Blogging
Serious Media or Just a Rant?

2006
25 minutes

Program Synopsis

Not everyone is happy with traditional forms of media. Concerns about independence and a decline in public debate have left many feeling that their voice will never be heard or considered. However, the internet has meant that ordinary people can be both producer and distributor of information and opinions through web-logs (blogs). However, the question still remains; are their voices really being heard? Having an online presence is one thing, but how do you attract attention to your blog when there are already 8.5 million bloggers out there? This program will inform students about the emergence of blogs, look at their associated negatives and positives and debate whether they really are an opportunity for the alternative voice or just uncensored rants.

Introduction

This program explores the challenges new media technologies pose to traditional forms of media and considers claims that the internet can deliver the diversity and independence that is missing from mainstream media. The program looks at the different platforms available on the internet and questions claims that interactivity and fewer gatekeepers necessarily lead to more empowered citizens or to political and social change. Students are also exposed to debates that argue the internet's reach and diversity as reason and compensation for change to Australia's cross-media rules.

Program Rationale

'Blogging – Serious Media or Just a Rant?' is aimed at middle to upper secondary school students and in particular Years 9 and 10. The program is intended to raise awareness of the impact of the internet and its tools of production that are said to be transforming traditional media to imagine a more democratic community based on equality, participation and empowerment. It introduces some of the key debates surrounding gatekeepers, interactivity and web logs to consider the potential of the internet as an alternative public sphere.

DVD Timeline

00:00:00   Introduction

00:05:29   Traditional vs. Alternative Spheres

00:09:31   The Democratic Promise of Alternative Online

00:14:18   Criticisms

00:18:50   Alternative Space?

00:23:12   Conclusion

00:24:05   End Credits

00:24:52   Program end

Background Information

There is growing concern in Australia, as in other western societies, that the public sphere as a space where "the people" come together and participate in inclusive discussion and debate is in decline. While proponents and critics alike have long recognized the public sphere as an idealized concept though not unlike today it was subject to powerful influences locking many voices out including those from particular racial groups, the disabled and women. It nevertheless serves as a strategic "benchmark" for the state of public communication: current concern is that a long-established trend towards commercialization, trivialization and a highly concentrated media ownership is accelerating.

Background Information (…continued)

In a survey conducted by Roy Morgan Research in August 2004 for The Reader, 73 per cent of journalists surveyed said that media proprietors use their outlets to "push their own business and or political interests to influence the national debate". Reinforcing these findings is Reporters Sans Frontières 2004 press freedom index that rates 167 countries noting Australia's decline from 12th position to 41st place in just 2 years (Sydney Morning Herald: 2004). Not surprisingly, the report is concerned with anticipated changes to cross-media ownership laws arguing that easing these restrictions poses a threat to press freedom and diversity.

The stranglehold of media ownership is an ongoing subject of debate in Australia, with unease escalating now that existing media players will likely have the wherewithal to tighten their grip when legislation changes. Coupled with this are concerns that the ABC, whose funding and independence have been severely compromised by an interventionist government, will be commercialized and privatized. Events that may include the stacking of the ABC Board with government appointments or appointing a Chairperson and Managing Director more aligned with government interests than public broadcasting will likely be ignored once anticipated changes in media ownership take place. The internet features as part of this debate with those clamoring for relaxation of cross-media rules offering the internet's reach and diversity as compensation and reason for change

The democratic promise of the internet has been in circulation since its earliest inception echoing the optimism often associated with new forms of media with online alternative media emerging from and responding to a perceived need for a more pluralist and inclusive media with claims that it can effect social, political and cultural change.

One of the key features of the internet is the interactivity it affords which is argued to enable anyone with a connection to the internet to be heard, therefore contributing to diversity and enriching democracy. Yet, the mantra of interactivity needs closer examination. There are questions to be asked of the quality of interactivity, when many claims to it resemble little more that a one-way response to articles or postings rather than the two-way conversation imagined. Is online interactivity any more democratic than talkback radio that allows a range of people to express a view or the much-lauded interactivity now boasted by reality television? How interactive is the online alternative when compared to newspapers that after a slow start have co-opted the interactive formula appealing to a more youthful audience.

A popular reading of the internet is that it has taken journalism from the pens of professionals employed for the most part in commercial organizations, where content is largely decided by its capacity to maximize audiences and advertising, and handed the tools of production to "the people". This dramatic shift in news production and dissemination rejects notions of truth, objectivity, credibility and distance from its audience with platforms that foster dialogue rather than monologue, is non-hierarchical and privileges unmediated narratives that emerge from the lived existence of its audience. Blogs make for a good example.

Online diaries or journals, otherwise known as web logs or blogs, have excited both public and scholarly interest with utopian claims they can transform passive media couch potatoes into active media producers. _Technorati_ puts blog numbers at almost 20 million. Blogs now attract 50,000 postings per hour and 70,000 new blogs are created each day.
While there are competing figures related to the number of blogs, even more so, the number that are politically interested, there is no doubting their popularity. However, is the surge of interest in blogging more attributed to their entertainment value than rising political or social awareness or bands of citizens demanding an alternative to mainstream media?

While the decentralized, non-hierarchical medium of the internet has renewed and sustained hope of news and current affairs that is radically different from that produced by media oligopolies there is some evidence that this optimism may be short-lived. The power relations present in an offline world are increasingly articulated online. Undisputed are the possibilities for public conversation, yet that dialogue, while less interrupted by gatekeepers and more interactive, is little different from the chatter overheard in most public spaces. The tools of the internet have been put to individual rather than collective use, and not unlike the potential of radio and television, are being deployed for their entertainment value rather than their democratizing capacities. Relaxing cross-media rules only hands increased power and influence to existing media interests to deliver more of the same, further reducing independence and diversity in Australia's media.

Program Worksheet

Before the Program

1. Ask students to set up a blog – the website below shows you how to do it in 3 easy steps. Allow the students to write their blog without any direction as to content (see 'activities after the program'). Warn students that whatever they write can be seen and read by others so discretion is important.
    www.blogger.com

2. Ask students to cover different forms of media and find out how many programs, newspaper sections, newspaper articles are devoted to technology and report back to class on their findings.

    Questions they might consider:

    a) Does technology drive society?

    b) Does society drive technology?

    c) Can we separate technology from historical, social, cultural, economic and political contexts?

    d) Who drives technology – 'ordinary' citizens, government, corporations?

3. Ask students to compare front page news stories in newspapers to news online:

    Questions that could be covered in this discussion:

    a) Do students know (or care) who owns the news site they are accessing?

    b) What do they like about accessing their news from the internet?

    c) Why do/don't they watch television news or read newspapers?

    d) Will there be newspapers in 50 years?

4. Show *OutFoxed.*

During the Program

1. What is needed for a democratic media?

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2. Name 5 different forms of media.

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3. What important role do the media play?

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4. Name the three branches or estates of government.

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5. Why is the media often referred to as the Fourth Estate?

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6. List the internet media interests of PBL and News Ltd.

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7. What is compromising the content of mainstream media?

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8. How do media organizations attract advertising?

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9. Why is the media not like any other business?

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10. Who controls Australia's media?

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11. Why does concentration of media ownership threaten media independence?

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12. What makes the ABC vulnerable?

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13. What is the public sphere and what is its historical significance?

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14. Whose voices are heard in the public sphere and whose voices are ignored?

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15. Who are most likely to become the successful or popular bloggers?

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16. Who are the gatekeepers of mainstream media? What do you think of the argument that gatekeepers do the difficult job of sifting through huge amounts of information to save us the trouble?

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17. What do alternative media websites offer that is not available in mainstream media and is that content a worthwhile alternative?

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18. Why do eyewitness news accounts or images posted directly to the internet have power as a democratizing tool? Can you give examples of these types of postings?

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19. Aside from a computer and an internet connection, what else is needed to access the advantages of the internet?

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20. Can online alternative media challenge the dominance of mainstream media? Why/ why not?

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21. How could the relaxation of cross-media rules contribute to heightened concentration of Australia's media?

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After the Program

1. Ask students to visit a number of alternative news websites and compare the content to that found in traditional mediums (teachers may want to visit these website to ensure content is suitable).

    a) http://www.indymedia.org.au/
    b) http://www.zmag.org/
    c) http://www.fair.org/
    d) http://www.onlineopinion.com.au
    e) http://www.crikey.com.au
    f) www.aljazeera.com

2. Have students revisit their weblogs and discuss their postings:
    What are most students using their weblogs to discuss - serious social and political issues or just posting entries for fun?

3. Set-up a debate with one group of students arguing the importance of cross-media rules and another that argues that the internet provides an alternative public sphere that makes these rules old-fashioned and unnecessary.

4. Find these words in the following Wordsearch:

ACCESS	DIVERSITY	LEGISLATURE
BLOGOSPHERE	DOWNLOAD	MARGINALISED
CITIZEN	EMPOWERMENT	NEW MEDIA
DEMOCRACY	EXECUTIVE	ONLINE
DIGITAL	INTERNET	PLATFORMS
DISINFORMATION	JUDICIARY	PUBLIC SPHERE

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Y D N E W M E D I A L P E S D
T A C I T I Z E N E U M S E V
I O O C F V E S G B P E M Y H
S L N Z X O E I L O C O K L M
R N L N J A S I W C C I X A A
E W I D E L C E A R V V K T R
V O N L A S R W A L M R D I G
I D E T P M T C E U G D I G I
D Z U H E A Y A E C F H D I N
I R E N E V I T U C E X E D A
E R T Y R A I C I D U J K G L
E W I B N P L A T F O R M S I
M G B R I N T E R N E T E G S
N O I T A M R O F N I S I D E
E R E H P S O G O L B D H U D
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Suggested Student Responses

During the Program

1. What is needed for a democratic media?
   Independence from government, diversity of voices.

2. Name 5 different forms of media.
   Various – internet, television, ipods, (even) mobile phones, film, books, magazines

3. What important role does the media play?
   Scrutinises government, big business, reports on issues that are in the public interest i.e. war.

4. Name the three branches or estates of government.
   Legislature, Executive and Judiciary

5. Why is the media often referred to as the Fourth Estate?
   Its independence and distance from the state provide citizens with disinterested information i.e. neutral, unbiased.

6. List the internet media interests of PBL and News Ltd.
   PBL: Ninemsn (other online interests – owns 25 per cent share Seek, Trader Classifieds).
   News Corp: news.com.au, News Interactive (other interests – realestate.com.au, careerone.com.au).

7. What is compromising the content of mainstream media?
   Profit margins.

8. How do media organizations attract advertising?
   Good ratings/ increased newspaper sales.

9. Why is the media not like any other business?
   The media plays a critical role in democracy.

10. Who controls Australia's media?
    Rupert Murdoch and James Packer.

11. Why does concentration of media ownership threaten media independence?
    Two (too few) voices setting the news agenda.

12. What makes the ABC vulnerable?
    Depends on government funding and appointments.

13. What is the public sphere and what is its historical significance?
    A space for citizens to have discussion and debates about important social and political issues that historically has occurred in coffee houses, political clubs, debating societies and newspapers.

14. Whose voices are heard in the public sphere and whose voices are ignored?
    The voices of elite nations – i.e. Australia, America, Britain
    The voices of elite people - i.e. George Bush, Kylie Minogue, Eddie Maguire, Jana Pittman.

15. Who are most likely to become the successful or popular bloggers?
    Journalists, academics or anyone already well-known.

16. Who are the gatekeepers of mainstream media? What do you think of the argument that gatekeepers do the difficult job of sifting through huge amounts of information to save us the trouble?
Media proprietors, editors, journalists. Answers will otherwise vary.

17. What do alternative media websites offer that is not available in mainstream media and is that content a worthwhile alternative?
More subversive content, different voices, the voices of ordinary people – answers will vary.

18. Why do eyewitness news accounts or images posted directly to the internet have power as a democratizing tool? Can you give examples of these types of postings?
They are uncensored by gatekeepers – September 11, London bombing, Bali bombing.

19. Aside from a computer and an internet connection, what else is needed to access the advantages of the internet?
Education, income, technical literacy.

20. Can online alternative media challenge the dominance of mainstream media? Why/ why not?
Answers will vary.

21. How could the relaxation of cross-media rules contribute to heightened concentration of Australia's media?
Hugely wealthy media owners in best position to extend their reach through Internet as we are already seeing.

After the Program

4. Find these words in the following Wordsearch:

(Over, Down, Direction)

ACCESS (9,6,NE)	DIVERSITY (1,9,N)	LEGISLATURE (11,1,SW)
BLOGOSPHERE (11,15,W)	DOWNLOAD (2,8,N)	MARGINALISED (15,4,S)
CITIZEN (3,2,E)	EMPOWERMENT (13,1,SW)	NEW MEDIA (3,1,E)
DEMOCRACY (15,1,SW)	EXECUTIVE (13,10,W)	ONLINE (3,3,S)
DIGITAL (14,10,N)	INTERNET (5,13,E)	PLATFORMS (6,12,E)
DISINFORMATION (14,14,W)	JUDICIARY (12,11,W)	PUBLIC SPHERE (12,1,SW)

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Y D N E W M E D I A L P E S D
T A C I T I Z E N E U M S E *
I O O * * * * G B P E M * *
S L N * * * * I L O C O * L M
R N L * * * S I W C C * * A A
E W I * * L C E A R * * * T R
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