

**STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL IDEA MEDIA ROUND TABLE**

**'ARE THE NEW MEDIA GOOD FOR DEMOCRACY?'**

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I am pleased to participate in this International IDEA Media Round Table, bringing you greetings from my colleagues in the independent media company *Globalvision*, and the team that produces *The MediaChannel.org*, the world's largest media issues network - a not for profit project that seeks to bring journalists together across all boundaries and borders – to discuss what we can do to respond to the global transformation of the media industry.

It is a transformation driven by globalization, new technologies like the Internet and other digital media and communications protocols.

It also produced an unprecedented level of media consolidation and concentration in which power over media investments and decisions are in the hands of fewer moguls in command of fewer and fewer mega corporations. Market values, not journalistic needs are increasingly the dominant values as bottom line pressures often threaten the potential of the great information revolution that we are part of.

I have become a multi-generational media maven. My current plunge into working on the web brought me, in my late fifties, into a new medium that seems to belong to twenty 'somethings.' As a journalist, I started in print back in my high school days. I soon graduated into magazine editing, and then, radio newscasting and later TV reporting and producing. And now I've returned to writing regularly. Around, and around I went and I ended up back where I started.

But, another sense, not really. The Internet is, as James Brown used to sing, 'a brand new bag.' It's an interactive medium with a global reach, a still emerging medium with a technology that seems to change by the day. All the rules are not yet in place, and all the controls have not been imposed. The Internet world is a world driven by entrepreneurs and techie geniuses where IPO dollars fall like manna from heaven one day, and dot.coms launched with overbearing hype, declare bankruptcy the

next. Like the TV and radio world I have been part of, this new world is also a battleground where all the debates over private greed versus public need are being played out for a new generation at the heart of what's been labeled a "new economy."

So here I go again, plunging into a new type of media work with all sorts of exciting possibilities, unless, that is, I am deluding myself. For years, critics railed that the means of media production were concentrated in a those who controlled expensive printing plants and TV studios. But once new technologies became widely available-low cost cameras, audio and editing equipment along with computer based publishing system-- there was a tectonic shift in opportunities. Suddenly the tools of radio and TV production became more affordable and anyone could become a publisher. This ushered in a technology driven democratization of the means of production as manufacturers discovered that consumer demand for equipment that allowed ordinary people to make media as well as consume it.

But as one means became accessible, another became more remote. Distribution-the ability to reach large audiences stayed locked up under the control of a smaller and smaller number of large and larger media companies. In the search for synergies to boost their bottom lines, a wave of media mergers accelerated industry consolidation at the top.

One consequence for independents like ourselves: as producing became easier, distribution became harder.

My own company, Globalvision could now produce important programming at a relatively low cost-but getting it seen in an unfiltered environment became problematic. If we were willing to make slimy films about serial killers for channels that insisted on owning and controlling all valuable rights, we could find work. If we wanted to do stories about human rights and corporate injustice under our own banner, and also own and control the product, the obstacles could be overwhelming. Competing as a small company in an age of giants makes you feel like an ant in a field of elephants. You have to tread carefully, lest you be crushed.

I joined the media to spotlight serious problems of the world, and soon realized that the media was not only one of those problems, but a problem that was barely recognized as such. Activists for so

cial change wanted to get on the media, not transform it. They saw media exposure as a means to other ends, not always aware that media companies had their own agendas closely wedded to the status quo. They decided what news was, and how to present it. And for the most part, they froze them out along with many of the issues they cared about

Inside the large media companies, another merger affected the rules of the coverage game as entertainment values insidiously corrupted news values. Market research and advertiser needs for the most lucrative audience demographic began to shape the programming mix. Executives ordered up programming to play to what they believed the audience cared about. International news was cut back; investigative reporting shrank, and serious issues were downplayed. Many journalists quickly adjusted to a new environment in which their work was devalued and dumbed down with few protests.

The 'golden handcuffs' that go along with well paid media jobs led many to conclude that protests were futile, and that to get along, one had to go along. Many complained about their situation but without much of a sense that the public even knew how it was being cheated and under-informed, or that media industry responsibility could become a popular issue.

Today many of us see the Internet as our salvation because the cost of entry is low, and regulation limited, except in some countries like China. Many democratic states are attempting to impose restrictions in the name of national security and protecting public decency according to a 2001 press freedom survey.

Today there are more than 400 million people online-but only 6.7% of the world's population presently uses the web. Industrial countries, especially here in Scandinavia are in the lead. The US has 154 million users. Africa only 3.1 million. This digital divide reflects other economic divides.

As the U.S. economy slows, Internet nay-sayers are everywhere. Boosters are in hiding, amidst the growing flurry of negative reports on new hi-tech companies crumbling and dot.coms going dot.gone:

- Surveys report Internet use in the US declining

- A global poll says 40% of the people living on the other side of the digital divide don't have any interest in going on line.
- The London Observer notes "Millions are driven to attack their computers: 'desk rage' is the new office epidemic as stressed out staff strike back at torrents of e-mail."
- A lawyer in Nassau County blames an increase in divorces on the number of men who prefer talking to strangers in chatrooms than spouses at home.

Welcome to the backlash, fueled by the irrationality of our global economic system that bases major decisions on self-styled "market psychology" in which perceptions trump reality.

Explains: Business Week: "With U.S. news just a click away on the Internet and TV sets around the world endlessly tuned to CNN and CNBC, pessimism in one country can crop up elsewhere in a way that was never possible before. The New Economy is built on global trade, global capital markets, and global communications. Unfortunately, the door swings both ways: Links that propelled growth in the boom may help spread the slump today."

Don't blame the Internet. The messenger (or in this case, the mechanism) is not responsible for the message. The Internet is here to stay, and while many commercial interests who wanted a modern gold rush were trapped by their own, greed, and hype, and phony projections, there is another Internet story going largely untold.

And that's the way the web has become a platform for not for profit educational and political forums, exchanges and organizing

Thousands of groups, causes and concerns have created an on-line presence for themselves in ways they never could do through off-line mainstream media. The diversity of opinion, dissenting perspectives and issues that tend to be sanitized and marginalized in media coverage now has an outlet and sometimes even a global audience.

If you surf the net, or plug into the countless free Email list servs, you will be deluged with all manner of content including petitions, tirades and yes, conspiracy-mongers.

Taken together, it can be a valued and worthwhile resource once you learn how to sort through the inundation of raw data.

A medium conceived and funded by the Pentagon, has become a unparalleled center for activism and source for community even if some view it only as a cesspool of sex, subversion and even sedition.

Millions of us make our own choices - for good and bad.

A Nielsen/Net Ratings study of American habits online, found search engines, portals and online communities are attracting the greatest number of Internet visitors. The study found that 95 million Americans surfed such sites in the month of May. The study posted on Newsbytes.com said "People are using the Internet at home on average of 32 times a month, visiting 21 unique sites, viewing 1109 pages per month and viewing 35 pages per session."

Sounds good, but critics still worry, because increasingly fewer big companies like AOL Time-Warner, followed by Yahoo and Microsoft control the largest customer bases. And there's this irony: despite globalization, there is shrinkage of global news. Only two news sources, Associated Press and Reuters offer 90% of the news of the world on the top 50 most heavily utilized news sites. This points to homogenization, an Anglo-American news orientation and on a "worldwide web" no less! There are other perspectives but you often need to be a webmaster to find them.

The good news is that despite all the mergers at the top, independent companies at the bottom of media food chain are coming up with easy to access new sites and ventures drawing on fast online technologies. These include bold news syndication services, and critical media sites where disaffected journalists can sound off, and critics offer unfiltered analysis of what's missing in our media diets.

I would like to tell interested colleagues about our new Globalvision News Network that hopes to syndicate more diverse content from a world of journalists and creators whose work rarely gets the distribution it deserves

I would like to tell you about our plans for expanding the Media Channel - by adding regional editions like the Nordic Media Channel, an Africa Media Channel and a Media Channel in Spanish.

We need help to grow our network, assist colleagues in the South, and communicate better among ourselves.

Finding sustainable financing is often the biggest challenge these sites face-but many have gone non-profit and depend on donors of all kinds.

For consumers, this may mean that to have a say, they may need to pay, backing independent media to keep the web free and feisty.

In my days in radio, a colleague used to say: If you don't like the news, go out and make some yourself.

For us, in the media world, that is a call that is still relevant.

We have the skills. Let's find the means

Danny Schechter

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