a U.S. military officer posted an anonymous reprimand to the debaters, warning them not to violate 'OPSEC' [operational security].³³ (That person contacted me directly to claim responsibility for his comment and to verify his identity, but did not want his identity revealed publicly on *North Korea zone*.)

In other instances, community members provided links and information that I was able to call attention to and follow-up on in further posts. It was in this way that I was informed of a website in Seoul run by two Dutch diplomats who had taken to posting emails from their Pyongyang-based German diplomat friends onto a public website. The

page, titled “North Korea Story” provided fascinating personal accounts – often not very complimentary to the regime – of diplomatic life in Pyongyang. Unfortunately the tales from North Korea have since been taken off that website. My queries to the Dutch couple who run the website received no reply, but it is likely that the German diplomats’ e-diary may have angered North Korean officials when they came across it.³⁴ Another story that a community member uncovered in the comments section was the fact that the chairman of a pro-North Korean organization in the United States – quoted with great fanfare by North Korean media – is a homeless person living in Oregon.³⁵

What if people deliberately post false or misleading information in the comments section? While I do not delete any comments unless they are obscene, clearly spam, or soliciting products, I do not call attention to information posted in the comments section that I do not feel “checks out.” If I know it to be wrong, I respond in the same comments section with my own information to prove their inaccuracy. Other members of the community also tend to respond to information they believe is incorrect with their own supporting arguments and facts. However it is important to note that a key assumption of *North Korea zone*, as with most weblogs, is that the information community should not be taking any information from any source at face value. Rather than passively receive information as truth and accept it at face value, they should always harbor strong skepticism, suspecting all sources of information to be flawed if not false until they can be proven trustworthy and true.

Another feature of online participatory media is the potential for complete transparency about the information-gathering process. In fact, transparency about one’s

methods becomes very valuable to the blogger as one seeks to build credibility and trust with the information community.

One example of this was an effort I made to seek entry to North Korea as an independent journalist and blogger. In March I contacted Mr. Alejandro Cao de Benos – a Spanish-born North Korean citizen and Special Delegate to the Government of the DPRK. Mr. Cao de Benos, who is also president of the Korean Friendship Organization, is a gatekeeper of sorts for people who want to get into North Korea. (Why this Barcelona native decided to become a North Korean citizen and representative of the North Korean government is another story.) I asked Mr. Cao de Benos whether I might apply to join an international group of peace activists and journalists that he plans to lead on a trip to North Korea this summer. U.S. journalists have been effectively banned from North Korea since late 2002, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to see if an exception could be made. I introduced myself as a former CNN reporter with experience covering North Korea, now an independent freelance journalist, running a Weblog focusing on North Korea. His response was a clear negative: *North Korea zone* is no better than other U.S. media organizations “that talk and comment so much about our government and system without real knowledge.”

His main complaint: *North Korea zone* includes an interview with the German doctor and North Korean human rights activist Norbert Vollertsen, as well as other information provided by him about activities condemning the North Korean government for its human rights abuses. In the view of Mr. Cao de Benos, “fair journalism” about the DPRK requires omitting the perspective of such human rights activists.

If I had made my query to Mr. Cao de Benos as a journalist from a conventional news organization, my traditional-media audience would never have known about my attempt to get into North Korea. Audiences of conventional news media hear only about our successes – not our failures. As a consequence, audiences generally are not aware of the effort required for journalists to cover certain kinds of stories. Nor are they aware of the myriad obstacles journalists and news organizations face when it comes to gathering basic first-hand facts in many situations. This lack of understanding likely contributes to a the lack of public trust in their media.

With a Weblog, it was easy for me to share my correspondence with Mr. Cao de Benos, including my reply in which I invited him to supply his information and analysis on North Korea, which I would be happy to reproduce, uncut and unedited, on *North Korea zone*.³⁶ Visitors to the site not only reacted to this post with a lively series of comments; one commentor brought our attention to something I was not aware of: a link to a segment of streaming video on a pro-North Korea Web site in which Mr. Cao de Benos proclaims his love for North Korea's leader Kim Jong Il (and at one point even sings about it). This provoked more reactions and discussion.³⁷ More importantly, the whole exchange provided insight into the nature of the North Korean regime and the people who support it, and *North Korea zone*'s community was able to experience and participate in the process of discovery. Due to standard news reporting habits and conventions, limited column space or broadcast time, plus a general lack of audience interactivity, conventional news media generally do not let their audiences in on the newsgathering process or enable their audience to participate in this process of discovery to the same degree.

Building an information community

As of this writing, *North Korea zone* – which is not commercially advertised or promoted – receives an average of 500 visitors per day, with about 150 additional subscribers to an e-mail list which sends out a once-daily digest containing the text of each day’s updates. The number of visits to the *North Korea zone* weblog has fluctuated over time, however, depending on North Korea-related news events. Right after the Ryongchon railway explosion on April 22nd, the number of visitors and page views peaked at over 5,000 and 9,000 respectively on April 23rd, dropping down to around 1,500 the next day (See Figure 4 for a graph of visits and page views over a one-month period).³⁸ As of this writing, *North Korea zone* appears as item number 13 on a Google search of “North Korea.”³⁹ This ranking was achieved in less than four months without any commercial advertising or promotion.

An unknown additional number of people receive *North Korea zone*’s content through “news reader” aggregation programs – software programs which conveniently distil updated content from large numbers of weblogs and news sites onto one Web browser window.⁴⁰ (Figure 3 shows one such news reader aggregation program, called Bloglines, but there are many others.) Increasing numbers of mainstream news media such as the *New York Times* and Reuters also syndicate their content so that it can be read by newsreader programs. This is an interesting experiment with their business model, for while it widens their exposure to more readers and helps generate buzz about their stories by enabling bloggers to find and link to their stories with ease, it is not yet entirely clear

how and whether this will increase advertising revenue or other forms of revenue linked to readership.⁴¹

Who are the members of *North Korea zone*'s information community? Through Sitemeter statistics and a voluntary online survey I was able to get some idea.⁴² (See Appendix 1 for a printout of the full survey.) According to Sitemeter, over 25 percent of visitors to the site came from the U.S. East Coast time zone, with over 50 percent of total visitors coming from American hemisphere time zones. Roughly 20 percent come from East Asia, with less than 15 percent from Western Europe (See Figure 5). Figures 6 and 7 give a sense of visitor origin with data on internet service providers and country share. Sitemeter tracking also shows a high number of visitors who find *North Korea zone* for the first time via internet search engines. Links from other weblogs are also common. Some articles on news sites also appear to have linked to *North Korea zone*.⁴³ (See Figure 8)

A voluntary online survey conducted from April 19-May 8 received 191 responses. Given the way in which the data was collected the survey sampling cannot be considered scientific, but it nonetheless helps provide greater insight into who *North Korea zone*'s community is, why and how they use *North Korea zone*, and how they compare it to more conventional sources of news and information.

It would appear that the majority of *North Korea zone* community members are young, American, and male. Of the 191 respondents nearly 64% claimed to be from the United States, with nearly 63% presently viewing *North Korea zone* from the U.S. (See Appendix) In second place, nearly 10% were viewing the site from South Korea although just over 6% were originally from South Korea. Users participating in the survey were

83.5% male. More than 57% were between the ages of 18 and 39. Most heavily-represented occupations were business, academia, journalism, students, and “other”. About 25% claim that some aspect of their job relates to North Korea, although far fewer have actually been there.

In response to the question: “How did you first find out about NKzone?” 40% selected “link from somebody else’s weblog.” The next-largest group, 17.5%, found the site through an internet search engine. 79% said they access the site directly through their web browser, as opposed to the other two options: email digest and news reader. Nearly 30% claimed to visit the site daily, while nearly 28% visit “a few times a week.” More than 80% said they read the “comments” section and roughly 20% had posted a comment.

More than half said they use *North Korea zone* as a “supplementary source of information on North Korea,” while more than 20% said the site is their “main source of information on North Korea.” Asked to rate the site’s reliability, nearly 63% chose “fairly reliable: I trust most but not all,” while a surprising 22% chose “very reliable: I trust everything I read on the site.” 1.2% (two people) deemed *North Korea zone* to be “totally unreliable”.

The survey also sought feedback on four questions: what people liked most and least about *North Korea zone*, how they thought the site differed from other media, and any other suggestions they might have. There were some interesting and thoughtful remarks. (See Appendix 2 for full list of comments.) Responding to the question, “what do you like most about *North Korea zone*?” One American living in Seoul replied: “the links and contacts I discovered through your site have helped me to get a better view of

'the big picture', something difficult to do as an American living in Seoul. I hope you realize how many of us are in a position that does not easily lend itself to unbiased views, and how appreciative I, for one, am that forums like this are available to help me get an understanding of how others view events in the North."⁴⁴ Another person observed: "I like the policy of allowing people of all viewpoints to have their say. NKZone allows me to access news on NK that otherwise would take a lot of digging. Given the small amount of time I have for reading news, it's likely that I would get very little news on NK if it wasn't for NKZone aggregating it for me."⁴⁵ A number of people agreed that they appreciate the raw format, in which different perspectives are offered unvarnished and largely unprocessed so that people can form their own opinions. One remarked: "If something is unconfirmed then that is said and if something is incorrect then an [*sic*] correction is made. People are free to post varying opinions about events and information is grouped together so a person can read all the rumors and information and form their own opinions."⁴⁶

In response to the question, "What does *North Korea zone* do for you that you're not getting from newspapers, magazines, TV or conventional news websites?" One person responded: "A lot! In fact, most of the media sources are too busy ignoring one of the most repressive regimes in the world."⁴⁷ Another said: "Conventional media has next to nothing about the DPRK beyond mentioning that Kim Jong-Il is a madman or that they're starving but have a very big army. I want to know what makes them tick and I pick some of that up via NK Zone."⁴⁸ Yet another respondent hit upon the value of media listening to and conversing with its information community, as opposed to just talking at the audience: "You can see non-experts' views here. Of course, it's experts and politicians

who make all the policies regarding North Korea. However, they have to persuade those non experts first before they do anything about North Korea. In that sense, we have to pay more attention to non experts' views.”⁴⁹

When asked what they liked least about *North Korea zone*, some complained about its graphic layout. Many complained that the weblog format makes it difficult to search for material in the archives. One expressed the need for a more open discussion forum or chat room. Some complained about the “chatty” and “rambling” style and asked for more concision. Others objected to the rawness of the material posted. One said: “Sometimes what seems to be posted are nothing more than rumors. The information isn't always accurate or true. It seems to me that the information would be more helpful if it could more accurate.”⁵⁰ Another complains about what is, indeed, the site’s greatest shortcoming: “The fact that McKinnon [*sic*] is not in North Korea doing her own reporting.”⁵¹

Is *North Korea zone* a form of journalism? While not all weblogs are, I believe this one is – although it is largely derivative because I could not report directly from North Korea. It is also a very raw, unvarnished and uncontrolled journalism that still makes many professional journalists uncomfortable, and gives their editors goose bumps. The site is not fact-checked or sub-edited; although as a trained journalist I have made a point to credit my sources and fully disclose what I know of their biases and backgrounds. In fact, I tend to give a lot more background on people being quoted in the mainstream media than the mainstream media tended to do. I don’t make things up – my community must trust me on that, despite the fact that I do not have the credibility and weight of a major-brand news organization behind my work. Based on the voluntary

survey, it would appear that a significant number of community members do trust *North Korea zone*, despite the fact that as a weblog author I do not try to control the tone and content of information on the site or filter the information through my own personal standards of “objectivity” and “balance,” as a traditional news organization would do.

Several professional journalists whose “beats” deal with North Korea tell me they now regularly visit *North Korea zone* for story ideas, leads and tips. I have also heard from some diplomats, congressional staffers, and military officers who say they visit it regularly as well. As of this writing *North Korea zone* is less than four months old and has no staff: it is essentially a one-person operation run with some occasional translation help from a South Korean graduate student, and another journalist who contributes every once in a while from Japan. To even dream of making an impact through traditional media with such paltry resources and personnel – and zero marketing budget – would be unthinkable. The viral information flow of online participatory media, however, has quickly inserted *North Korea zone* into the news cycle. An interview I conducted in late April with North Korea expert Selig Harrison, who had recently returned from a trip to North Korea, was quoted by a recent *Asian Wall Street Journal* editorial.⁵² *North Korea zone* has also recently been cited by the *Economist Intelligence Unit* and the London *Sunday Times*.⁵³

Where does *North Korea zone* go from here? I was able to devote the time to create and build it thanks to my Shorenstein Center fellowship. In order to keep it going, some alternative source of funding will have to be found. (To date, aside from about \$500 in miscellaneous software, equipment, and subscription fees, the main “cost” of maintaining *North Korea zone* is the value of my working time, which goes

uncompensated after my fellowship ends.) Turning *North Korea zone* into a paid members-only news site is not the answer, as its value and influence derives from being part of an open information web. Some weblogs are now making money through advertising and community donations, but a specialized foreign policy-oriented subject like North Korea is unlikely to succeed in taking that route.⁵⁴ Thus the answer is more likely to point in other directions: The first and least ambitious would be to keep it going as a personal hobby and vehicle to enhance my own reputation and influence as an expert on North Korea, while holding down another job that would be in some way complementary. For many bloggers the reputation-building aspect of blogging is a strong incentive, provided they have other sources of employment which are either related to or complementary to their weblogging activities. Another alternative would be to construct a kind of non-profit, public-journalism model, seeking grant money from foundations and donations from individuals who view *North Korea zone* as a useful contribution to public debates on an important issue that is not well covered by mainstream U.S. media.

Returning to work for my former employer and asking them to support my work on *North Korea zone* is not an option: as of this writing CNN has a policy of not allowing individual reporters to blog. Senior executives have stated publicly that blogging detracts from reporters' ability to perform the jobs they are paid to do. Privately they have expressed concern about loss of control over content and image if journalists' weblogs are not integrated into the company's structure of editorial oversight.⁵⁵

Still, it is likely that other media companies will increasingly see the value in moving toward a more interactive and participatory model. There are several reasons for this: First, while they would no longer have complete control over content they would

gain community interest and loyalty due to the opportunity for two-way interaction.

Second, as my experience with *North Korea zone* has shown, holding a two-way conversation with one's community – while making one's information-gathering process more transparent by including that process in the conversation – is conducive to building the trust of one's community, which in turn is conducive to increasing the size and loyalty of that community.

Even so, the professionals have generally been more cautious about the merits of this model, which involves loss of control over content as well as a willingness to give credit to the work of others who have generally been viewed as competitors. Questions of credibility, factual accuracy and trustworthiness faced by the traditional media also dog new forms of online participatory media. However this may encourage public skepticism about all journalism – and encourage people to seek information from more than one source, which I would argue is in the public interest anyway.

Some media outlets are experimenting with new weblog-like formats on the edges of their primary product: newspapers such as *The Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, TV outlets such as the BBC and MSNBC, and many smaller local newspapers and TV stations. Others, such as the ABC.com's "The Note," are allowing reporters to contribute to web pages set up in a chronological posting format similar to blogs.⁵⁶ However, according to my definition of participatory media, media which allow their reporters to "blog" – but without linking to outside sources nor conversing interactively with their audiences – cannot be considered to be using a participatory media format because their information flow remains linear and retains the same "information silo" structure as before.

Is *North Korea zone* competing with conventional mainstream media? I do not believe it is. Rather, it act as a supplement, serving a niche, specialty demand. The work of professional journalists will always be needed to confirm and verify the facts of events. *North Korea zone*'s coverage of the April 22nd railway explosion in Ryongchon would not have been possible without a steady stream of professional media reports from South Korea and the Chinese border regions with the latest information as it trickled over from North Korea. But many of these stories contradicted each other or left questions unasked or unanswered, which *North Korea zone* pointed out and discussed. But rather than compete with them, if anything *North Korea zone*'s existence benefits traditional media organizations by calling attention to good reporting on North Korea.

The larger international “Blogosphere”

North Korea zone is one very tiny organism in the evolving international blogosphere which has the potential to change the way in which information about events in other countries is transmitted and discussed across borders. This international blogosphere is now concentrated among a relatively small group of young, internet-savvy, early adopters. But given the rapid, viral way in which weblogs transmit information, the influence of online participatory media is likely to spread quickly as weblogging software tools become more sophisticated and user friendly, as broadband becomes more commonplace (making it easier for people to stay online for longer periods of time and to access or post information and pictures onto interactive websites more quickly and easily), and as more people among news-consuming publics turn increasingly to the internet as a source of news and information.

The 2003 Iraq War saw many journalistic firsts. Among those firsts: this was the first war to be blogged. Journalist Kevin Sites, then working for CNN, blogged from Northern Iraq with extra stories, pictures and information beyond what could fit into his TV reporting.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, an Iraqi who calls himself “Salam Pax” had quietly started a weblog called “Where is Raed?” in 2002, posting regular accounts of his own life and increasingly, how the war buildup looked from the perspective of a young Iraqi architect. A typical blog post during the war itself is this one, written soon after the bombing began over Baghdad:

“today my father and brother went out to see what happening in the city, they say that it does look that the hits were very precise but when the missiles and bombs explode they wreck havoc in the neighborhood where they fall. Houses near al-salam palace(where the minister Sahaf took journalist) have had all their windows broke, doors blown in and in one case a roof has caved in. I guess that is what is called “collateral damage” and that makes it OK?
We worry about daytime bombing and the next round of attacks tonight with the added extra of the smoke screen in our skies.⁵⁸

Such an account – with no pretense of objectivity or balance – nonetheless provided people around the world with a window into the thoughts of an Iraqi in Baghdad at the time, without going through the filter of a news correspondent who would choose brief quotes and soundbites after interviewing a number of Iraqis, if he or she could do so at all. In this case, no Western journalist could have successfully interviewed Salam Pax at that time, due to the fact that 1) very few Western journalists remained in Baghdad at that time, and 2) Salam Pax would have gotten into a great amount of trouble had he been caught giving interviews to Western journalists at that time.

The end of 2003 and the beginning of 2004 has seen a proliferation of weblogs from Iraq – Iraqis, foreigners working in Iraq, U.S. servicepeople stationed in Iraq, and journalists working there. The revelations of torture at the Abu Ghraib prison sparked a range of perspectives from Iraqi bloggers, providing powerful personal perspectives and a

valuable window on how events in Iraq look to ordinary people on the ground. Examples include a blog called “Baghdad Burning” run by an Iraqi who calls herself “Riverbend.” after the torture photos from Abu Ghraib were publicized, she reminded her readers of an account she had given on her blog in March of a young woman who had told her harrowing tales of abuses she had witnessed in Abu Ghraib.⁵⁹

An Iraqi dentist with a blog called “Healing Iraq” recounts an experience he had while visiting friends imprisoned at Abu Ghraib under Saddam Hussein. Then reflecting on the latest revelations under U.S. occupation, he writes:

While Saddam Hussein sits safely in his comfortable cell in Qatar or wherever else he is being held, Iraqi detainees are being put into the most humiliating and degrading conditions that can be imagined. While the guilty are free to wreak havoc, and take refuge in holy cities, the innocent are detained and mistreated for months without charges. But it seems like that is life.

They may be just a few soldiers, it may be an isolated case, but what's the difference? The effect has been done, and the Hearts and Minds campaign is a joke that isn't funny any more.⁶⁰

That blog post received 256 comments. Such a high number of comments tends to be found only on very high-traffic weblogs.

Another Iraqi blogger, at “The Mesopotamian” takes a different point of view:

“All this has not shaken my support for the liberation one little bit, nor my absolute conviction of the justice and nobility of the "Project". If some of you have seen fit to appologize to us about the behaviour of some of your "scum"; we must also appologize to you for the behaviour of so many of our "scum".⁶¹

It was followed by 108 comments.

Members of the U.S. military also have weblogs from Iraq, giving their side of the story. “Boots on the Ground” is one of many such blogs.⁶²

These voices on the Internet show a cacophony of opinions and personalities among today’s Iraqis. What impact will all this largely voluntary, uncompensated citizen-

journalism have on the work of professionals? The work of professional journalists will remain valuable in verifying and recounting the facts of events in an accurate and timely manner: what building exploded, at what time and where, how many people were killed and who was likely to have been responsible, what official said precisely what to whom, etc. But when it comes to learning what people in Iraq think about these events – at least the literate, internet savvy ones, their relatives, friends and neighbors – some people may conclude that they no longer need to rely on professional journalists. Sitting in your living room in Cambridge, Massachusetts, you can go on line and not only get firsthand perspectives and viewpoints from Iraqis themselves; you can also have a conversation with them online, through the comments section of their weblogs or send email to the addresses posted on their weblogs. (Many weblog authors post responses to interesting emails received directly to their sites.)⁶³

As the number and influence of weblogs grows, the news-consuming public may increasingly find less value in professional journalists' analysis and reports about how locals in other countries are reacting to various news events in those countries, especially if the journalists doing the analysis and reporting have no language skills, expertise or "inside track" about what is going on in that country. Another implication is that journalists who make mistakes in their reporting about a country will quickly be "outed" by people in that country who have weblogs.

Still, motives and identities of weblog authors can be very murky. As a U.S. military officer pointed out to me in a conversation about Iraq blogs, weblogs are a fertile opportunity for "PSYOPS" (psychological operations).⁶⁴ On the corporate side, public relations companies also see fertile opportunities in the blogosphere to spread buzz and

interest in products.⁶⁵ Not all bloggers are who they claim to be, and their communities do not always mind: The most famous weblog run by a fictitious person – the author’s real identity remains a mystery – is the popular U.K.-based “Belle de Jour: Diary of a London Call Girl.”⁶⁶

Despite these concerns, people frustrated with the way in which their country is being covered by the Western media – or that it isn’t being covered much at all – have found weblogs to be the most effective vehicle for taking matters into their own hands. A leader in this effort has been the Toronto-based Iranian blogger Hossein Derakhshan, who since starting his own weblog in December 2000 has helped many other Iranians set up weblogs in Persian and in English. He estimates that roughly 200,000 Iranian weblogs had been created by early 2004, and has written a set of guidelines for any group of people wanting to create a blogosphere – an information community surrounding a constellation of weblogs. He writes: “Weblogs have had social, political, and journalistic functions in Iran, a country run by an authoritarian, Islamic regime. Studying the process of forming such online community can help many in developing countries to shape their own version of blogosphere.”⁶⁷ He suggests that a technologically savvy opinion-leader in a country or community can take the lead by starting a lively, well-written weblog, then encourage other intellectuals to do the same, providing them with technical advice and guidelines, and forming alliances with software engineers and web designers who can help to develop weblog software tools in the local language.

A big reason for the rapid growth of Persian-language weblogs has been that they are a lively alternative to Iran’s state-controlled media. But blogging in Persian in Iran is not without its risks, and at least one Iranian blogger has been arrested for his activities.⁶⁸

Iran is not the only government concerned about weblogs. In March the online blog-magazine Livinginchina.com reported the shutdown of three Chinese-language blog-hosting sites and all the blogs hosted therein.⁶⁹ According to China-based bloggers, those sites were later allowed to return to operation after blogs containing politically controversial and sexually provocative material had been cleaned up. But as of this writing, Chinese Internet Service Providers (ISP's) continue to block weblogs hosted by the two U.S.-based blog-hosting services Typepad.com and Bloghost.com.⁷⁰ Still, the efforts of Big Brother have failed to stop China's blog-proliferation. Livinginchina.com editor Philip Sen estimates that there are now 300,000 weblogs in China. He cites members of the Chinese blogging community who believe that this new medium – despite government efforts to control it – is fast becoming a powerful new alternative to the state-controlled press.⁷¹

But are the Chinese and Iranian blogs helping Americans to understand those countries better? The jury is still out on that. Ethan Zuckerman, a Fellow at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society (and who also has a weblog project called "Blog Africa" aimed at calling attention to African issues that go largely uncovered by the mainstream Western media)⁷² has been using computer keyword-tracking programs to compare the levels of attention paid to news in different countries by both traditional news media as well as weblogs. On a day-to-day basis, his initial research shows that the attention paid by weblogs to different countries around the world not only closely mirrors the level of attention paid by mainstream media outlets to those countries; weblog attention actually amplifies the "hottest" stories around the world on any given day while paying even less attention than the mainstream media to stories

treated as more “minor” and less “breaking.” He found that Iraq, for instance, tends to be discussed proportionally even more in the blogosphere than in the commercial media, while most African countries are discussed even less.⁷³

North Korea zone's visitor statistics reinforce Zuckerman's findings: traffic to this kind of country-specific weblog does indeed seem to be closely linked to the amount of mainstream media coverage that country is receiving. As mentioned earlier, visitor numbers skyrocketed immediately after the April 22nd Ryongchon train explosion. Most members of the news-consuming public first heard the news from mainstream media sources, but many people who surfed the web for more information ended up at *North Korea zone*. A number of the more popular general-interest weblogs also linked to the site during that time, driving up visitor numbers.⁷⁴ Once there, visitors found a source of more in-depth information and a place for discussion about events in North Korea not found elsewhere. One cannot expect the general American public to closely follow large numbers of websites devoted to various foreign countries all the time. But when a crisis or breaking news hits in a particular place, the weblogs are there to provide more in-depth information, texture, firsthand perspectives, and aggregation of more information from a diverse range of sources than any one mainstream media outlet can provide.

World-wide Conversation?

Another aspect of interactive participatory media is that it enables citizens in different countries to converse directly with one another – without ever having met each other, and without the mediating help of governments or commercial media. One example of this conversation takes place on a weblog called “The Religious Policeman”

run by a Saudi man who goes by the name of Alhamedi Alanezi. Alanezi writes with great eloquence and humor about his government, whose policies he views as draconian and not in keeping with his views of how Islam should be practiced in the 21st century.⁷⁵ The well-trafficked comments sections at the bottom of each of his posts contain many questions and comments from Americans and other Westerners about Saudi and Arab life. The author engages in a conversation with them. Many comments posted by Westerners reflect a feeling that “The Religious Policeman” has shown them the human complexities of ordinary Saudi people that they were not seeing in their mainstream commercial media, which largely reports on the actions of the Saudi government and provides little insight into the lives of ordinary people.

By creating new opportunities for cross-border, citizen-to-citizen communications, weblogs and other forms of interactive participatory media are seen by some as a hopeful vehicle for cross-border non-governmental activism and citizen diplomacy. James F. Moore, a Fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society and former Director of Internet & Information Services for Howard Dean’s presidential campaign, wrote in a 2003 essay titled “The Second Superpower Rears its Beautiful Head” that this new force of web-connected citizens, through coordinated global organization, has the potential to act as a counter-balance to the global force and power of the United States. He writes:

The Internet and other interactive media continue to penetrate more and more deeply all world society, and provide a means for instantaneous personal dialogue and communication across the globe. The collective power of texting, blogging, instant messaging, and email across millions of actors cannot be overestimated. Like a mind constituted of millions of inter-networked neurons, the social movement is capable of astonishingly rapid and sometimes subtle community consciousness and action.⁷⁶

Some technologists are making concerted efforts to build this cross-border community. The Tokyo-based weblogger and venture capitalist Joichi Ito is working to create a “global commons” as part of an effort to bring about positive change among the world’s community of software “toolmakers:” organizing conversations and brainstorming among internet-savvy elites around the globe about what direction we would like to steer our societies and our technologies.⁷⁷ In the conclusion of an essay about technology and global democracy, Ito writes:

Representatives of sovereign nations negotiating with each other in global dialog are very limited in their ability to solve global issues. The monolithic media and its increasingly simplistic representation of the world cannot provide the competition of ideas necessary to reach consensus. Emergent democracy has the potential to solve many of the problems we face in the exceedingly complex world at both the national and global scale. The community of toolmakers should be encouraged to consider their possible positive effect on the democratic process as well as the risk of enabling emergent terrorism, mob rule and a surveillance society.⁷⁸

As Ito recognizes, there are some serious barriers to the creation of this kind of emergent global democracy or “second superpower.” One is the fact that technology can be used for control and surveillance, as well as disinformation and tyrannies of information majorities. As he also points out in his essay, democracy is not possible without free competition of ideas. Nor is effective debate possible without a shared set of reference and metaphors, or a “commons.”

A serious obstacle to the creation of a global “commons” is the lack of trust between different information communities operating within different national and cultural contexts. How, for instance, do you convince people in an Islamic country that Jews didn’t attack the World Trade Center if they are determined to believe it - because all their friends do, and because most of the local-language websites and chatrooms insist

upon this version of reality? If you can't break through this basic trust-information barrier how can citizens bridge the chasms that their national leaders have failed to bridge?

In the documentary "Searching for the Roots of 9/11," *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman interviewed a young Indonesian woman who was thus misinformed, thanks to the internet. She was inclined to believe what she had been reading on local Indonesian internet websites, internet bulletin boards, and chatrooms. She was not inclined to pay attention to conflicting information available in her country's mainstream media. Nor was she inclined to believe U.S. or other English-language news websites. She could read English well enough to seek out Western sources of news and information if she wanted to. But she chose not to. She chose not to trust them, and to trust her internet chatroom peers instead.⁷⁹

I saw similar patterns of trust and mistrust of information while working as a journalist in China. In China, many dissident and international news sites are blocked. Even so, people who really want alternative information can access and distribute it, although it takes some risk and effort. After the U.S. bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in April 1999 during the NATO airstrikes against the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, virtually nobody in China who we interviewed at the time believed that the bombing could have been an accident. Chinese chatrooms and websites similarly had no tolerance for people who ventured to argue the opposite. Even people with access to international news sites claimed not to be interested in the "facts" they reported. Reports from the Western media were simply not viewed as credible. Similarly, after the "spyplane incident" of April 2001, when a U.S. EP-3 spyplane and a Chinese MIG fighter jet collided off of Hainan Island on China's southern coast, Chinese cyberspace

had zero tolerance for the possibility that the collision could have been caused by the Chinese fighter pilot's previously-documented penchant for hot-dogging dangerously close to aircraft he was monitoring.⁸⁰

This is especially interesting because educated Chinese people are generally well aware that their media is controlled by the communist party's propaganda department, and that many "truths" go unreported by the Chinese media. Even so, they chose to believe versions of "the truth" espoused by their countrymen over "truths" proffered by foreigners.

Another obstacle to the creation of information communities by citizens within their own national borders – let alone becoming part of international information communities – is the digital divide. In his essay, "Making Room for the Third World in the Second Superpower" Ethan Zuckerman points out that Moore's "second superpower" will remain a small, elite club of early-adopters unless the technological tools are made more user-friendly for the average person - even in the United States, let alone in places like Africa. Furthermore, the economic, technological, and cultural-linguistic barriers-to-entry are so high for many communities that unless a real effort is made, large sections of humanity will be excluded from the "second superpower," if such a thing does emerge. In which case, rather than becoming a force for truly universal global democracy and human rights as Moore envisions, the "second superpower" could instead become a global ruling class of cyber-elites who use their communication skills and technological power to further their own interests and freedoms, and ignoring the rest of the world's unwired and unwashed masses. He writes:

Given the challenges of involving the developing world in the world of online reporting, discussion and activism, it's worth asking whether it's reasonable to try to make room for the Third World in the second

superpower. Are technologists in developed economies being absurdly arrogant in speculating that a set of tools and behaviors used by less than one percent of the world's population - a disproportionately wealthy and powerful group of people - can help change the political lives of people around the world?

My strong suspicion is that the answer to this question depends a great deal on the actions of the people using and developing these tools in the First World. In designing the tools to enable communities, are we thinking about the full spectrum of people we'd like to use these tools? Are we helping people join our dialogues, or are we content to keep them out? If we are committed to the long, hard project of ensuring that the whole world has a chance to participate in our conversation, there's a chance that emergent democracy can be a force in emerging democracies. If not, we help ensure that the community phenomena that have developed around social software won't extend to the people who could be most positively affected by this technology.⁸¹

Moore responds to this challenge by proposing a concerted and deliberate effort by technologists and webloggers in the United States and elsewhere in the West to include Third World voices in their information communities. He also advocates that First World technologists and software developers should assist people in the Third World with the process of developing the software tools that they will need in order to bridge the digital, cultural, and language divides.⁸² They will also need much more assistance in obtaining hardware and internet access. At a conference devoted to weblogs called "Bloggercon II" held at Harvard in April, I led a session focusing on these questions. Participants in the room, including the authors of many popular U.S. weblogs, agreed that bridging the digital divide and creating a truly global conversation will require proactive effort by the Western "power-bloggers" who dominate the English-language blogosphere. The need to develop translation tools was also raised. Another idea was to help radio broadcasters in Third World and unwired communities to serve as bridges between the conversations taking place in cyberspace through weblogs, and the more accessible, low-tech conversations via talk radio.⁸³

Non-commercial motivations

Such ideas are motivated not by a desire to make money, but by a desire to improve the state of the world – about which many bloggers voice daily concern on their weblogs. However, assuming that fundamental human nature is unlikely to change in tandem with technological upheavals, is this desire to improve the world going to move beyond talk to concrete, concerted efforts?

Yale Law School Professor Yochai Benkler argues that the shift now taking place in the developed world from a physical, industrial-based economy to a “networked information economy” makes activities based on volunteerism, philanthropy and the desire for social justice more likely in cyberspace than in the physical economy. He points to the free software and creative commons movements among communities like Joichi Ito’s “toolmakers” as an example of the way in which “the networked information economy can be more open and admit many more diverse possibilities for organizing production and consumption than could the physical economy.”⁸⁴ Why? Because the actual means of producing new media creations – be they information-oriented or creative and artistic – is now easily available to the average consumer in the form of personal computers and commercially available, and in some cases free, open-source software. Thus, the cost of this “means of production” for making media has been reduced from prohibitively high for the average citizen to either free or at least generally affordable for a middle-class person with computer and internet access. Benkler does not argue that market-driven, for-profit motives for economic and social activity will disappear due to technological change, rather:

The point is that the networked information economy makes it possible for nonmarket and decentralized models of production to increase their presence alongside the more traditional models, causing some displacement, but increasing the diversity of ways of organizing production rather than replacing one with the other.⁸⁵

Benkler argues that the socio-political implications of this shift are substantial:

...decentralization of information production and distribution has the capacity qualitatively to increase both the range and diversity of information individuals can access.... Decentralization of information production, and in particular expansion of the role of nonmarket production, makes information available from sources not similarly constrained by the necessity of capturing economies of scale.⁸⁶

The ease with which internet technology allows works of creative media (music, movies, and software especially) to be copied and disseminated has led to an intense battle between major media conglomerates such as Time Warner and Disney and members of the “creative commons” movement.⁸⁷ The details of this battle over intellectual property rights and copyright law are beyond the scope of this paper, but one can argue that some elements of this battle are very relevant to the future of journalism. Benkler and other activists in the creative commons movement, including Stanford Law Professor Lawrence Lessig, warn that large media conglomerates such as Time Warner are seeking to create and maintain control over “a fully integrated, proprietary information production and exchange system,” which, in seeking to maintain ironclad control over intellectual property and its means of distribution, will also stifle the development of non-commercial means of disseminating and sharing non-proprietary information. Journalists who believe that the fundamental point of our profession includes serving society – not just making money for our employers – should consider this issue seriously. As Benkler argues, the point here is not to eliminate capitalism or profit-motive from media creation; rather, the

idea is to create technological structures that can supplement capitalism with other motives:

As we enter the twenty-first century, law and policy must once again develop to accommodate newly emerging modes of production. The primary need is to develop a core common infrastructure – a set of resources necessary to the production and exchange of information, which will be available as commons – unowned and free for all to use in pursuit of their productive enterprises, whether or not market-based. . . . The idea is not to replace the owned infrastructure, but rather to build alongside it an open alternative. Just as roads do not replace railroads or airport landing slots, the core common infrastructure will be open to be used by all, and biased in favor of none.⁸⁸

It is also very likely, however, that mainstream commercial news media could face a substantial challenge to its business model from inexpensive, citizen-run online media that attract rapidly-growing communities due to their highly interactive, virally self-duplicating ability to create information networks in a rapid fashion while spending little or no money on marketing or advertising. In order to survive, trends and developments discussed earlier in this paper would indicate that commercial news media are likely to be forced to become more interactive and participatory over time. In the process, commercial media will also have to find new internet-centered profit models – models which at this point are unclear and unproven. While some weblogs have found ways to make money as small businesses, it is unclear whether this business model can be scaled or broadly applied.

What does seem clear, however, from both my *North Korea zone* experiment as well as my own experiences as a foreign correspondent with a large commercial news organization, is that serious foreign policy subjects, while important to citizens' informed participation in national decisions about war and peace, are not as entertaining – and thus

not nearly as profitable – as other forms of news. This is a reality that technology cannot change.

New internet technologies are removing many of the costs associated with the processes of dissemination and discussion-facilitation. On the other hand, the process of gathering quality, first-hand information will remain expensive. Even most citizen-run weblogs depend upon reports by professional journalists as the basis for their discussions. Journalists must be paid in order to be willing to leave their loved ones at 4am to jump on the next airplane after a breaking story hits. Most will not to risk their lives in war zones for free, and they must be paid to conduct tough, investigative reporting that requires not only travel, long working hours, and legwork but also the backing of news organizations' lawyers against the threat of libel lawsuits.

Quality international news will never come cheap. But the nature of interactive participatory media offers the potential to use public financing and charitable donations much more effectively and efficiently in ways that were not possible with conventional forms of media. If we believe that our country's ability to conduct responsible foreign policy ultimately impacts the security and happiness of all citizens, then we – as journalists and as individual concerned citizens – must be willing to make the effort to find alternative, non-commercial means of support not only for the gathering and dissemination of quality international news, but also for the facilitation of public discussion about this information.

Technology is opening new doors. There are many uncertainties. Experiments must be made, along with the inevitable mistakes. Frightening though that may be, we must seize the opportunity at this time of technological change to create new forms of

news media that can serve our democratic society better. If we stand by and do nothing, blaming our government, our bosses and “those big media corporations that control everything” for the current state of affairs, we will deserve our government and its foreign policies. We will also deserve the global consequences brought upon ourselves and our nation as a result of those policies. We will have nobody to blame but ourselves.

Figure 1: Traditional Media Information Flow

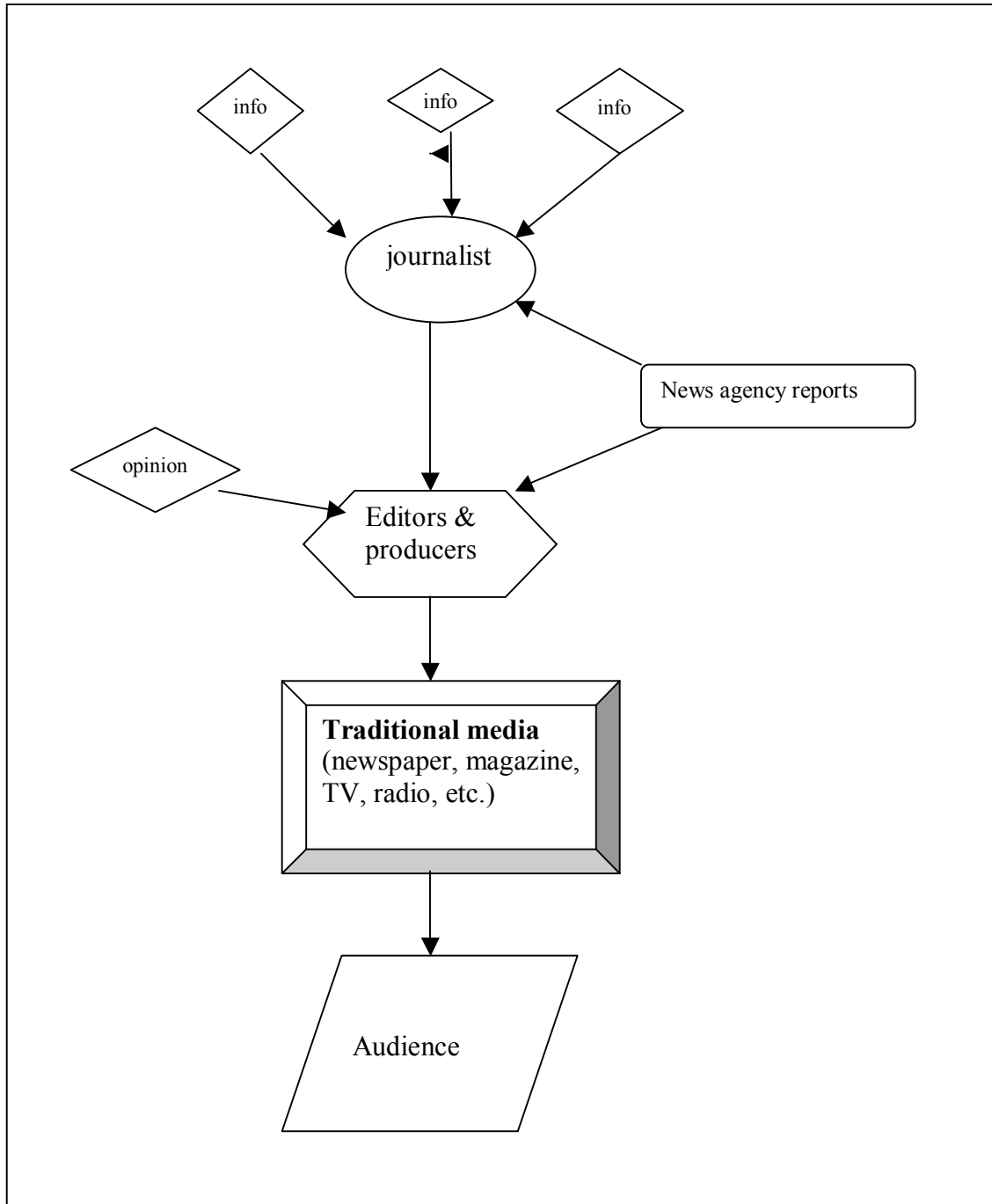


Figure 2: Participatory Media Information Flow

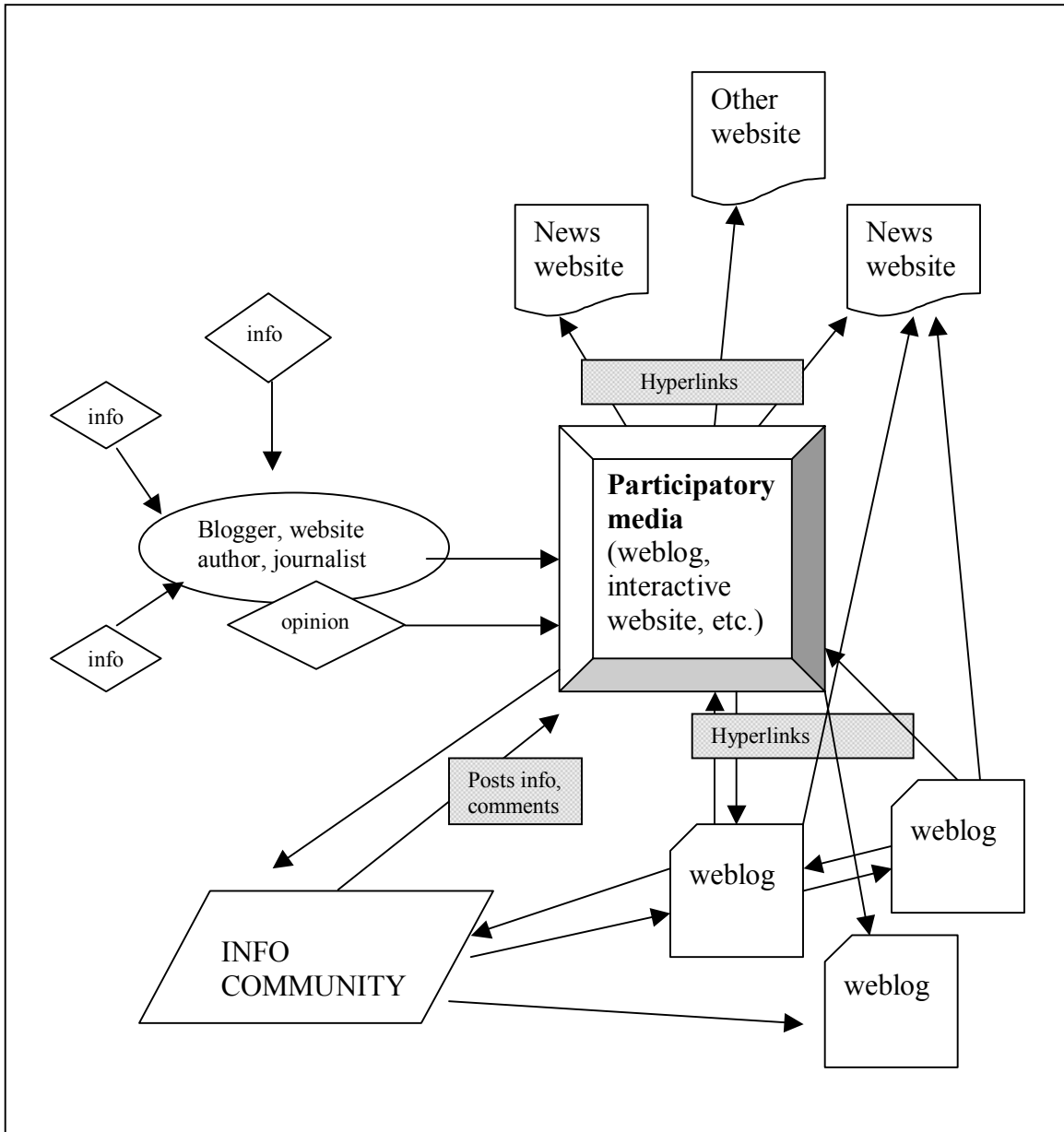


FIGURE 3: Screenshot of Bloglines news aggregator used to collect news items and blog posts mentioning North Korea from around the Web

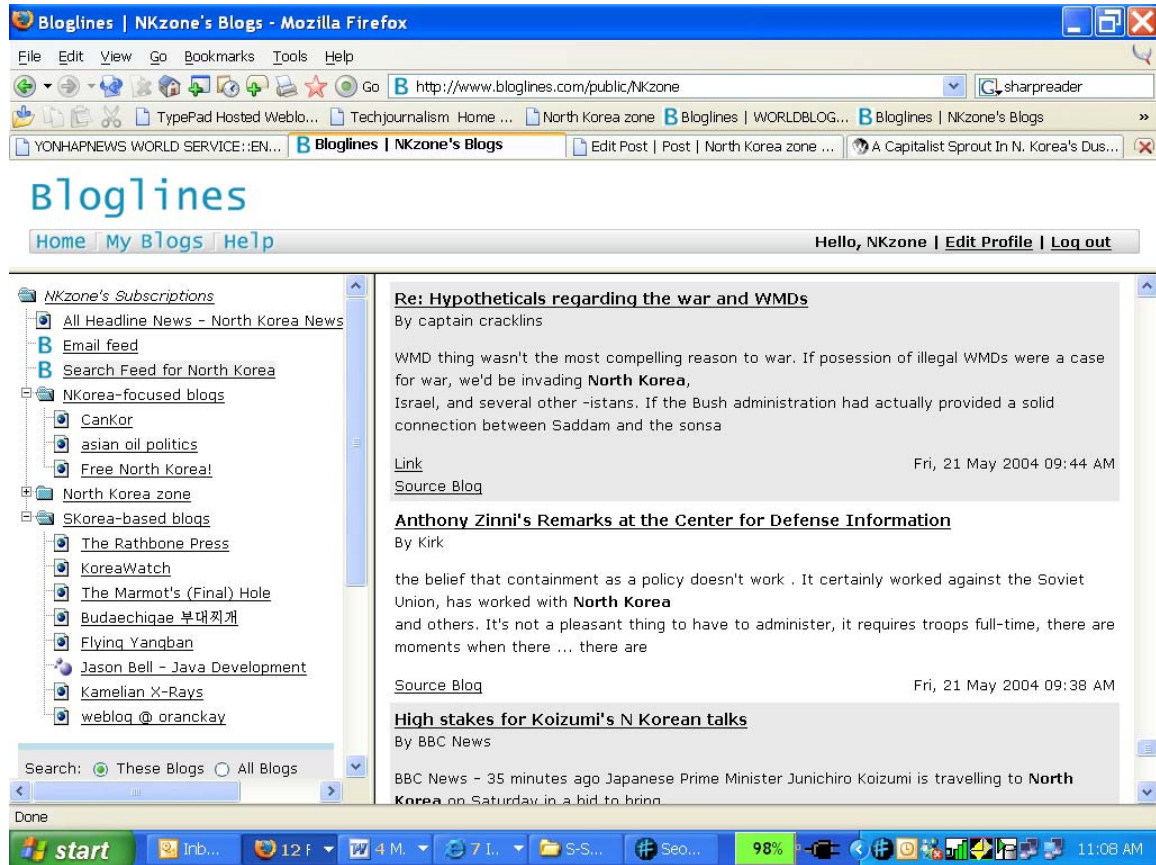
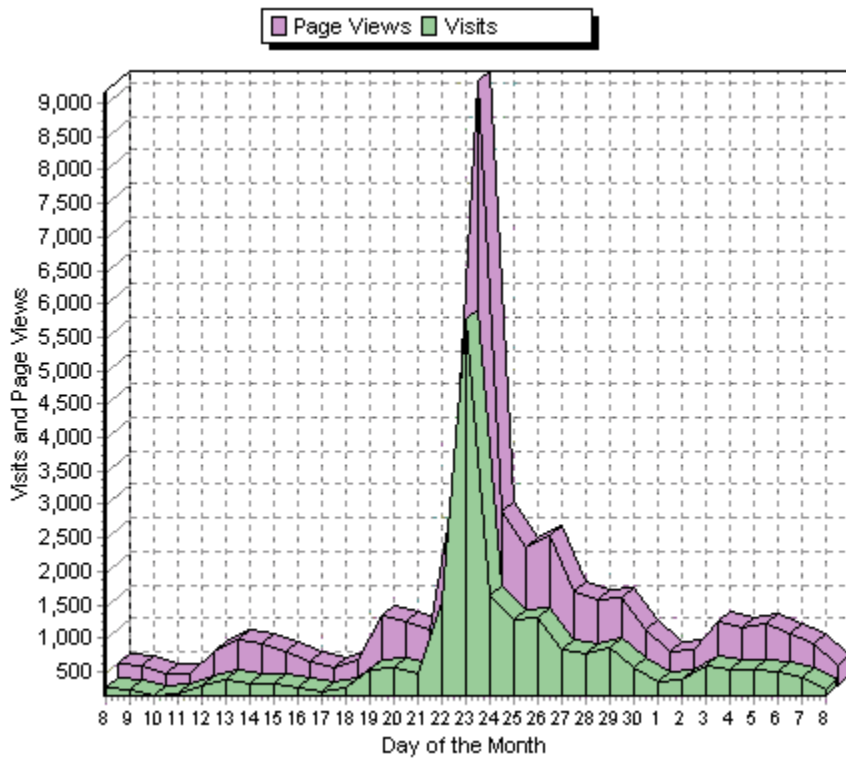


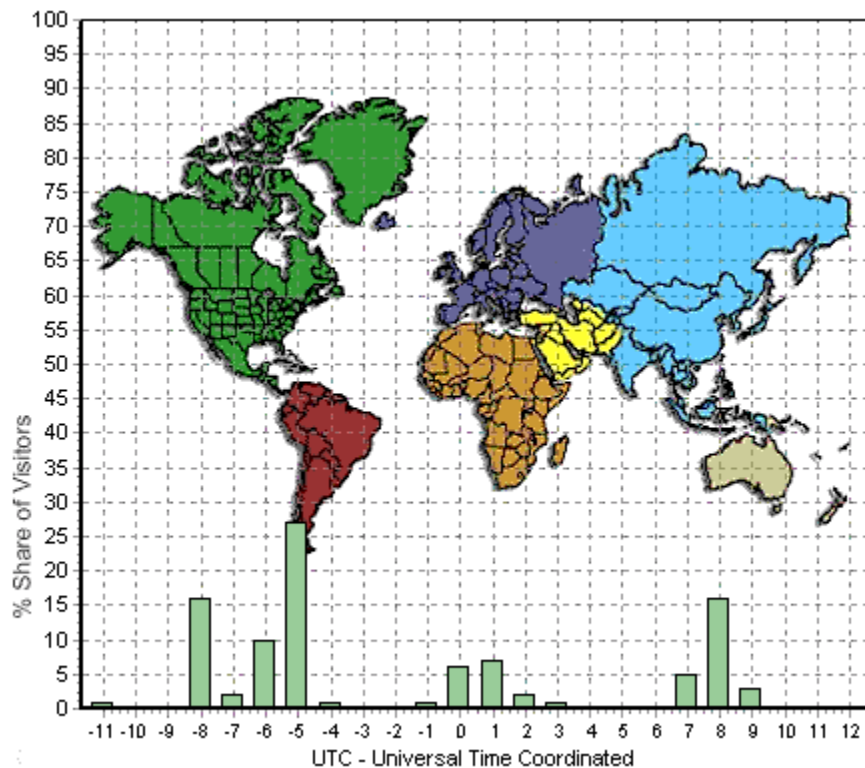
FIGURE 4: Number of Visitors and Page views over one month



Graphic courtesy Sitemeter (www.sitemeter.com)

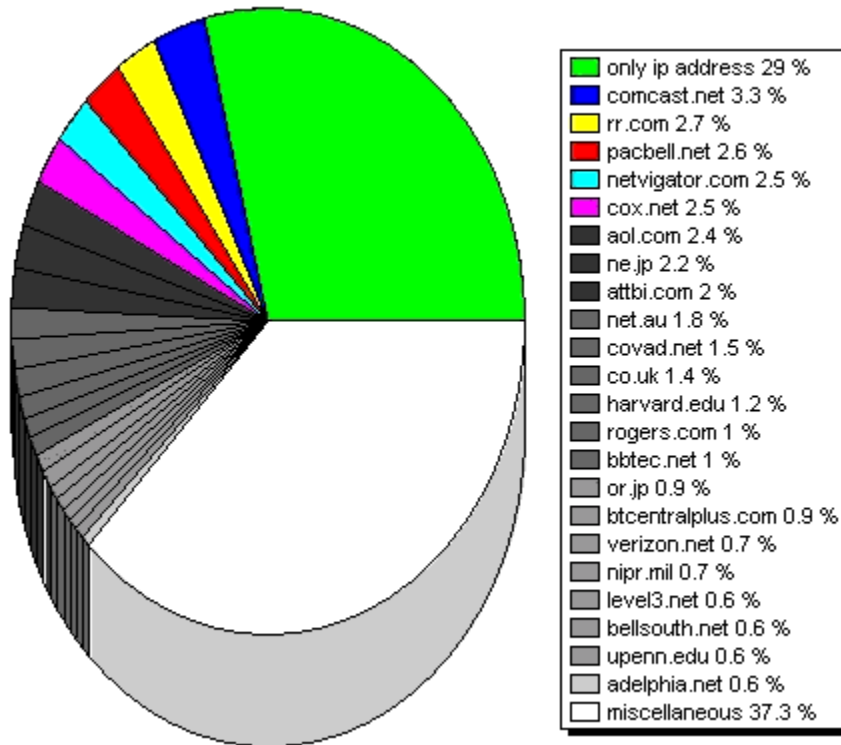
Note: A railway explosion occurred in Ryongchon, North Korea on April 22nd. causing a huge spike in visits and page views. Site traffic consistently drops every weekend.

FIGURE 5: Time zone origin of visitors



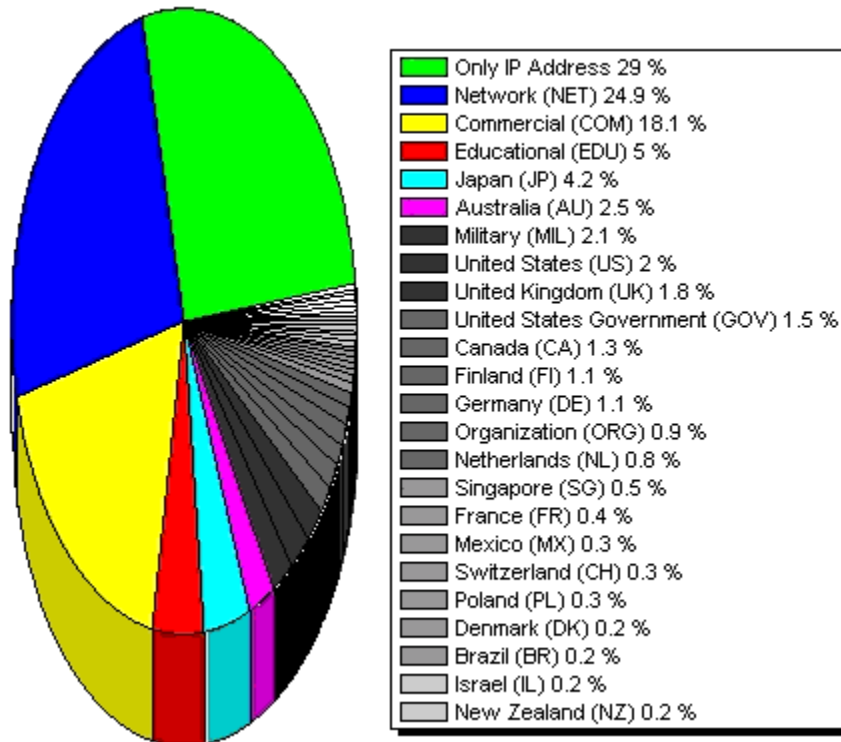
Graphic courtesy Sitemeter (www.sitemeter.com)

Figure 6: Visitor internet service provider (ISP)



Graphic courtesy Sitemeter (www.sitemeter.com)

Figure 7: Visitor country/organization



Sitemeter (www.sitemeter.com)

Graphic courtesy

Figure 8: example of Sitemeter's referral tracking

Home Statistics Manager Help Search Logout	
General	North Korea zone
Summary	Recent Referrals
Who's On?	Detail Referring URL
Traffic Prediction	61 http://search.yahoo.com/search...r=fp-tab-web-t&n=20&f=0&x=wrt
Recent Visitors	62 unknown
By Details	63 http://search.yahoo.com/search...8&fr=fp-tab-web-t&cop=mss&tab=
By Referrals	64 http://www.technorati.com/prof...c57e34367009927dae0d4930a4a488
By Search Words	65 http://www.google.fr/search?q=...e=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&start=10&sa=N
By Entry Pages	66 unknown
By Exit Pages	67 http://www.google.com/search?h...859-1&q=nkzone+%2B+%22Lybia%22
Visits	68 http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/techjournalism/
Day Week Month Year	69 http://korealive.blogspot.com/
Visits and Page Views	70 http://www.google.com/search?q...+kim+il+sung&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8
Day Week Month Year	71 http://www.google.ca/search?q=...e=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&start=10&sa=N
Moving Average	72 http://www.asahi.com/english/svn/gillmor/TKY200404240190.html
Visits 7 / 30	73 http://www.google.co.uk/search...q=alejandro+cao+de+benos&meta=
Page Views 7 / 30	74 http://www.google.fr/search?q=...=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&start=790&sa=N
Referral Ranking	75 unknown
Web pages ranked by	76 http://www.google.co.hu/search...btnG=Google+keres%C3%A9s&meta=
Visits	77 http://www.google.com/search?h...e=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&q=north+korea
Page Views	78 http://dev.tzib.org/?TakuyaHoshi/Japanese
Visit Length	79 http://www.google.com/search?q...8&client=REAL-tb&start=40&sa=N
Web sites ranked by	80 unknown
Visits	
Page Views	
Visit Length	
Search engines ranked by	
Visits	
Page Views	
Visit Length	
Search words ranked by	
Visits (+SE)	
Page Views (+SE)	
Visit Length (+SE)	
Page Ranking	
Entry Pages	
Exit Pages	
	61-80 of 1000 Previous 20 Next 20 Newest Oldest
	Page Views per Visit Site Tracking Web Browsers Tools
	Day Month Time Zones Browser Share [Edit Account]
	Language JavaScript [Refresh]
Durations	OS DHTML [Display Help]
	Domain PNG Graphics [Export]
Month	Organization Style Sheets

Screenshot from Sitemeter at:

<http://www.sitemeter.com/default.asp?action=stats&site=s18nkzone&report=11&visit=61>

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⁴⁵ Response #25 to question #23.

⁴⁶ Response #20 to question #23.

⁴⁷ Response #2 to question #25.

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⁴⁹ Response #4 to question #25.

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⁷² <http://allafrica.com/afdb/blogs/>

⁷³ <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/ethan/2004/04/16>

⁷⁴ Popular weblogs linking to *North Korea zone* at the time included Dave Winer’s popular “Scripting News” at: <http://www.scripting.com/>

⁷⁵ <http://muttawa.blogspot.com/>

⁷⁶ James F. Moore, "The Second Superpower Rears its Beautiful Head," Berkman Center for Internet and Society, <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/people/jmoore/secondsuperpower.html>

⁷⁷ The locus of Ito's global technologist community is his weblog at: <http://joi.ito.com/>

⁷⁸ <http://joi.ito.com/static/emergentdemocracy.html>, accessed 5/23/04.

⁷⁹ <http://dsc.discovery.com/anthology/spotlight/911/spotlightnow.html>

⁸⁰ See "Professor Fei-Ling Wang: Chinese react online to spy plane incident" at: <http://edition.cnn.com/COMMUNITY/transcripts/2001/04/04/wang/>

⁸¹ Ethan Zuckerman, "Making Room for the Third world in the Second Superpower" at: <http://h2odev.law.harvard.edu/ezuckerman/sstw.html>, accessed 5/23/04.

⁸² Jim Moore, "Bringing the Third World into the Second Superpower," at: <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/jim/2004/04/05#a548>, accessed 5/23/04.

⁸³ " "Blogging the World": what came out of the International blogs session at Bloggercon II" at: <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/techjournalism/2004/04/19#a209>

⁸⁴ Yochai Benkler, "Freedom in the Commons: Towards a Political Economy of Information," *Duke Law Journal*, Vol.52:1245, p.1246.

⁸⁵ Benkler, p.1247

⁸⁶ Benkler, p.1273.

⁸⁷ For a full discussion of the issue from the "creative commons" movement's perspective, see Larry Lessig's *Free Culture*, downloadable for free off the internet at: <http://free-culture.org/>

⁸⁸ Benkler, p.1274.