

Rebellious Media Conference: leading the way in the information age

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[Niki Seth-Smith](#) [1] 10 October 2011

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Radical media are far behind the mainstream in terms of readership and revenue. But when it comes to understanding media's future, the 'alternative' press are ahead of the curve.

Last weekend saw a [Rebellious Media Conference](#) [7] in London. I went along and enjoyed it, particularly one of the smaller sessions on Saturday: 'Mind the Gap: What's Missing from the UK Radical Media Scene'. It was an opportunity to discuss where the non-mainstream media of the left was failing, and how we could do better. I say 'we' because while OurKingdom publishes from across the spectrum, I think of us as 'on the left' in terms of supporting equality, democracy and openness.

I went along to eat my slice of humble pie in good company, but left the session surprisingly heartened.

Kate Belgrave of the New Left Project and Michael Pooler of Manchester Mule chaired the session along with members of the video collectives SchMovies (Paul Light) and Reel News (Shaun Dey). The fifty or so participants were split into workshops, to establish the main problems facing radical media today.

These were the main three that we came up with:

- The proliferation of publications and the lack of an aggregator to help readers navigate this content
- Shortage of journalistic skills, as content is increasingly provided by citizens with little or no formal training
- Lack of funding, particularly of funding streams that don't threaten editorial independence and integrity.

Underfunding, proliferation of platforms, reliance on unpaid labour: these are perennial issues for 'alternative' media. But what struck me during the session is that the problems we were discussing are now also increasingly faced by the mainstream. Far from being the 'alternative', we – certainly openDemocracy as a whole – are redefining the media, and the mainstream will soon be forced to follow.

Take the proliferation issue. No one wants to be 'merely' a consumer on the radical left; we are all would-be producers. Every passing week, it seems, marks the birth or death of another ambitious pamphlet, paper, magazine, blog or webzine. While right-wing readers on the net have Conservative Home, followers of the left blogosphere have developed personalized navigation and dissemination

habits and practices through necessity. As for print, while Michael Pooler discussed the idea of a radical tabloid that might serve as a pointer to other publications, a founder of the News on Sunday reminded the group of that tabloid's short lifespan back in 1987. We don't do 'one-stop-shop' very well, it seems.

We discussed the weaknesses of over-proliferation: energies are dissipated; echo chambers develop; publications merrily produce near-identical content unaware of each other's existence. What was not raised was that this is no longer (if it ever was) a 'problem for the left'; it is a challenge that media - all media - are increasingly forced to confront in the information age. I would argue that we are better equipped to take on the challenge as we understand the enormous democratic potential as well as the problems entailed, while the mainstream struggles to acknowledge the seismic scale of the shift.

Last Saturday's exploratory discussion of the opportunities and problems raised by the rise of the reader-producer contrasted sharply with a session I attended on the BBC and democracy in March. This was at the POLIS Value of Journalism conference, when I watched Hosam El Sökkari of Yahoo! Middle East clash with Helen Boaden and Nik Gowing of the BBC on the role of citizen journalists. To me, it was the future talking to the past. El Sökkari argued that the role of media professionals would increasingly be to authenticate, interpret, filter, package and disseminate material from a 'fuzzy cloud of information', supplied in large part by ordinary citizens. Boaden countered that the mainstream media did not face a growing threat from 'alternative' platforms, while Gowing dismissed the very term 'citizen journalist', advocating their denigration to 'information givers' (implying feeders or foot-soldiers for the professionals).

The non-mainstream media of the left understands the blurring of distinctions between editor, journalist, reader and citizen - for us they were never that distinct to begin with. We understand the opportunities and dangers of this new age because we always have been a 'fuzzy cloud of information'. So, while there was plenty of humble pie to go round at the 'Mind the Gap' session, I left in higher spirits than when I came in. We could do with more opportunities to work through our weaknesses and strengths together. My thanks to the organisers of the Rebellious Media Conference - Peace News, Ceasefire, the NUJ, Red Pepper, Undercurrents and visionOntv - for providing a space for discussion.

Country or region: UK

Topics: Democracy and government

[View the discussion thread.](#) [8]

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 About the author

Niki Seth-Smith is a freelance journalist and Co-Editor of OurKingdom.



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