

Young People Are Already Shaping the Media of the Future

The following article is a brief commentary delivered to the News in the Next Century Conference sponsored by the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation and held at the Cantigny Conference Center of the Robert J. McCormick Tribune Foundation last Fall.

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To get an idea of what will be happening with media in the future, it helps to look at what young people are doing with media today.

What is happening is an explosion of creativity. Perhaps it would be better to say "explosions," since there are a wide variety of experiments with a variety of new media tools. Here's a few examples: Rock Videos. For every slick production on MTV, there are thousands of home-brew rock videos circulating that were created when a friend of the neighborhood teenage garage band shows up at a session with the family camcorder. Then another kid gets a PC with a CD-ROM drive and other multimedia add-ons. Before you know it, they've put together a miniature video production studio for less than the price of a new pickup truck.

The Zine Scene. There are so many new electronic publications popping up that no one can keep track of them. A few publications, like the Alternative Press Review and FactSheet5, make an effort to track a maddening diversity of new journals, many with a half-life of two or three issues. These are the 1990s versions of the underground press of the 1960s--the former a product of the photo offset press, the latter a product of desktop publishing software, the PC and the Internet. Most of the content is about culture--hip-hop, rap, and cyberpunk. The politics are rebellious, whether left wing anarchist or right wing skinhead. Some have limited-run hard copy editions done on cheap newsprint without much attention to good looks. The best graphics often appear only in the electronic versions, where the cost is minimal.

FreeNets and Group Home Pages. Young people like to show their stuff off, and these media provide an electronic version of the public square. The kids at DuSable High in Chicago, for instance, managed to get, through serendipitous means, their school computers linked to the Internet with a fast T-1 line. DuSable is located in one of the poorer public housing projects in the city, but these youngsters take great pride in the fact that their student paper, the Panther, now has a home page on the net and is read by students in South Africa. Now students at other high schools in the city are clamoring to catch up. Beepers, Pagers and Cellular Phones. Hundreds of storefronts selling these devices have popped up in every major city in the country. While a good chunk of the business is connected to gang activity and the drug trade, a lot branches out in other directions. Cellular communications are playing the same role for inner city youth that CB radios have played for truck drivers.

What are the general trends discernable in these examples?

1. The tools of the trade are becoming miniaturized and relatively cheap. What was previously mainly available to large corporations is now accessible to a vastly larger number of small entrepreneurs. The means of media production are becoming widely dispersed at the same time that a handful of global media giants are being formed.

2. The media market, to use Alvin and Heidi Toffler's term, is becoming "demassified." The national mass market is being supplanted with a mosaic of segmented niche markets. This is not only driven by the desire of advertisers to get more bang for their buck; it also helps new subcultures find a means of distribution and feedback.

3. The new means of media distribution are becoming universal and relatively cheap--although some "info-rich" vs. "info-poor" gaps are slower to close than others. The VCR and audio CD are already everywhere. The PC is in 30% of households and growing fast. Internet surfers are increasing exponentially. The desire of children to play video games at home is accelerating the pace. It's now possible to do decent, high-speed net surfing in your own home on a \$500 used computer with a \$100 28.8 modem and a \$12 a month on-line account. It still excludes the children of the poor, but it's well within reach of many college students and working-class families.

4. The global market of the global village has arrived, but it's a networked mosaic rather than a traditional, uniform mass market. It's sometimes easier to find a like-minded group on another continent than in your own city. It's a global linking of the niches.

5. The new media tools are creating new hybrid forms of cultural and artistic expression. The interactive CD-ROM disk of Bob Dylan's Highway 61, the New Age graphics and music in the CD-ROM game Myst, and the new ability to post sound and video clips of self-published works on the InterNet are a few leading examples.

These trends all pose several critical questions: How will an aspiring media worker or artist of the future get paid in cyberspace? What does decentralized ferment at the grass roots have to do with the formation of giant media empires? What are the political implications?

As for getting paid in cyberspace, the immediate answer today is that a great majority of young media workers don't get paid--their work is both beyond the market and softening the edges of the market.

For example, it's extremely difficult these days to make a living as a writer. There's simply too much good writing available on the net at no cost. Most zines can choose their content from a rich supply of material that is never paid for.

Strategically, however, the key word for getting paid in cyberspace is interaction. The software giants are now demonstrating this with a vengeance. They recognize that the number of bootlegged copies of their programs is enormous. So they lower the cost of software, but raise the rates for technical support services. Borland's Paradox, for instance, dropped from \$500 to \$100 for a vastly improved product. But to get access to an 800 technical support number that someone will answer in less than five minutes will cost you \$250 a year, every year. In this way, they might even sell the program for \$10 and still make money.

A writer, therefore, has to begin viewing his or her writing differently. The article or essay or video clip is given away; it's not the product, it's advertising for a related but a different product. On the basis of the appeal of your article, you go on to sell yourself as a speaker or seminar leader or editor of a specialty newsletter. You get paid to the degree that you can establish an ongoing, preferably person-to-person, back-and-forth communication with your customers.

The successful journalist of the future, therefore, will not simply be an employee of a large city newspaper or TV station. With the shrinking number of major dailies, this is an elite, restricted job

market anyway. A writer would do better as an independent contractor who develops a niche, an area of expertise, in which he or she can become a consultant and teacher as well as a writer. Nor should writers limit themselves to the printed word. A variety of new skills will be needed-- the ability to combine text with graphics, sound and video; create documents in hypertext; format documents for Home Pages and CD ROM, etc.

Despite the impact of the creative energies bubbling up from below, the importance of the media giants in shaping the media of the future will still be decisive. The simple reason is that the massive amounts of resources involved in assembling the architecture of the global information infrastructure are far beyond the reach of local entrepreneurs. Inner city youth may make ingenious use of beepers and cellular phones, but the economies of scale needed to launch a network of satellites to sustain cellular communications is far beyond them.

But there is one arena where the small scale, hand-held new media technology can have a magnified impact: politics. If we proceed from Tip O'Neil's maxim that "all politics is local," then the usefulness of the technology already in the hands of young people becomes quite apparent. Imagine what happens when the street-based beeper-cellular mini-networks are used to get out the vote. Or think of the Rodney King video and imagine what happens when homegrown rock videos shift into the realm of political documentary and agitation. Then think of the synergy unleashed when creative breakthroughs in one part of the world are posted on the Internet, a la the Zapatistas and their Home Page on the World Wide Web beamed up to satellites from laptops in the jungles of Yucatan.

I think it's going to be hard to predict just how these insurgencies and experiments will bring themselves to fruition. But I am fairly certain that the future of media is not going to be 500 channels of home shopping. Even if the media giants wanted to move in that direction, the dynamic interplay and conflict between the young and the establishment is bound to move things in directions that can be both more creative and more destructive at the same time. So fasten your seatbelts; it's going to be a bumpy ride.

