

Netizens Are Critical to Citizen Journalism

[Citizen Reporters in Their Own Words] Ronda Hauben from the U.S.

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It is with a smile that I prepare today to go to Korea and the 2006 OhmyNews International Citizen Reporters' Forum.

When leaving the forum last year I remember having a conversation with one of the citizen reporters. She said she had been thinking and felt that perhaps one of the most important aspects of citizen journalism was that there are netizens, people online who have found that the Internet is helpful in their efforts and desire to make the world a better place.

She felt that it was from the netizens that the significant aspects of citizen journalism will develop. She told me she wanted to be sure to share this with me before she left the forum.

I first came to learn about OhmyNews in 2003 when I saw an article in the Financial Times that said the "netizens" in South Korea had made it possible to elect the President of the country. This made me curious and I wanted to learn what I could about what had happened.

From Korean friends online and off I came to know about OhmyNews. A Korean friend showed me the Korean edition, which was all there was in 2003, and she translated some of the many comments there were on different articles.

She encouraged me to write to founder Oh Yeon-ho with my questions about OhmyNews.

I probably did try to write an email and sent it, but don't remember exactly and didn't at the time get an answer. Instead Mr. Oh, it seems, was preparing to do an English edition so that the many people who were interested in OhmyNews but who couldn't read Korean would still get an idea of the idea of citizen journalism.

A little while later, a netizen I met online said she would submit an article I had written about the Howard Dean campaign in the U.S. to OhmyNews. In it I compared Dean's election campaign to the campaign for the presidency of South Korea. She translated it into Korean, and it appeared in both English and Korean in an issue of the Korean OhmyNews in March of 2004.

This all raises an important question for me that I hope will be considered at the 2006 forum: How is the spread of OhmyNews and OhmyNews International connected to the fight for democracy? The fact that the birth of the Korean edition of OMN was connected to the continuing fight for democracy in South Korea seems an important aspect of any effort to spread the lessons from the Korean OhmyNews to other publications and to other countries.

The netizens of South Korea who contributed their articles as citizen reporters when OMN began and who continued to contribute the articles as it grew, are a factor that is to be considered and understood. Also, it seems there was a staff for the newspaper which not only encouraged the submissions, but who also helped to cover the developments in the fight for more democracy in Korea for the young newspaper.

I have found that learning about and understanding the developments in the Korean fight for more democracy is an encouragement to continue working with OhmyNews. I often wish that OhmyNews would have more of the articles from the Korean version of the newspaper translated into English to be part of the English edition. That way there would be more knowledge of what is happening in Korea among those who read and write for the International edition of the newspaper.

Next year is the 20th anniversary of the victory of the 1987 revolution in South Korea.

Perhaps in honor of this event OhmyNews can find a way to share more of the events of the Korean democratization efforts with those who can only read the English edition.

I often wonder if there is any way there could be an American version of OhmyNews which would be a champion in the fight against the conservative press and politics that dominate U.S. society. It seems so difficult to consider this possibility here in the U.S. as the conservative forces are so strong and pervasive.

It seems that they would find a way to impose the need to make money on whatever was created, rather than recognizing the need to have a social purpose as the critical thrust. This is why I feel it is so important to have some knowledge of how OhmyNews grew out of the progressive movement in South Korea. It is important to remember that an early goal of Mr. Oh was to create a media culture in which “the quality of news determined whether it won or lost,” not the power and prestige of the media organization that printed the article.

Last year’s forum was a very memorable experience. There are many special events I recall, but the most special was after I gave the brief talk I had been invited to give. Several citizen reporters for the Korean edition of OhmyNews came to embrace me and thank me for the talk. The talk I gave was about the online research of Michael Hauben in 1992-1993 which discovered that the Net was encouraging people to be able to participate as citizens in a way previously impossible.

This research – observing what was developing on the Net – resulted in the concept of “netizen.” The continuing spread of the Net and the netizens are symbolized by “netizens” I met during last year’s OMNI forum. They, in turn, are a tribute to and an encouragement for the spread of OMNI’s great experiment.
