Credibility of new news: session one: technology

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/02/29/credibility-of-new-news/

Polis is hosting an Opendemocracy.net/MacArthur Foundation all-day seminar on the credibility of new forms of news. There is an introductory podcast here. In short, we have gathered a bunch of clever people – journos, geeks and philosophers to discuss what the advent of the Internet means. Contributers today will include Jonathan Zittrain, Roger Scruton, Anthony Barnett, and John Lloyd.
Here goes.

Elspeth Revere from MacArthur points out that this is about more than our conventional idea of new media. This is about all types of information that people need for complex modern information-ridden lives. Take one example. How do citizens make judgements about vaccinations?

Tony Curzon-Price points out that New Media is not new anymore. The problems it raises are now a decade old. Many of them pre-date the Internet in the sense that new technology has been revolutionising media in other ways, too. Take the satellite for example. So we are now at a point where we should be able to have serious discussions about what is at stake. At the heart of this, says Tony, is the idea of 'credibility'. How is something believeable?

The technology session

Perhaps technology can solve its own problem. Martin Moore from the Media Standards Trust suggests that every online image can have a built-in code that identified who took it, where and when? It can be done but as Dave Berry from Swansea University says – that information can be faked, and anyway, it doesn't really prove authenticity – that is something that people judge in a social not technological context.

Can you trust the Web itself? Is search – the way we find stuff on the Internet – is search neutral, reliable and transparent? It used to be that if you put the words Britney and Spears on your website 100 times your ranking would shoot up. Now there are more complex ways of putting your information at the head of the queue. Google the question: "should we have gone to war in Iraq?" and you get a handful of right-wing articles. How come? What kind of algorithm is that? And does anyone ever go to the fifth or even second story on the list? As Flemming Rose from Jyllands-Posten says, that could be a recepie for even less diversity in opinion. But as Tobias Escher from the Oxford Internet Institute said, users are more intelligent that that. They ask further, different questions and don't always accept what they read. They use links to different sources. And my point would be that in comparison to Old Media sources, the consumer has far more control and far more choice overall. It is up to them to use it.

Another problem is how we can adjust software to make sure that comment is free. How do you stop the first comment on a post having priority over later posts? How do you make sure that news reccomendation sites like DIGG are not captured by cliques? The answer from some here is that you have to live with it. Small groups have always shouted loudest. It doesn't mean that others will listen. Steve Herrmann from the BBC has another solution. He uses good old-fashioned editorial interference. His journalists will edit forums – they moderate the comment pages. They have rules. His message boards are not, he says, a community. Instead it is a relationship that forms around news stories and then moves on.