
Participatory Journalism

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

CONSIDER THE DEMOGRAPHICS. Fewer people are reading print newspapers, and readers of the Jewish press are aging. While the mainstream press is consolidated in a few corporate hands, there is an explosion of what is variously known as grassroots or citizen or participatory journalism: people are not only reading the news, but also writing, editing, and publishing it in an unprecedented range of media. How are Jews participating in this movement?

The Working Group on Jews, Media, and Religion at the Center for Religion and Media, New York University, has been studying just such emergent cultural phenomena. Given our concern with what Jews *are* doing, rather than with what they *should* be doing, we are interested in developing a research agenda for studying such media practices, which we view as social practices. These practices give rise to distinctive forms of community, as well as to media specific generational divides: younger technologically savvy Jews are increasingly drawn to digital media for their news, while their parents continue to rely on print media.

Judging by three recent studies of American Jewry — *American Jewish Identity Survey* (Graduate Center of the City of New York and Center for Cultural Judaism, 2001), *OMG! How Generation Y Is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era* (Reboot, 2005), and *Assessing the Impact of Culture and the Arts on Jewish Identity Building* (UJA-Federation of New York, in progress) — young Jewish adults, particularly those who are not connected to the organized Jewish community, are of particular concern to the sponsors of these studies.

Attention to the media practices of this born-digital generation reveals a tectonic shift in the ways that Jewish youth and young adults relate to one another and understand themselves. Their comfort with what has been called “social software” (blogs, bookmarking tools, wiki-server software that allows anyone to add and edit web content, whether for a wikipedia [encyclopedia] or most recently wikinews), is central to their involvement in participatory journalism, which offers not only alternatives to mainstream news media — whether print or broadcast — but also alternative modes of community. A large proportion of this extremely diverse generation prefers the many-to-many mode of communication over the one-to-many (or broadcast) mode, a preference that is consistent with their attraction to informal kinds of association over formal affiliations with Jewish organizations. Whereas it has long been assumed that strong ties (family, close friends, local community) are the key to Jewish continuity, social software activates a broad range of weak ties that have value in their own right (see the work of sociologist Mark Granovetter) and that expand the possibilities for converting weak ties into strong ones. Based on consent, rather than descent, communities of interest, affinity, and practice are multiple and distributed. Proximity is a function of the intensity of communication, not physical closeness. In sum, the notion of social software points to the primacy of connection — networked, self-organizing, peer-to-peer, bottom-up — in the production and circulation of content and the preference for collaborative and processual ways of working, even when a “cool” site is underwritten by the Jewish establishment.

What does journalism produced in this mode look like? For Jay Rosen (“What’s Radical About the Weblog Form in Journalism,” http://www.lifewithalacrity.com/2004/10/tracing_the_evo.html), weblog journalism is volunteeristic, rather than commercial, participatory, scalable (from a very few readers to thousands of them), information flows from the public to the press, rather than the other way around, and for these and other reasons weblog journalism is a more democratic medium. For example, Steven I. Weiss’s *Campus*, which celebrates these principles, aims to combine “old standards and new

practices” in its coverage of Jewish campus news.

Such blogs are not about creating new ways to deliver traditional journalism, though that certainly happens, as can be seen from the online presence of print media. Rather, they are about new journalistic practices for both professionals and amateurs, whether reporters, editors, or publishers. This can be seen in The Jewish Bloggers Webring. This webring, “for everyone who considers themselves Jewish,” includes 493 active members, with 30 awaiting approval, as of this writing. Like blogs more generally, many of the Jewish blogs disaggregate news coverage from various sources and, consistent with the blogger’s particular point of view, reaggregate, recontextualize, and recirculate that coverage in ways that are designed to encourage comment. What emerges is a recombinant Jewish newssphere, viral in its spread and unprecedented in its vastness, heterogeneity, and interactivity.

Many of these Jewish blogs report in the first person from the front lines of daily life: the mundane world of an American suburban teenager, the loneliness of being the sole Jew in a Midwestern town, the frustrations of a *baal tshuvah*, the otherwise hidden conflicts within a Hasidic enclave, the struggles of the newly converted, the anxieties of a new *oleh*. For example, a group of Israeli settlers recently created www.YeshaSpeaksOut.org in order to speak directly to the world about “what life in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza is really like for the Jews who have chosen to settle there.” They want to counteract the mainstream press, which has labeled them “obstacles to peace.”

Whether or not the kind of journalism that arises from such media practices is really journalism is of less concern than what the media practices themselves tell us about the Jewish life they shape. Where life is news, the source to cultivate is oneself. The intensity of self-reflection and public expression in the Jewish newsspace — and the dazzling diversity of Jewish life in the making that can be witnessed there — is, in its way, making history.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is University Professor and Professor of Performance Studies at New York University. She is also Affiliated Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies. She and Jeffrey Shandler are co-conveners of the Working Group on Jews, Media, and Religion at the Center for Religion and Media, New York University, which is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Her books include Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage and Image Before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland, 1864-1939 (with Lucjan Dobroszycki), The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times with Jonathan Karp and Painted Memories: A Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust in collaboration with her father. Reprinted with permission from Sh'ma (www.shma.com) June 2005.