

DIGITAL PHOTO, BLOGS AND THE (RE) DEMOCRATIZATION OF REPORTAGE

The article attached comes from a technology-news blog site buzzing with commentary over last year's release of photos of torture from Abu Ghraib prison. While the sensation of scandal surrounding these photos has largely diminished (for better or worse), the implications for what constitutes "news" and "reportage" has never been more salient. The most interesting comment made by the blogger was an implication that digital photography and personal web spaces (blogs, profiles, websites, etc) have become to the institution of media what Martin Luther's printing press became to the Catholic Church (and the consequent Protestant Reformation). The printing press allowed for the inexpensive, mass distribution of the scriptures, thereby affording lay people a greater agency over their spirituality and reducing the Church's role as the sole medium between the congregation and the divine. Similarly, digital photography and web blogs, with their mutual ease in the production, reproducibility and (most importantly) mass distribution of images and text, provide all users with an augmented control over the channels of information from which we now receive our news.

While the acquisition of traditional news was once intended to be completely objective, it is now a common-place assumption that reportage is a tainted practice. What news is covered by which network and then framed according to an ideological spin is now so heavily mired in a political agenda that consumers have little option but to either turn to other sources of information or (more significantly) produce their own reportage. When an officer in Iraq sends pictures of the frontlines that are not controlled by the military, or blogs broadcast the covert sexual orientations of closeted members of Congress, or a family announces the birth of a new sibling, these are all circumstances of personal reportage that derives their significance from the lack of mediation between news source and recipient. While this brings to question issues of credibility, it also heralds an ongoing reformation of the media that, like the Protestants of old, seeks not to destroy the tradition of reportage, but make it accessible to everyone.

Moblogging from the front and the new Reformation

Posted by Clay at 11:28 AM

James Hong of HotorNot fame launched [YAFRO](#) as a Friendster clone (the acronym is for Yet Another Friendster Rip-off.) Since then, they've turned it into a moblog, and Hong has recently posted a list of [US soldiers posting pictures to YAFRO from Iraq](#). Images straight from the front, with Dan Rather nowhere in sight...

Jaques Barzun, author of the marvelous history of modernity *From Dawn to Decadence* (1500 - present), makes the point that the Catholic Church as a pan-European political force was done in by the Protestant Reformation, itself fueled by the printing press. Once the Church lost the ability to control the direct perception of scripture, thanks to the printing of (relatively) cheap bibles in languages other than Latin, their loss of political hegemony followed.

This is what we are seeing now relative to the military's control of information. A year or so ago, someone in the DoD told me that the thing that would most affect the prosecution of the war in Iraq would be images of DAB's — Dead American Bodies. The unplanned spread of photos of coffins, and now of torture victims, means that control of this part of the war is outside the military's hands.

The spread of images from Iraq, both relatively plain ones like most of what's on the YAFRO blogs to the horrifying images of torture and abuse from the Abu Ghraib prison are all part of the removal of bottlenecks that will change the political structure in ways we can't predict.

And it isn't just military affairs, its politics and business and everything else, from [attempts to coordinate evidence of Apple's manufacturing errors](#) (previously handled case-by-case, but now becoming a kind of grass-roots class action protest, to Apple's horror) to the [distributed amicus brief on the SCO case conducted by the Linux community](#) to the recent [right of Americans to get their medical records on request and within 30 days](#) to [the publication of spoilers for popular TV shows](#). (Read this last link now — its from the Times and goes away in 5 days, and although on the surface its about TV, its really a musing on life in a fully disclosed culture.)

I remember hearing about the security efforts being put into place around delivery of Ken Starr's Whitewater (Lewinsky) report as it was delivered, and thought "Why are they bothering? It will be in the web in 48 hours..." I was wrong, of course — it was on the web the next day. Now I hear that military officials are debating whether to release other photos with evidence of American torture of Iraqis, and I wonder again why they are bothering. If the images exist, they will be released. It's a fantasy to assume that they can re-assert control of the spread of images by fiat.

A parallel and a counter-parallel jump to mind. The parallel is Barzun's point that during the initial furor of the Protestant Reformation, neither the Church nor Luther and his peers wanted a schism — on the contrary, all of them constantly maintained that what they wanted was to preserve the Church. It's just that the Lutherans wanted to preserve the Church while reforming the relationship between the institution and the laity, while the Church itself was willing to talk about all sorts of reforms *except* institutional privilege.

At a guess, filtered versus unfiltered information, in many settings and particularly around control of audio and visuals as opposed to words, is going to precipitate the same sort of conflict. (The music industry is a canary in that particular coal mine.)

The counter-parallel is from *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, where Dom Claude holds up a newly cheap and accessible bible, points to his beloved Cathedral, and says “This will kill that.” The word was more powerful than the image.

Now we are in a mirror world, where the newly free production and distribution of images is the novelty. Hearing about DABs or torture victims is nothing like seeing them — I had to rip the cover of the Economist this week because my wife can’t stand to see the image of the man on the box with the electrodes in his hands.

New tools for spreading of the word are powerful, of course — witness the weblog explosion in all its complexity. But the spread of images is a different *kind* of thing, not least because images pass across linguistic borders like a lava flow. Now that production and distribution of images are in the hands of the laity, it’s a safe bet that we are entering a world of “That will kill this.” We just don’t know what parts of society “this” refers to yet.