

Lesson 6. “New Orleans in Peril” Citizen Media

At the risk of being alarmist, we could be 3-4 days away from an unprecedented cataclysm. . . .

—**Brendan Loy**, *The Irish Trojan’s Blog*, August 26, 2005

The 23 year-old law student and self-described “weather nerd” who predicted the devastating effect of Hurricane Katrina three days before New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin ordered the city evacuated—and before most Big Media reporters arrived on the scene—is the first person interviewed in *When the Levees Broke*. We hear Loy’s voice reading his August 26th message while it scrolls across the screen as though being typed. His prophetic words eventually reached many thousands of Internet readers through a link provided by law professor Glenn Reynolds, who blogs at Instapundit.com. Together Loy, in Indiana, and Reynolds, in Tennessee, performed a public service for residents of the Gulf Coast, using a young news medium still derided in professional circles as the realm of journalism wannabes.

Citizen journalism—or citizen media, as it is called by practitioners sensitive to criticism by professionals—is a growing phenomenon worldwide. Six hours after the London bombings in July 2005, the BBC had received more than 1000 images and 400 video eyewitness reports from citizens. By December 2005, more than 12,500 images tagged “Hurricane Katrina” had been posted to the photo sharing Web site Flickr.com, many shot by students working on the Gulf Coast as volunteers. Numerous citizen accounts appeared in print media, including, most notably, New Orleans’ *Times-Picayune*. By augmenting, and sometimes challenging, the information professional journalists put in the story frame, do citizen journalists improve the functioning of the free press that is essential to a democratic society? Spike Lee reminds us that the Katrina narrative—already entering history shaped by myriad citizen writers, photographers and filmmakers—is a test case.

I didn’t “predict” the hurricane. I merely “sounded the alarm” at a time when publicly available information—computer models, National Hurricane Center forecasts, and years-old scientific doomsday scenarios—made it crystal-clear that New Orleans was in mortal danger, yet the MSM and the government seemed to be asleep at the switch.

—**Brendan Loy**, “Welcome HBO Viewers!” message posted to *The Irish Trojan’s Blog*, August 21, 2006 at 6:45 pm.

I think it’s a good thing that there are bloggers out there watching very closely and holding people accountable. Everyone in the news should be able to hold up to that kind of scrutiny.

—**Anderson Cooper** in Patrick Phillips, “Anderson Cooper: ‘I didn’t go to Anchor School,’” *I Want Media*, 01/03/06.

As the Katrina coverage demonstrates, 2005 was the year that much of the mainstream media began embracing participatory journalism. The Dallas Morning News, Denver Post . . . and other newspapers promoted citizen reporter Web pages. . . .”If you believe in a democratic society and freedom of the press, I don’t see how you can look at citizen journalism and say it’s a bad thing,” says Rich Gordon . . . [of] Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism. It’s the most democratic system of publishing ever.”

— **Jon Marshall**, “Citizen Journalism Continues to Surge,” *The Quill*, Oct/Nov 2005

From now on, news coverage is a partnership. The BBC holds a license from the government that enables it to experiment with citizen journalism and social networks. . . . This circumstance allows it to try things that commercial broadcasters, with an eye to the bottom line and share value, would not attempt. The BBC has long been expected, by virtue of its public funding, to innovate and lead industry development.

—**Richard Sambrook**, “Citizen Journalism and the BBC,” *Nieman Reports*, Winter 2005

Call it what you like —citizen journalism, witness contributors, user-generated content—one of the most profound changes taking place in the mainstream media is the part played in it by the audience. Once a passive receptor for messages from newspapers, radio and television, media consumers are now making themselves heard in a rapid move towards the democratisation of media.

—**Emily Bell**, “We’re All Reporters in the Digital Democracy,” *Guardian Unlimited*, March 20, 2006.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What are the essential functions of the journalist in a democratic society?

What is the role of the citizen journalist in a democratic society?

What role does citizen media play in a democratic society when there is a national disaster?

How do professional journalists and citizen journalists promote core values of American democracy?

KEY CONCEPTS

1. citizen journalism / citizen media and the delivery of news & information
2. many-to-many (v. one-to-many); bottom-up (v. top down); conversation (v. lecture) model
3. Weblog (blog) medium: interactivity; hypertext / hyperlink; post; reverse chronology
4. Wiki medium: open source, anonymous collaboration; Wikipedia; Wiki News; “wikitorial”
5. hyperlocal media movement; media consolidation; “journalistic DNA”; “truth-squadding”
6. photojournalism techniques: story board; on site photo shoot; photo editing; photo essay
7. Flickr.com photo sharing site / social networking site; tagging ; Flickr. “pools”
8. photographic archive; historic document; constructing the public record on Katrina

SKILLS ORIENTATION

1. Understand key differences between professional media and citizen media
2. Understand local, national and global citizen journalism initiatives across media
3. Research / analyze (changing) relationships of professional and citizen journalism / media
4. Use citizen media tools for reporting and commentary on issues of importance in students’ own communities—e.g., as bloggers or digital photojournalists

RELEVANT SECTION(S) OF THE FILM


Act I, Chapter I, Interview with weather blogger Brendan Loy, 00:05:15–00:05:48

Act I, Chapter 6, Superdome video shot by Shelton Shakespear Alexander: 01:03:43–01:04:13

RELATED CURRICULUM STANDARDS

All states incorporate media literacy in their curriculum standards. Individual state standards can be viewed by visiting http://www.frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm

MATERIALS USED IN THE LESSON

For concept mapping: large paper and markers, or computer running concept mapping software (e.g., Inspiration ) if available. For blogging: computer with access to Blogger.com or another free site to set up student blogs. For photojournalism: digital camera(s), access to photo sharing site Flickr.com. For research on local citizen journalism/media portraits: online research tools (e.g., cyberjournalist.net site: http://www.cyberjournalist.net/citizen_media_monitor); iPod with attachable mic; digital still/video camera; computer running audio and photo/video editing software; and a school/community Web site to disseminate student reportage. (As an alternative, students can use their blogs to share findings from this citizen journalism research project.)

Tools and Resources

Blogger tutorial https://www.blogger.com/start?utm_campaign=en&utm_source=en-ha-na-google&utm_medium=ha&utm_term=blogger&gclid=CIOYhJP-mI4CFQEyYQodVyWkRw

Blood, R. (2002). Weblog Ethics (excerpt from chapter 2). *The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog*. Available online at Rebecca's Pocket blog: http://www.rebeccablood.net/handbook/excerpts/weblog_ethics.html

Bowman, S., & Willis, C. (July 2003). *We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information*. Report commissioned by The Media Center at the American Press Institute. Available for download at: <http://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/weblog.php>

Center for Citizen Media. Principles of Citizen Journalism. University of Maryland, College Park, J-Lab initiative, available at: www.citmedia.org/principles

[The Economist Research Tools] Surveys: New Media (2006, April 20). It's the Links, Stupid: Blogging is just another word for having conversations. *The Economist*, from http://www.economist.com/surveys/displaystory.cfm?story_id=6794172

Gillmor, D. (2004). *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly. Entire book available under a Creative Commons License at: <http://www.oreilly.com/catalog/wemedia/book/index.csp>

Internet Archive and Wayback Machine <http://www.archive.org/index.php>

Lipton, R. (2002, June 11). What Is a Weblog? *RadioDocs*. Available at: <http://radio.weblogs.com/0107019/stories/2002/02/12/whatIsAWeblog.html>

OhMyNews International: English Edition. Available at: <http://english.ohmynews.com/>

Online Journalism Wikis. *Online Journalism Review*. Available at: <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/wiki/glossary/>

Schaffer, J. (2007). *Citizen Media: Fad or the Future of News? The rise and prospects of hyperlocal journalism*. Report by J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism, Philip

Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland, College Park. Available for download from: http://www.kcmn.org/research/citizen_media_report/

Reading / viewing / listening material:

- Bell, E. (2006, March 20). We're All Reporters in the Digital Democracy. *The Guardian*, from <http://media.guardian.co.uk/newmedia/story/0,,1735153,00.html>
- Dee, J. (2007, July 1). All the News that's Fit to Print Out. *The New York Times Magazine*, pp. 34-39. Available through ProQuest or *New York Times* (fee-based) archive.
- [The Economist Research Tools] Surveys: New Media (2006, April 20). Compose Yourself: Journalism too is becoming interactive. *The Economist*, from https://www.economist.com/surveys/displaystory.cfm?story_id=6794240
- Kovach, B. (2006, Winter). Toward a New Journalism with Verification. *Nieman Reports*. Available at: <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/06-4NRwinter/p39-0604-kovach.html>
- Lemann, N. (2006, August 7). Amateur Hour: Journalism without journalists. *The New Yorker*, from http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/08/07/060807fa_fact1
- Marshall, J. (2005, October/November). Citizen Journalism Continues to Surge. *The Quill*. Available for a fee from the Society of Professional Journalists at: <http://www.spj.org/quillarchive.asp>
- McDermott, N. (2007, May 30). Voices of Freedom. *The Guardian*, from <http://society.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,2090481,00.html>
- Min, J. (2005, Winter). Journalism as a Conversation. *Nieman Reports*, pp. 17-19. Available at: <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/contents.html>
- Phillips, P. (2006, January 3). Anderson Cooper: 'I didn't go to Anchor School.' *I Want Media*, from <http://www.iwantmedia.com/people/people54.html>
- Poland, H. (2005, October 31). Blogosphere's 'Irish Trojan' explains the urge to blog. *Online Journalism Review*, from <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/blog/Sites/853/index.cfm>
- Public Broadcasting Network. (2005, November 16). *The Rise of Citizen Journalism: A report on the rise and influence of citizen journalism, including bloggers, in the United States*. TV program available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/july-dec05/citizen_11-16.html
- Rosen, J. (2004, March 8). The Weblog: An Extremely Democratic Form in Journalism. *PressThink*, from http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2004/03/08/weblog_demos.html
- Sambrook, R. (2005, Winter). Citizen Journalism and the BBC. *Nieman Reports*, pp.14-16. Available at: <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/contents.html>
- Tisserand, M. (2006, September 18). Don't Mourn, Link. *The Nation*, from <http://www.thenation.com/docprint.mhtml?i=20060918&s=tisserand>
- Yu, Y-J. (2003, September 17). OhmyNews Makes Every Citizen a Reporter. *Japan Media Review*, from <http://www.japanmediareview.com/japan/internet/1063672919.php>

Photojournalism and Citizen Media:

- Agger, M. (2007, January 17). The Camera Phone. *Slate*, from <http://www.slate.com/id/2157736/>

Capturing Catastrophe: *Dallas Morning News*' Pulitzer Prize-winning photography of Hurricane Katrina, along with audio of the photographers' descriptions of the images. Available at: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14484343/displaymode/1107/s/2/>

Flickr.com. Tell a Story in 5 Frames (Visual Story Telling).

Pool page: <http://www.flickr.com/groups/visualstory/>;

Rules page: http://www.flickr.com/groups_join.gne?id=46744914@N00

How to Create a 5 Frame Story and instructions on setting up and configuring Flickr accounts: <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/faculty/documents.htm?facid=jc1427>

Hypertext Muckraker: Research Materials

Gerstein, J. (2007, March 21). New Technique Lets Bloggers Tackle Late-Night News Dumps. *The New York Sun*, from <http://www.nysun.com/article/50895>

McDermott, T. (2007, March 17). Blogs Can Top the Presses. *Los Angeles Times*. Available at: <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-blogs17mar17.0,4018765.full.story?coll=la-home-headlines>

McLeary, P. (2007, March 15). How TalkingPointsMemo Beat the Big Boys on the U.S. Attorney Story. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Available at: http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/how_talkingpointsmemo_beat_the.php

Moyers, B. (2007, April 27). Blogging for Truth: Interview with Josh Marshall. PBS. TV program available at: <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04272007/watch2.html>

Naughton, J. (2004, March 14). Power to the bloggers? That's only half the story. *The Observer*, from <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/business/story/0,6903,1168745,00.html>

Niles, R. (2007, March 20). Lessons from 'Talking Points Memo' and the U.S. Attorney Scandal. *Online Journalism Review*, from <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/070320niles/>

Porter, T. (January 22, 2004). Public Journalism, Privately Funded. *First Draft by Tim Porter*, from <http://timporter.com/firstdraft/archives/000246.html>

Rosen, J. (2004, March 14). The Legend of Trent Lott and the Weblogs. *PressThink*, from http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2004/03/15/lott_case.html

Scott, E. (2004). "Big media" meets the "bloggers": Coverage of Trent Lott's Remarks at Strom Thurmond's Birthday Party. Case program, John F. Kennedy School of Government. Harvard University, C14-041731.0. Cambridge, MA: President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Smith, R. (2007, March 22). Talking Points Site Kept Attorneys Story Alive. *All Things Considered (NPR)*, from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=908350b1>

Thompson, C. (2007, June 27). Blogs to Riches: The Haves and Have-nots of the Blogging Boom. *New York Magazine*, from <http://www.nymag.com/news/media/15967>

UNFOLDING OF THE LESSON:

1. Accidental Hero: Portrait of weather blogger Brendan Loy

- a. Students watch opening interview segment of the documentary with Brendan Loy.

Questions for discussion:

- What is blogger Brendan Loy's main point?
- Why did Spike Lee begin *When the Levees Broke* with Brendan Loy?

b. Students become more familiar with Brendan Loy by watching/listening to mainstream media interview clips he posted on *The Irish Trojan's Blog* in the immediate aftermath of Katrina.

— “Tucker and me” [video], posted September 7, 2005, from (<http://www.nd.edu/~bloy/movies/msnbc-loy.mov>);

— “Another radio interview” [audio], posted September 13, 2005, from (<http://www.brendanloy.com/2005/09/another-radio-interview.html>);

— “CBS 2 Chicago” [video/audio], posted September 13, 2005 <http://www.brendanloy.com/2005/09/cbs-2-chicago.html>

c. Based on this research, and additional research to learn more about Loy, the Weblog form, other weather blogs and the blogosphere, students create a profile of Loy as one example of a citizen journalist. The profile should take into account the way Loy sees himself and is seen by others, including journalists who interviewed him and readers who follow his blog.

Questions to discuss:

- What is a “weather nerd”? Does this label have positive / negative / no connotations?
- Though a meteorological amateur, does the 23-year old Loy have professional expertise as a blogger? How can expertise in blogging be acquired? Can it be verified?
- What did blogger Brendan Loy contribute to public knowledge of Hurricane Katrina at the end of August 2005?
- Should these contributions be considered reporting? commentary? something else? (Lesson 5: Commentary, also posted at <http://www.teachingthelevees.org/>)


2. The Rise of Citizen Journalism

a. Students watch the PBS news report. *The Rise of Citizen Journalism*, available at: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/july-dec05/citizen_11-16.html. With the additional online materials listed above, and others researched themselves, students extend their understanding of citizen journalism, to learn, in particular:

- 1) what role bloggers and other citizen journalists played during and after Hurricane Katrina;
- 2) how the relationship between citizen and professional journalists has been/is now evolving

Questions for discussion:

- What are some of the ways “citizen journalism” has been/can be defined?
- What are some differences between professional journalists and citizen journalists?
- How does someone become a citizen journalist? How can people “be the news?”
- Why have people in some US communities taken over reporting the local news?
- Why does *Wikipedia* have a larger readership than five major newspapers combined?
- Can you trust *Wikipedia*? Why, according to founder Jimmy Wales? According to some of its many volunteer editors, as reported by *The New York Times Magazine*?
- What is “the conversation of democracy”? How does interactivity fit into this model?
- What is “journalistic DNA” (according to Jan Schaffer, Director of the J-Lab)?
- What are the various strengths and weaknesses of top-down and bottom-up journalism?
- What do these suggest about the possible relationship(s) between citizen journalism and professional journalism? Are they alternatives to one another? Complementary?

- b. Concept Map.** With markers and wall-mounted paper, or with concept mapping software like Inspiration,  students collaborate to map citizen journalism. Their aim is to visualize
- 1) distinctions between citizen & professional journalism brought out by their discussion;
 - 2) the forms citizen journalism takes across diverse kinds of media and diverse news constituencies.

Students may need to develop several maps to organize this information. Their visualizations should strive to articulate conceptual schemes nuanced enough to pinpoint not just differences, but also similarities, say, between a Web site like the hyperlocal *Forum*, run by citizens from four small towns in New Hampshire, and the international social networking site Flickr.com, with 750,000 members across the globe.

NOTE: For this task, students may find it helpful to consult the diagrams in Chapter 1 of Bowman and Willis' report We Media (see pp. 10 and 12 of the PDF version).

CLOSURE: Activities for Media Literate Citizens

I. Citizen Journalist Blog:

One year after Katrina, more than a hundred local blogs now provide on-the-ground reports, photos and videos from New Orleans. Many are written by bloggers who go online in the off hours between gutting their houses and fighting with their insurance adjusters. Most bloggers say their primary duty is to counter prevailing myths: that the flood was a natural disaster, not an engineering debacle; that the city lies so far below sea level that it's not worth rebuilding; that people in New Orleans are now doing just fine and have adequate federal assistance.

—**Michael Tisserand**, “Don’t Mourn, Link,” *The Nation*, September 18, 2006

Using Blogger, or comparable site, students create a Weblog for news reporting or commentary on an issue of concern in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Depending on the availability of equipment, student blogs can be set up to highlight development of each individual blogger’s “voice”; or set up as group or expert blogs where students write together on a particular topic, (e.g., environmental degradation). Students become familiar with Weblog and citizen journalism standards by consulting various online resources (e.g., Rebecca Blood’s “Weblog Ethics”; the Center for Citizen Media). Student blogs should make use of hypertext, linking both to expert sources on the Internet and to other blogs within the class. If possible, students should integrate on site photography, or images researched on the Web, to give their messages added force.

NOTE: this activity can be combined with the photojournalism projects below (see Topics for Further Study). Additionally it can be combined with one or both Closure activities in Lesson 2: People of the Press, which involve research, reporting and interviewing.

II. Citizen Media Portraits

There is an enormous capacity for citizens to want to be able to participate in news and information in various ways—participate in interacting with it, questioning it, truth-squadding it and creating it. And now that they have the tech tools and the tech skills to do that, the appetite has only increased.

—**Jan Schaffer**, *The Rise of Citizen Journalism. The News Hour*, November 16, 2005.

As citizens become more proactive consumers, journalism must help equip them for that role and not continue to see them as a passive audience. Unless journalists can develop tools to do this, we will abdicate the role we once held—to provide the raw material of self-government. If, and only if, we can accompany citizens as they move into cyberspace will we be able to justify the hope placed in the press. . . .

—**Bill Kovach**, *Toward a New Journalism with verification. Nieman Reports*, Winter 2006.

With the understanding of citizen journalism they have gained from the PBS program, class discussions and mapping activities, students undertake to learn collaboratively—and to report on for the members of their community—how citizen journalists are active in their city/town/region. To frame their report, and to develop interview questions, students consult *Citizen Media: Fad or the Future of News?* This report on hyperlocal citizen media, produced by the J-Lab and edited by J-Lab Director Jan Schaffer, who appears in the PBS program, is available for download at http://www.kcnn.org/research/citizen_media_report/.

Relying on the J-Lab report, online tools (i.e., <http://wiki.cyberjournalist.net/citmedia>) and their own shoe-leather as reporters, students compile a list of prospective local citizen journalists/media producers to interview—for an eventual group portrait. The list may include any kind of citizen journalists, from solo bloggers to publishers of chains of community newspapers, but students should search for examples of pre-Internet grassroots journalism and media, such as alternative print weeklies and community radio. Speaking with people in these kinds of media outlets, along with those, like bloggers, who publish online, will allow students to assess the affordances and constraints of the Web medium for a hyperlocal citizen journalist’s endeavor.

Together students draft a project interview guide, to ensure that each interview subject is asked to comment/reflect upon on the same topics. Like the J-lab’s, students’ interviews should invite subjects themselves to describe what they are doing with citizen media and define the ways they measure their success. Dividing up the tasks of interviews, photography, text and visual editing, students determine as a group how to disseminate their citizen journalist portraits: through a school or community publication or Web site, student blog, or perhaps most appropriately, in a series of reports tailored for inclusion in the hyperlocal citizen media outlets they have found.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY:

I. Photojournalism and Citizen Media

Students begin by discussing the footage shot by poet Shelton Shakespear Alexander in the Superdome (Act I, Chapter 6: 01:03:43–01:04:13) Why does Lee include this brief piece of amateur media in the documentary? Why does he let audio from Alexander’s film serve as a track for other people’s (still) images? How are viewers affected by the way Lee mixes citizen filmmaking and photography with his own formal interview footage? **NOTE:** See materials on framing (*Lesson One*), photomontage (*Lesson Three*) and scoring in a film (*Lessons One, Four*).

A. “Tell a Story in 5 Frames”:

“What people don’t understand [said Current TV CEO Hyatt] is that there are tens of thousands of people out there who can create something great”. . . . During Hurricane Katrina, some residents of New Orleans made excellent contributions by taking cameras onto their home-made boats and making videos of their own neighborhoods.

– Compose yourself: journalism too is becoming interactive. *The Economist*, April 22, 2006.

Working in pairs, students identify an issue of concern in their own communities raised by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, which they can report or comment on as photojournalists. Students use digital cameras (or cell phones) to photograph on site. With the storyboard and slide show functions common to many software programs (e.g., PowerPoint, iPhoto), they create a 10 frame photo essay—with a title, but no captions—on their topic. Based on classmate feedback, they further edit their photo essays to a 5-Frame format, for uploading to the Flickr.com “Pool” *Tell a Story in 5 Frames*. Students discuss the feedback they receive on their photo essays from an international Flickr membership.

NOTE: Instructions on setting up Flickr.com accounts and creating a 5 frame photo essay are available at: <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/faculty/documents.htm?facid=jc1427>

B. The Photographer’s Voice:

Covering Katrina: from the first moment I saw it, I was cognizant that this was a moment in history that required what we were doing, we collectively were doing—creating a historical document. It needed to be done, and needed to be done well. And here was I, in a helicopter with a digital camera, being able to transmit pictures immediately from that helicopter.

—**Smiley N. Pool**, (transcription) *Capturing Catastrophe: Dallas Morning News’ Pulitzer Prize-winning photography of Hurricane Katrina*, along with audio of the photographers’ descriptions of the images.

Students study the audio slide show “Capturing Catastrophe”—in which photographers from *The Dallas Morning News* comment on their Pulitzer Prize winning images of Katrina—then write and narrate similar texts for their own 5-frame photo essays (see above). Students present their photo essays as PowerPoint slide shows with live or recorded narration or, if equipment is available, in a more sophisticated format. The emphasis should be on explaining to their viewers why they made the choices they did to tell the stories they wanted to tell. Students may share their narrated photo essays with the larger school community in a formal presentation, or by uploading them to a school/community Web site, online publication, or blog.

NOTE: This project may be coordinated with the Citizen Journalist Blog (above) and with several projects that focus on visual/verbal communication in Lesson 3: The Power of Images.

II. Hypertext Muckraker: Portrait of political blogger Joshua Marshall

One of the biggest news stories in the country—the Bush administration’s firing of a group of U.S. attorneys—was pieced together by the reporters of the blog Talking Points Memo. The bloggers used the usual tools of good journalists everywhere—determination, insight, ingenuity—plus a powerful new force that was not available to reporters until blogging came along: the ability to communicate almost instantaneously with readers via the Internet and to deputize those readers as editorial researchers, in effect multiplying the reporting power by an order of magnitude.

—**Terry McDermott**, “Blogs can top the presses,” *The Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 2007.

Reading Marshall’s TPM reminds me not so much of reading the New York Times, but of listening to a frill-free network newscast. . . . With effective use of voice and hyperlinking, Marshall is able to draw new readers into the story, allowing them to catch up, while keeping the

narrative moving for long-time followers. Newspapers do a lousy job of sustaining narratives. Broadcast's always whipped print on that front, and now blogs such as TPM can combine the best of both worlds, providing print's depth with broadcast's voice and narrative.

—**Robert Niles**, “Lessons from ‘Talking Points Memo’ and the U.S. attorney scandal,”
Online Journalism Review, March 20, 2007

Using the blogosphere’s research tools (e.g., Lexis Nexis, Wayback Machine, site archives), as well as published case studies, students track the career of political blogger Joshua Micah Marshall, proprietor of Talking Points Memo and offshoots TPM Cafe, TPM Muckraker, and TPM Election Central (<http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com>). Marshall is often credited with the Internet’s “first scalp”—the resignation of incoming Republican Majority Leader Trent Lott in December 2002. He is one of a small number of professional journalists who not only moved early and easily from print to the Web—he began blogging in 2000—but since then has consistently innovated with his new form.

Now an independent media company employing other journalists, Talking Points Memo also draws on the skills of a large cadre of readers—even on short notice and weekends—to sift through documents “dumped” by the government on Friday evenings, for instance. Marshall sometimes says about himself the same thing Brendan Loy told Spike Lee: he simply sounds the alarm when the press is ignoring important information. However, some of the information TPM generates with the help of its readers is not the sort that mainstream reporters go after—because of professional journalists’ traditions and constraints. Bloggers, not bound by these, are more likely to ask, as Spike Lee did: what was left out of the picture? Bloggers might reframe a story, or might challenge conventional notions about what constitutes “news”—and who decides.

Students explore these issues by examining three cases in which Talking Points “made news”:

- a) the 15-days between Trent Lott’s racially charged remarks and resignation (December 2002)
- b) the Bush Administration’s failed Social Security Privatization campaign (2004–2005)
- c) the firing of 9 US Attorneys and subsequent Congressional hearings (began December 2006)

Questions for research and analysis:

- in each case, how did Marshall leverage intellectual, social and technical capabilities of his medium to highlight information that previously had been left out of the story frame?
- was the information already in the public domain? or did Marshall create it?
- where does *truth-squadding* fall in a media saturated society’s mix of reporting & opinion?
- how does *truth-squadding* relate to the honorific *muckrakers* used at TPM?
- how can many-to-many, bottom-up journalism maintain standards of trustworthiness?
- where do TPM’s reader-researchers fall among citizen and professional journalists?
- how does TPM Media’s ratio of amateurs to professionals compare to that of *OhMyNews*?
- could TPM’s mix of volunteers and professionals be a replicable/sustainable media model?