

# **The localisation of a global movement**

## **How ‘citizen journalism’ is embraced by**

### **a Hungarian news-portal**

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*“We should approach democratic communication as a live creature that contracts and expands with its own very vital rhythms- rythms which often have very little to do with the linear, pre-planned, and rational processes that informs our scholarly inquiries” (Clemencia Rodriguez, Fissures in the Mediascape:2001 36)*

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates the evolution and localisation of citizen journalism, a global partisan media movement. Taking into consideration that the movement is being assimilated by mainstream media all over the world, this paper wishes to highlight this process with a special regard to the democratisation of the public sphere. The research underlying the paper is a qualitative analysis of a Hungarian news-portal that incorporates citizen journalism. The central argument of the paper is that such assimilation undoubtedly changes some core aspects of citizen journalism, but does not necessarily undermine its potential to democratise the public sphere.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The global mediascape, since the emergence of the Internet has been gradually transforming, and events such as 9/11, the London and the Madrid bombings, the Tsunami in Indonesia or the Katrina Hurricane gave a boost to this transformation and signalled its power to those involved in both the margin and the mainstream of the media world. One of the fundamental developments that the digital revolution helped to speed up is the proliferation of user-generated content, which holds promises of the democratisation of the media, and of the public sphere, so that engineered consent can be replaced by the Habermasian ideal of deliberative democracy.

Some theorists suggest that mainstream media has lost control over the flow of communication, which can have subversive effects. “Communication in distributed networks becomes potentially transformative when networks spill outside the control of established organizations ( ...) if not controlled, they embody the Internet’s potential as a relatively open public sphere in which the ideas and plans of protest can be exchanged with relative ease, speed and global scope” (Howard Rheingold in Bennett:2003 20).

Blogs are powerful tools for distributing unorthodox views, dissent opinions, popularising alternative lifestyles, and, as it is fashionable to point out these days, for building communities. However, it is important to bear in mind that new technologies by themselves cannot trigger social and political changes. To take two examples, in South Korea, where civil society was suppressed and the political regime was highly conservative, citizen journalism as a decentralised communication network played an important role in launching reforms in the country. In the USA, due to the shocks that hit the nation, and to the intense dissatisfaction with mainstream media, the professional and the community aspects of citizen journalism has been particularly strong.

In Hungary, one of the most crucial factors that determine the potential role of citizen journalism is internet penetration. Although one would presume that digital divide is a strictly economic issue, studies have shown that in Hungary at least, social and cultural explanations are more accurate. “Investigation into non-use has shown the continuation of the trend that it is rather cognitive-cultural reasons than financial ones why people are absent from the world wide web”<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, the regional, economic and cultural inequalities in terms of internet use must also be taken into consideration. According to the 2006 Hungarian annual report of the World Internet Project, internet use in Hungary is still low. In 2006, 36% of the population over 14 used the net regularly. Age, education, income and residence were important influencing factors. The average age of Internet users is 20 years lower than that of the non-users. In the capital, more than 50% of the population use the web, whereas in small towns, only 38%, and in villages only 25%.<sup>2</sup>

My main research question can be summarised as follows: *What are the political implications of a partisan media movement’s assimilation by mainstream media, and how does the localisation of a global movement takes place?* By political implications I mean the potential democratisation of the public sphere. Under localisation I understand the specific struggles between agents in a local media field, where the global movement seeps in. To answer the second question I will use Bourdieu’s field theory as a theoretical framework.

## 1.1 Method

Citizen journalism is in its infancy in Hungary, but mainstream media already cast its net on the blogosphere hoping it will gain momentum. It was in light of this process that I chose to conduct my fieldwork at the editorial office of Index, the second biggest news-portal in

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ithaka.hu/Kezdolap?&news\\_id=7&page=details](http://www.ithaka.hu/Kezdolap?&news_id=7&page=details)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ithaka.hu/Kezdolap?&news\\_id=7&page=details](http://www.ithaka.hu/Kezdolap?&news_id=7&page=details)

Hungary, which has recently purchased a weblog hosting site, Blog.hu. The fieldwork for this thesis was conducted in 2007 in April. I prepared nine in-depth interviews and distributed among the staff an attitude-measuring questionnaire, adapted from Morris's (2007) factor score analysis on civic journalism. I must note that the sample I obtained is not representative even of the 60 member Index staff.

I felt more satisfied with my in-depth interviews, which I mostly conducted in the editorial office, so I had a chance to observe the work environment. My respondents were very informative and devoted considerable time to my questions, quite surprisingly for a news-portal working under intense time-pressure. I managed to talk to gate-keepers – the chief editor, the content developer of Blog.hu, as well as its technological developer and support director. I also interviewed journalists from various sections of the portal, who write blogs themselves. If I had more time, I would also have conducted interviews with journalists who did not write blogs. I also used secondary literature on the history of Index, to be able to “position the agents in the field”.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

To reiterate my two research questions, firstly I wished to examine how the spread of a new technology, embraced by citizen journalism restructures the field of journalism. One obvious change is that outsiders, i.e. amateurs enter the field. One can ask, what values they display to legitimate their participation in the field, what alliances are formed, and for what explicit and implicit purposes they are recruited. Do they contest the power of mainstream media, and, meanwhile, do they strengthen the positions of certain, formerly more or less powerless agents of the field? In order to answer these questions, I retraced the emergence of the journalistic field, as discussed by Bourdieu, Habermas and Curran, to be able to position citizen journalism and to provide me with an analytical framework. My second goal of inquiry was whether the mainstream assimilation of a partisan movement in the context of the global information society undermines the movement's potential to democratise the public sphere, or, on the contrary, it enhances it. For this question first I present the concept of mediated public sphere, which is still with us today, secondly I review some debating theories on the postmodern public sphere, to be able to critically review citizen journalism's democratising role. Lastly, to provide a Hungarian context, I also describe the structure of mediasystems before and after 1989 with some notes on journalistic professionalism.

### 2.1 The evolution of the journalistic field

According to Bourdieu, the journalistic field as such emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a polarisation between sensational newspapers and newspapers, featuring analysis and commentary. The latter claimed objectivity as its distinguishing quality. (Bourdieu 1998:70). Both poles had their own principles of legitimation, just as any other field. One was peer



recognition, which was built on the internal “values” of the field, and the other was recognition by the public. So, one can say, that legitimation was , either based on conformity to professional standards, or on market success.

Bourdieu notes, that the journalistic field has permanently been subject to market demands, whether directly through advertisers or indirectly through audience ratings. This takes us to the issue of autonomy, both with regard to the newspaper and to the individual journalist. The autonomy of individual journalists is measured by the degree to which the press ownership is concentrated, the paper’s autonomy is measured by the sources of its income, as state subsidy or advertisement.

In Britain, 18<sup>th</sup> century press proprietors highly depended on political patronage, both in terms of advertising and in terms of information provision, consequently they were disdained by the elite society. The majority of newspaper owners in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were merchants, tradesmen, printers, booksellers, while journalists were recruited mainly from the petite bourgeoisie. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century their prestige gradually increased thanks to their growing political autonomy and bigger circulation. (Curran:2002) When one looks at the social hierarchisation of the journalistic field, it is important to note that already in the beginning there emerged a vast journalistic subproletariat, forced into a kind of self-censorship by an increasingly precarious job situation. Their descendants today are represented by the freelance journalists, who are obliged to sell their work at a low price and are the most exposed to editorial authority.

To explain the social conditions and consequences of the formation of commercial press, Curran, in line with Habermas, recounts that the growing middle class, which hitherto had been marginalized from political decision making, became the major consumer of newspapers, which also helped them build a positive social identity. They began to see

themselves as England's economic and moral backbone. (Curran:2002) Another effect of the commercial press was that it gradually legitimated the market system.

I find an interesting parallel between what Bourdieu calls the 'journalist intellectuals' and citizen journalists. As he writes, they have a dual attachment to both fields and "thereby manage to evade the requirements specific to each of the worlds they inhabit, importing into each the capabilities they have more or less completely acquired in the other. In so doing they exercise two major effects. On the one hand, they introduce new forms of cultural production, located in a poorly defined intermediary position between academic esotericism and journalistic exotericism" (Bourdieu 1998 74). Citizen journalists also like to pose as experts in their chosen field – be it technology or marketing or academia or media by that matter, and lay readers tend to accept their value judgements as they have less knowledge on the subject. Meanwhile they exempt themselves from conforming to journalistic rules, such as source validation or source identification.

## 2.2 The mediated public sphere

The central role of media in relation to the public sphere is a feature of modern societies, as public sphere is where a community, be it a village, a town, a subculture or a nation state **exchanges information** and where **public opinion** is generated. Since Habermas's seminal work on the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), it has also been used as an analytic category, which "links actors, factors and context together", [with an emphasis on] "institutional and discursive contingencies". (Dahlgren 1991 2). In Habermas's historical and critical analysis of the emerging bourgeois public sphere at the turn on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, the coffehouses and salons served as forums, where people as private men gathered to discuss the economic, cultural and political issues of the day. Their function was

highly different from the representational publicness that the monarchs and their aristocracy displayed in the courts. The latter was showlike and exclusive, the former meaningful and inclusive in principle. Habermas argued that in industrialised welfare societies the rational public sphere was again replaced by empty representativeness, with media as a central agent of engineered consent. This was what he called a 'mediated public sphere' (Habermas: 1989)

Other scholars were not so dismissive about 'mediated public sphere', some argued that radio and television in the 1920's and 30's provided a basis for social integration and solidarity by providing shared experiences and shared meanings in a social constructivist sense.

New Media, with Computer Mediated Communications (CMC) raised hopes that the top-down 'mediated public sphere' might disintegrate due to the new discussion foras, specialized groups of interests and new dialogical spaces on the Net. (Oblak 2002). Some scholars drew a parallel between chatforums in cyberspace and salons and coffee houses in the European Enlightenment period (Connery 1997, Knapp (1997), arguing that they signal the revitalisation of the public sphere.

Oblak argues that Internet representations are more democratic than traditional electronic representations, given that they can generate interactive exchanges about them. She phrases it very succinctly, saying that the Internet gives room to "representations in dialogue, and dialogues about representations". That is, the methods of representation change. Today, local governments on their websites give room for comments and questions, and netizens can critically discuss how powerful agents represent themselves. What she does not account for is that the feedback mechanisms are not automatic, and civic dialogues about representations do not necessarily have an impact on institutional representations.

## 2.3 Postmodern features of the digital public sphere

Building a dichotomy between modern and postmodern public spheres obviously produces a rather schematic picture that may not necessarily apply universally. However, there are many generalisable features in the digital public sphere that can be contrasted with characteristics of the modern public sphere. To cite a few from György's model (1997), normativity is replaced by plurality, predictability by unpredictability, high culture by mall or popular culture, argumentation by narrativity, citizen awareness by consumer behaviour, linguistic turns by image turns, abstraction by sensuality, normativity by plurality, logical enforcement by theatricality and impressiveness. Furthermore, whereas the modern public sphere was based on rational understanding, and was led by ideology, the postmodern one is based on the metacritique of rationality and led by economic technology. Lastly, while the modern public sphere was a big consumer of theories, the postmodern public sphere is antitheoretical. An important aspect that György raises is the social and cultural meaning of the spread and need for 'infotainment' (mixture of entertainment and informing) and 'edutainment' (mixture of entertainment and education). He claims that it signals "the meeting of cultural spheres that were artificially and radically separated for centuries." (György 1997: 87). It is an important remark, as the commercialisation of news and information is normally resented, and viewed only from the economic perspective. Some scholars offered the 'discotheque' metaphor (Bankhurst) to emphasise its sensual, visual and noisy character, as opposed to the "coffee house" of the Enlightenment period.

### 2.3.1 Chaos

Disorder or unpredictability has been conceptualised by other scholars as well in relation to the digital public sphere. Brian McNair, coined the term 'cultural chaos' to

describe the “unchecked digital revolution led by globalised media” (...) saying the grounds for optimism in this are that cultural chaos, like chaos in nature, can be both destructive and creative. On the one hand, the networked nature of globalised news culture makes it easier than ever before to terrorise the planet. If terrorism is Baudrillard's "theatre of cruelty", then the internet and satellite TV have made all the world its stage”<sup>3</sup>. Nair argues that the digital public sphere is a highly complex space that connects national, transnational and global levels of public discourses, with potentially subversive effects, and that that powerful elites cannot control it as well as the less complex and regionally more bounded public spheres.

### 2.3.2 Fragmentation

The normative, rationalist public sphere ideally provides forums for debate, where agents represent their unique interests and the conflicting parties can reach a consensus and establish the norms of a community. Mediated public sphere is a deterioration to that norm, but to a certain extent it also creates a shared knowledge and experience for a community, and its content is not totally predictable from the consumer's point of view, therefore he or she can be exposed to viewpoints other than his/hers. Cass Sunstein( 2001) argues that digital news, like the Wall Street Journal's `personalized` electronic editions are “approaching a complete personalization of the system of communications” (Sunstein 2001 5). Such communication systems result in the “Daily Me” a term he borrowed from MIT technology specialist Nicholas Negroponte (Negroponte 1995), which is a “communication package that is personally designed, with each component fully chosen in advance”. In other words, the filtering process is not done by the news outlet, like in the systematic propaganda model of Herman and Chomsky (1988), but exclusively by the consumer. This creates “social

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<sup>3</sup> It is a question whether one should regard Brian McNair a „journalist intellectual” in the Bourdieuan sense, given that he popularises his theories in a national daily online news portal. On the other hand, one might argue that in the „postmodern culture” such dual belonging becomes the norm and they do not threaten the „pure” values of the academic field, given that the validity of such internal „pure values” are called into question.

fragmentation, and a decrease in the power of general interest intermediaries”. Note that with the advent of books, the intermediary function of the church was also undermined, and similar warnings of social desintegration were announced. Sunstein justifies the inherent risk in fragmentation by the social-psychological law of group-polarization, which means that “after deliberation, people are likely to move toward a more extreme point in the direction to which the group`s members were originally inclined”(Sunstein 2001 65). If people discuss public issues with mostly like-minded people, as it is indeed the trend on online forums and politically engaged websites, they easily move towards extreme views.

#### **2.3.4 Identity**

To understand the nature of the transforming public sphere, the identity of citizens or netizens in the digital environment is crucial. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century the bourgeois public sphere was “based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple” (Habermas:1989 56). Public identity was a combination of ‘common humanness’ that grew out of a newly found subjectivity, manifested in the world of letters, and a middle class identity, represented by the emancipated property owner.

In the digital era, there is a new wave of individualisation that restructures the webs of social cohesion. “The ease of identifying with distant and diverse partners in problem definition, solution, and cosmopolitan community is the engine that drives the process of individualization into new collective forms. (Beck,cited by Bennett 2003 34 ) This process has consequences in both the economic and the political domains. What emerges, are “cosmopolitan professional groups (Boyer,Hannerz). “Identity bonds weaken from groups, and people have less reason to create and maintain their identities through conventional (partisan, national and ideological) forms of social conflict and exclusion. (...) These identity

changes have resulted in a shift toward a *lifestlye politics* in which ideology, party loyalties, and elections are replaced with issue networks that offer more personal and often activist solutions for problems (Bennett 2003)

I assume that whereas in the bourgeois public sphere it was the newly found subjectivity that gave munition for private men to have a voice in the political debates, today, the trend is the opposite. Politics is the ammunition that helps individuals to create and recreate their identities and to find their ‘common humanness’. That process is expressed by such theorists as Dalhgren (1991), who in line with theorists of radical democracy, like Mouffe and Rodriguez talk about the emergence of the self as a reflexive project, as an ongoing process of shaping and reshaping identity. According to them citizenship is not a formal issue, it is *self creation* through communicative means.

## **2.4 Specifitities of the Hungarian post-socialist mediasystem**

It is important to briefly review the structure of the mediasystem under socialism, and how it evolved since. Seeing what the Hungarian media system looks like today, helps us better understand what role citizen journalism can play in the Hungarian public sphere. If the media system is dependent on political and economic powers, citizen journalism has a potentially important political role to play in the democratization of the public sphere.

James Curran (1991) provided a decent summary for different theoretical perspectives on the public sphere, with the role of media in it. Using his model, we can claim, that in Hungary under socialism the ‘communist view’ prevailed, entailing the public ownership of the media system, didactic journalistic norms and the enlightening function of entertainment (Curran 1991 28). Curran notes in relation to the Soviet media, that “before Gorbachev [it] was more restricted in theory than in actual practice” (Curran 1991 35). It is also relevant for the Hungarian media, where a coded language evolved between the media and the public to evade

censure. The samizdat press also gave forum for dissent opinion, but at the risk of imprisonment or other forms of official retribution. (Skilling). Nevertheless, the public sphere was highly controlled, even nonexistent, apart from the so-called second public sphere of the samizdat press. In this repressive regime, civil society and the public sphere gained a special appeal for those who wished for a democratic transformation.

In 1989, with the emergence of the pluralist party system the liberalisation of the media also took place. Borrowing Curran's summarising model again, the adoption of the liberalist view on the public sphere, means that the role of the media is to provide a check on government as a fourth estate; the media system is governed by a free market; the journalistic norm is disinterestedness, and the function of entertainment is distraction and gratification. (Curran 28). The democratic opposition, mainly intellectuals under socialism were highly disappointed at how free market transformed the media.

The current problems that Hungarian journalists face today are partly the heritage of the communist era, partly phenomena emerging in the market economy. As Vajda (Vajda 2001) explains, under communism, there was only one formal education institution for journalists, provided by the Hungarian Journalist Association (MUOSZ). Although after 1989, journalist education became an attractive market, the norm remained that older generations pass on their experiences. However, many of them were socialised in the communist regime. The credibility and the legitimacy of journalists have been questioned as a result of the role they played in the communist regime. Today, their credibility is further undermined because many of them do part time work in the financial and PR sector of the competitive market, and because of the "buddying practice", which means that public interviews with the elite members often take the form of private dialogues. Lastly, due to the news competition, public officials often get the interview questions ahead.



Online news-media, whose pioneer has been the Index news-portal since the late 90's, beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, implemented a new model in the Hungarian media system. One can claim that it started to democratise the public sphere by introducing a more autonomous communication network. Since then, online news media has flourished, and has become a new terrain for economic investments, so its autonomy is questionable. This is the Hungarian context where the global trend of citizen journalism arrives and the question is whether it can transform the existing media system, and the public sphere.

## Chapter 3: The evolution of citizen journalism through the blogs

*The Medium is the message, to understand  
the message we first must examine the  
characteristics of the medium  
(Marshall McLuhan)*

### 3.1 Historical precedents

Citizen journalism was preceded by the civic or public journalism reform movement, initiated in the USA. The movement started around 1988 with a growing concern about the lowering standards in journalism. Its purpose was to regain public trust and engage in a more meaningful dialogue with the public. “More democratic structures were needed to increase public access and counteract the concentration of ownership and growth of media conglomerates” (Curran:2002) The advocates of public journalism set specific precepts to achieve these aims. For instance, during election campaigns they suggested that newspapers should “sponsor one or more public forums on issues/ use polls to establish the issues your coverage will focus on/ form citizen panels to consult at different stages of the campaign/base reporting largely on issues developed through citizen contact” (Meyer, cited in Barlow:2007 133). Civic journalism was also about freeing journalism from the grip of the economic and political elite, as the press relied far too heavily on them as sources of information.

The impetus for change was not only a growing feeling that journalism became alienated from its public, but there was also an economic factor. The print media was quickly

losing their readership due to the competition of electronic media, and the emerging Internet. The movement spread abroad, but overall it did not fulfill its promises. Witt argues that it was the blogosphere that eventually completed the process.

Without belittling the novelty and contemporary significance of blogs, it is important to remember that partisan press also had its precedents, albeit in a different form. In Hungary one can think of the samizdat press, or to take an American example, the zines in the 80's, as of individually created, self-published magazines, which bore striking similarities with the present blogs.

### **3.2 Blogs as a new form of journalism**

The word 'blog' derived from 'weblog', which initially meant a "record of the traffic for a web server, as it "kept a log or record of their owner's surfing in the form of a collection of links to other locations online." (Allen 2006 45), and acquired its present day meaning of a 'daily net journal' in 1997. Rebecca Blood, a blogging veteran and unofficial blog historian says that blogs date back to 1990's, and are written in reverse chronological order, contain links to other webpages, and a blog roll, i.e. a list of links to the writer's favorite blogs, lastly they are archived. If these features are the spine, then the flesh of the blogs are the frequently updated posts, which are individual entries like stories in a newspaper.<sup>4</sup> (Tremayne 2007).

As far as the mainstream media was concerned, Tremayne (2007) distinguished three stages of their reaction to the blogs. The first was 'attack', claiming that blogs were 'insignificant, filled with errors, and lacking in credibility'. The second reaction was "embrace: if you cant beat`em, join`em", therefore traditional news outlets changed their formats, whereby some columns were replaced by blogs, and the most popular bloggers were

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<sup>4</sup> Preface, p. VII. Blog Tremayne 2007

hired by the outlets. The third reaction was to “learn how take advantage of active citizen readers to generate better product and lower costs, and to adapt to the changing environment” (Tremayne 2007 ).

Drawing the boundary between citizen journalism and ‘simple’ blogwriting is not easy, given that the definition of what counts as news is also undergoing a change these days. Nevertheless, many bloggers are undeniably doing journalistic work, like “choosing stories, judging the credibility of sources, writing headlines, taking pictures, developing prose styles, dealing with readers, building audience, weighing libel considerations, and occasionally conducting informed investigations on their own.” (Matt Welch in Allen:2003:87)

One can claim that blogs helped to increase the scope of issues circulating in the public sphere, by being exempt from editorial filtering. It is in this light that we should interpret how scandals break out in blogosphere, like the notorious Lewinski-Clinton scandal, which was leaked by the *Drudge Report* blog. Other frequently cited advantages of blogs and citizen journalism over daily news articles is that they usually add depth, context to stories. “Bloggers are keen on bringing in foreign views, digging up alternative perspectives and first person accounts” (Allen: 2003 84). Furthermore, they are not bound by time pressures, and are less constrained by power relations. Lastly, they can “keep the fire going”, unlike a traditional news source that in the news-competition usually drop stories for new materials.

Building on collective intelligence is one of the founding principles of citizen journalism. “My readers know more than I do, sometimes individually on specific topics, but always collectively” (Dan Gillmor cited in Allen:2003:85). Jay Rosen, press critic and owner of *PressThink* claims that weblogs come out of the gift economy, as they are based on voluntariness, where users freely give content, and in return they get information they

need<sup>5</sup>, while others regard user-generated content as sheer exploitation of citizens for profit making purposes. Given that blogging softwares are business ventures operating with advertisements, there is undeniably some truth value in this latter view.

Scholars distinguish between three models of community type of citizen journalism sites, according to the editorial freedom of the users. For my research this typology is useful, as I will examine which model Index is implementing and with what expectable results. The first is the ‘controlled model’, where “most content is written by one writer, usually the founder and maintainer of the site. The public can contribute, but there is centralized editorial control to maintain standard journalistic norms. In these models, the staff contributes to the content by 75%, while the users by 25%. The second is the so-called hybrid model, in which the blog uses a small, centralized part-time or volunteer staff, typically one or two people, who generate content and moderate content provided by citizens. Although posts are reviewed, they are generally moved to the site’s home page untouched. Here the staff occasionally contributes posts and comments. So, proportionwise, the staff is responsible for 25% of the content, while the users for 75%. Lastly, there is the open blog model, which has “an administrative and advisory board, and a small degree of obvious direction or intervention. The staff approve posts and comments, but rarely contribute.(Babarasi:2002)

According to Babarasi’s findings in the USA, the hybrid form produced the highest percentage of citizen contribution, and the open-one was the least effective at generating such content. Hence, he concluded that traditional journalists have a new role to play: to “manage complexity, complex systems, monitor the public, tend to a

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<sup>5</sup> [http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2003/10/16/radical\\_ten.html](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2003/10/16/radical_ten.html)

complex system, and save it from its worst natural instincts, because a democratic public sphere is not a necessary product of a self-organized public” (Babarasi 2002)

He also examined the network structure of the blogosphere and found that despite claims that it is a highly democratic field, “one law of networks is the power law, which states that there are too many small members in a network, in terms of sign, alongside a few large members” (Babarasi: 2002 67). In other words, there is an uneven distribution of power, so blogs do not give everyone an equal voice. Apart from the power law, the blogosphere obeys the law of preferential attachments, that is “individual nodes are more likely to link to well-connected network hubs”, which puts newcomers and latecomers at a disadvantage. We can connect this law to Castells’s idea of how networks operate. He pointed out that the “power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power” (Castells:2000 500). This means that former power inequalities are replaced by new inequalities, which depend on the agency over the flow of information.

To summarise the main points of this chapter, it is apparent that citizen journalism has a strong American rootedness, especially if one interprets it as a continuation of the civic journalism movement of the early 90’s. I explained the information filtering function of the blogs, and of citizen journalism. If we agree with Castells, that “information is the key ingredient of our social organization and ... flows of messages and images between networks constitute the basic thread of our social structure” (Castells: 2000 508), then such filtering entails a form of power and serves an important function in modern societies based on a division of labour and organic solidarity in the Durkheimian sense.

I also noted that blogs as a type of partisan press are not without precedent in human history, nevertheless the scope of the movement is bigger than ever before,

creating a highly complex network. I mentioned that these networks are not horizontal, but create a new type of power inequalities.

### **3.3 Citizen journalism's ethos as grounded in alternative media**

In the Bourdieuan spirit, my question here is what values citizen journalists and their allies attach to citizen journalism to legitimate their autonomy and position in the field. My answer is that the values they apply and appropriate are all grounded in alternative media. No wonder, that social movements have always actively encouraged citizen media, like Paolo Freire's Catholic reform movement in Chile in the 1960' and 70's, or the antiglobalist movement, Indymedia. However, I claim that citizen journalism has a different role to play, when it is embraced by professional journalists to enhance their own position in the field. Below I list those legitimating values that citizen journalism adopted from alternative media, and which ideally help to democratise the media and through it the public sphere.

#### **3.3.1 Radical reform, community building, empowerment, agency**

Social change, resistance and opposition to mainstream political power are the three principles of alternative media, according to its first theoriser, John D. H. Downing (1984), who based his criteria on anarchist philosophy and socialist movements. A similarly reform-oriented political strand is recognizable in citizen journalist theorising and practice as well. "Netizens have emerged as a smart mob, interested in the political use of the Internet." (Rheingold in Young 2005: 928) One contemporary example for direct political use of citizen journalism is the South Korean news-portal *OhMyNews*, which became one of the most widely read organ in the country, and had a direct influence on presidential elections in 2002 (Young 2005) .

Political goals are not necessarily explicitly stated in alternative media. Clemencia Rodriguez conceives of a different political role of alternative media, when she considers its community-, radical and participatory nature all at once. With a unique conception of citizenship she prefers the use of citizens' media to alternative media. Her notion of citizenship is inspired by feminist, radical democratic thinkers, like Chantal Mouffe and Kristie McClure, who argued for a dynamic and pragmatic understanding of it, instead of treating it as an empirically given, but at the same time abstract legal status. They claimed that citizenship must be enacted and constructed in everyday actions. Identification, empowerment and agency are the most important 'political' results of this enactment. On the basis of these premises, Rodriguez defined citizens' media, where "a collectivity is enacting its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape. These media contest social codes, legitimised identities, institutionalised social relations. Thirdly, they empower the community involved."(Rodriguez:2001 5)

Community building is one of the most frequently cited aspects of citizen journalism, and a crucial motive for established media to attempt to embrace it. Attaching a community to a media outlet is the most efficient way to insure audience for its product. Empowerment, participation and agency are also key concepts of citizen journalist advocates, implicitly present in the title of Dan Gillmore' manifesto on citizen journalism: [\*We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People\*](#) (Gillmor: 2004), which is a paraphrase of the antiglobalist Indymedia social movement's slogan „*Don't hate the media, be the media*".

„Because it is generally understood that a blog directly represents the intent of the person who produces it, a blog empowers the writer with greater freedom to provide colorful, subjective, and political commentary than would be possible within the framework of a traditional media outlet, which has an economic interest in maintaining a sense of detached objectivity”<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/imagining\\_the\\_blogosphere.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/imagining_the_blogosphere.html)



### 3.3.2 Horizontality and transparency in the production process

A traditional critique against mainstream media is that it is based on top-down, hierarchical communication, so that the audience simply receives pre-packaged messages. Although researchers like (Katz and Liebes) showed that instead of being passive recipients of messages, the audience is engaged in active meaning construction that is always a social process as well, the messages are still unidirectional. Citizen journalism offers a horizontal communicative model, where senders and receivers of messages are interchangeable.

Differentiating alternative media from mainstream media, Chris Atton referred to the unique features of the production process and of content. According to his criteria, the production process of alternative media is non-commercial, small-scale, collaborative, participative, and horizontal. As for content, it is crucial that previously voiceless people, 'subalterns' in Spivak's term, such as working class people, sexual minorities, protest groups, or simply ordinary people gained access to media, to present themselves through their own values and in their own voices instead of through the hegemonic, often blameworthy discourse of the mainstream that reiterates the views of the powerful elites. Activists of alternative media help to generate reader-writers to involve people as much as possible in the communication process, to use it for mobilisation. Meanwhile they also pave the way for the de-professionalisation of the communication process.

Looking at the discourse on citizen journalism, we can see similarities. Firstly, the 'reader-writer' concept has been embraced by citizen journalism. (see Dan Gillmore and Laurence Lessig). Secondly, Gillmor also claims that in the digital environment there is an emphasis on process, instead of products in journalistic work, which implies collaboration and a horizontal relationship between journalists and their public. "The manufacturing model of journalism was appropriate for a 20th century system of actual manufacturing on periodic deadlines, but makes less sense now. The publication or broadcast today should be the middle

of the process, not the “finished” end of it; the discussion that transpires can teach everyone, including the reporter who did the original, and we then iterate to catch up with the latest information”<sup>7</sup>. ([Straw Men Versus Citizen Journalists](#)). The process-orientation also entails transparency. Firstly, the inclusion of hyperlinks enables the reader to see if the author was biased in his source usage and to check the validity of his or her claims. “Given their [readers’] close watch on reporters, they also show that professionals will be rendered transparent and shown to be subjective in selecting sources, using certain adjectives, etc. (...) they showed the shortcomings of ostensible objectivity, and that blogs are a more viable alternative” (Allen:2003) Secondly, the aim of a writer is not to give the perfect account of an event or an issue but to invite comments, so that with his/her readership they can get a more clear sense of the ‘reality’.

To conclude the points raised in this chapter, the values represented by citizen journalists, which also serve to legitimate their participation in the field of media focus around three issues. One issue is direct political influence, where the values would be reform-mindedness, radicalism and a critical attitude towards government, the other issue is about community with the values of community-building, agency and empowerment providing new sources of identification and role models, apart from the institutionalised and legitimate ones. The last issue concerns the production process, where citizen journalism offers transparency and horizontality.

It is also useful to look at citizen journalism in light of the theoretical considerations I presented on the digitalised public sphere. Firstly, fragmentism and extremism are valid problems for citizen journalism. Secondly, if we accept Dahlgren’s and Hermes’s point that public sphere is rooted in the everyday discourse, it means that citizen journalists do not have

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<sup>7</sup> Gillmor wrote it in response to Samuel Freedman, a columnist at New York Times and professor of Journalism at Columbia University, who vehemently criticized citizen journalists in the name of professional norms. [Straw Men Versus Citizen Journalists](#) And his nostalgia for “finished product” misses several points, not least that

to engage in highly rationalistic debates for seeing their work as the expansion of the public sphere. Citizen journalism can also be interpreted in terms of ‘lifestyle politics’ and the ‘active enactment of citizenship’. Indymedia, a global alternative media and social movement is a perfect example for the shift towards this disposition. For its members self-expression is a crucial component of political activism.

## **Chapter 4: Analysis and Results: How Index news-portal incorporates citizen journalism**

In this part I follow the route of one successful player — Index online news-portal from the moment it entered the Hungarian media field, until today, when it is currently channelling in citizen journalism. I wish to examine how it realizes this project, how it has been maneuvering in the field; what sort of habitus it has displayed that might shed light on its success, and how it contributes to the negotiations of the internal boundaries of the field due to the explosion of user-created content.

Firstly, I present the closest rivals of Index to set the contemporary scene.

### **4.2 A preliminary sketch of the current Hungarian blogosphere**

One of the specificities of the Hungarian online culture is that people have been socialised into using the web as a news-source instead of using it for services like bank transactions, search optimisation, or playing and chatting online. This trend is currently changing, especially among the younger generation, who are more likely to use the web for other purposes than reading news. Besides the slow rate of Internet penetration (see the quoted data in the Introduction), one of the reasons for this development was that a great majority of the public learned about the Internet itself through the emergence of the first news-portal,

*Internetto* — the predecessor of *Index*, in 1995. This meant that the public identified the Internet with the online newsportal in the beginning. (Bodoky:2005)

*We started in this direction, and left a very definite mark. There was also an escapism from the solidified structure of the news media. Hungary found the Internet painfully slowly. Its informatics culture was deteriorating since the middle of the 90's. There was one freemail, bought by the Origo<sup>8</sup>. The next step was the iwiw<sup>9</sup>. We don't have good developers. That's why this newspaper-thing came along.* (Uj Péter, chief editor of Index)

As Uj explains, the main value Index introduced was “unbiased news”. It was due to its audience success, that other online service providers also began to produce their own content, instead of operating as distribution channels of offline news outlets. (Bodoky:2005)

Currently, the Hungarian blogosphere is organized along three main blog-aggregators, which are all business ventures. Out of these two — Blogter and Blog.hu — are owned by the two major and rival online news-portals and media empires, Origo and Index respectively. Blogter was conceived by a businessman, a sociologist-blogger and a freelancer journalist-blogger, with the latter serving as consultant. Before launching it, they had a debate whether they should have an ‘elite media’ with edited blogs or apply the ‘long-tail’ model, with unedited blogs, where the moderators act as “sherpas” i.e.guides in the network. The consultant voted for the elite media option, but eventually the commercial idea won and he quit. Blogter was recently bought up by Origo. Blog.hu was started by an ex-Index member, and the blog-hosting site originally worked on an invitational basis. It was mainly used by Index members, so, it was “in that sense, elitist”. Blog.hu was recently bought by Index, with

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<sup>8</sup> the main rival online news-portal of Index

<sup>9</sup> The Hungarian version of Myspace.com

its programmer and owner as well, and was opened for the wide public. Freeblog was the first Hungarian blog hosting site, gradually losing its position on the online market. Besides these a traditional central-left daily newspaper, Nepszabadsag also launched a blogservice, Nolblog.hu in 2004, which attracted a considerable but less numerous user-base. *“Those users have a strong attachment to Nepszabadsag, even if it is clumsy and slow, they say it’s ours. They have a sense of comfort there”*, said Pollner, one of my interview subjects, who has a Media-blog<sup>10</sup> and is playing an ‘expert’ role in the blogosphere, presenting on blog-conferences and reflecting on the global and Hungarian blogosphere. Lastly, the American blog service provider, Blogger.com<sup>11</sup> should also be mentioned as a hosting site for Hungarian blogs.

The Hungarian blogosphere is just as hierarchical as the global one (see Babarasi:2002 in the Introduction). First of all there is a layer that considers itself the “expert” core, organising costly blog and web2 conferences, where the majority of the audience consists of people from the marketing and the advertisement sectors, which also reveals the commercialisation of the movement. Pollner told me that *these conferences are rather inward-looking, where people are mutually praising each other, but novel ideas rarely spring up*. Besides these vocational bloggers, journalists’ and media personalities’ blogs provide important hubs in the Hungarian blogosphere.

In this section I presented the blog hosting sites that are used by the majority of Hungarian Internet users. I pointed out that they are being purchased by news-portals and media empires. Index, which was a pioneer in the Hungarian online media, strongly influenced the ruling values in the field, such as ‘own content’ and ‘unbiased news’. Moreover, its new acquisition, Blog.hu was created by an ex-Index member and the

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<sup>10</sup> He writes on commission for one of the weekly economic magazine

<sup>11</sup> It was bought by Google

majority of the initial bloggers on it were Index staff. So Index seems to have an advantage over its rivals in deciding how best to exploit blog potentials.

#### 4.3 Index's position in the Hungarian news media

In this section I look at Index's position in the news-market, taking into account the print media as well. Hungarian newspapers strongly reflect the division of the political field, i.e. they have a right and a left wing faction. Besides, they consciously try to distance themselves from tabloid newspapers. Index, born in 1999 in the online environment, purposefully aimed to break away from these traditions. As for the issue of political biases, the chief editor of Index phrases their editorial policy in the following way.

*“The Hungarian media sucks, just as many other things in this country. Of course, the Hungarian media also likes looking for external reasons, saying that politicians censure, the economy censures. I do not think that they are that powerful. Index was a strange experiment also, of course we started out small and we were not in the focus of attention. That was an important appeal of the online press. We did not want to enter that trench warfare that stood up. We will not eat venison stew with Szekeres Imre<sup>12</sup> nor will we go hunting with Surján Zsolt<sup>13</sup>”. So, he claims that Index politically and economically is a more autonomous medium than his traditional competitors in the field, despite some minor compromises.*

When the Internet balloon exploded and the online world globally experienced a recession, Index was bought up by Wallis, a company that specialises in buying up bankrupt firms, to help them recuperate and later sell them for a massive profit. The Index editorial office at the time had no choice but to accept the ‘helping’ hand.

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<sup>12</sup> Left-wing politician, member of the Hungarian Socialist Party

<sup>13</sup> Right-wing politician, member of the Christian Democratic Party

*Everybody was frightened, there was a rumor, that he (the director of Wallis) is close to the MSZP<sup>14</sup>, graduated in Moscow, a sort of kader kid. But he did not really interfere, and when he did, it was rather funny. They(Wallis) are also car distributors. We got the toughest telephone call, when the manager of a star was knocked down on Pepsi-island, heading to his concert. His car broke down, and he opened the boot to see what had happened, and then they hit him and took his wallet. His car was a BMW. And then Wallis called to say that we can't write down such thing that a BMW broke down, because it never happens. At print daily newspapers I experienced much tougher cases. (Laszló Szily, Blog-content developer at Index)*

Recently Index has been bought by BIF Rt. Real Estate, and the owner is in joint partnership with a right-wing politician, Mária Schmidt. So, the management took a 180 degree turn to the right. However, the journalists at Index still feel that their autonomy is not under threat.

*He is reserved. He is relatively young. He comes to the Index parties in a hooded T-shirt to show he's young spirited. And he exerts no political influence at all. He took over Index, when it was uphill, so there was an increase, even without his pressure. (Laszlo Szily)*

Later on I will discuss the conflicts between the sales – as the agent of the economic power field — and the editorial office — representing journalistic power.

Tabloidisation is also crucial in terms of Index's self positioning in the field. Whereas the traditional daily news press has always tried to build its legitimacy by distancing itself from the tabloid press, Index explicitly took on a dual role by acting as a watchdog of the political powers, adapting investigative reporting and embracing tabloid news at the same time. This comes from the interplay of “the business model that dictates a constant pressure

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<sup>14</sup> Hungarian Socialist Party

to increase, and the technology that mediates the feedback of the total audience: the editors, who watch the real-time traffic of the portals know that the readership is mostly interested in tabloid topics.” (Bodoky: 2005 )

One aspect of tabloidisation at Index is the stylistic one.

*“We were unmercifully honest with ourselves and sat down to think over what we like reading. It could have remained a niche taste. But when we experimented with this light-hearted style, the reaction was intense clickings, so we knew that it moved something in the audience too.*

Gergő, a journalist-blogger at the Technology section, who joined Index only two years ago, deems tabloidisation obligatory in contemporary newsmaking.

*The ivory tower is not a market behaviour, the aim is to have a growing readership. There must be compromises. In the case of a mass medium, there are more compromises. Journalism is part of the entertainment industry. Index is representing a lot of things. Naked boulevard and investigative reporting. It is a special position in the Hungarian market. (Gergő, Tech section)*

Uj Péter, the chief editor of Index, and the daredevil of Hungarian media, thanks to his unconventional and sarcastic columns, jokingly remarked in the course of our interview that *Index is a Playboy wrapped into a Nepszabadsag*<sup>15</sup> paraphrasing the genre hybridity of the portal.

What is currently happening is that a real estate manager-turned investor is building up a huge media empire, buying up content-producing online companies, including Index, where he became a 100% shareholder in April, 2007. The umbrella firm of this investor is called Central European Media and Publishing and Service Company. As the chief editor

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<sup>15</sup> A central-left print daily newspaper



informed me, it is basically an ‘empty’ company, and it is a current project to fill it with content. Given Uj ’s long dream to build a regional news service, it seems that he is really on the verge of realising it. However, in the meantime, Index is being totally subordinated to a profit-yielding media empire. “The autonomy of individual journalists is measured by the degree to which the press ownership is concentrated” (Bourdieu:1998 69). It seems that in the current media concentration around Index, such autonomy will be more and more limited.

Here I have tried to show the differentiating features of Index in relation to print media. Apart from creating ‘unbiased news’ they also embraced commercial news, from which traditional newspapers have always tried to distance themselves. To adapt the field metaphor, they helped to push the borderline between tabloid news and ‘serious’ news by offering a sort of ‘infotainment’ following the global trend. This commercial orientation is also reflected in the ownership structure of Index, which is getting more and more concentrated, potentially threatening the autonomy of the portal.

#### **4.4 Internetto, the predecessor of Index**

Although the focus of my interviews was not the emergence of Index, it frequently came up in the talks, and I gradually realized that it was not only background information, but crucial in terms of finding answers to my initial question: what is the fate of citizen journalism in Hungary, and how it is channeled into Big media.

The history of Index has been documented in the collaborative community site Wikipedia among others, which in this case I think must not be dismissed as an academically dubious source, instead should be treated as one legitimate and changing narrative among many others.

There have also come out a few academic studies on Index: on its polical forums, on its development into a mass medium (Bodoky:2005), and on its market strategies. Here I will

reconstruct parts of the narratives that shed light on the citizen journalistic features of the predecessor of Index, Internetto.

It was uniformly agreed by my informants and by the written narratives, that the starting point of the story was a lexicon, written by three academics, which bore the title ‘Politika’ (Politics). It contained the analysis of the history of the Hungarian Socialist and Worker’s Party from 1944 till 1989 on the basis of contemporary newspaper- and library sources. In 1993 the authors made a CD-ROM from the immense amount of data they gathered, using hyperlinks, and hence becoming the pioneers of multimedia CD-ROM publishing in Hungary (Bodoky:2005). Later, besides releasing a series of CD-ROMs commissioned by the Hungarian Film Institute, they also created a multimedia magazine (ABCD) at IDG Hungary, an IT publishing company, where, among other things, they made videos on the scenes of the 1956 revolution together with interactive maps, to show what they looked like in the beginning of the 90’s, which was quite ‘revolutionary’ in terms of technology at the time.

*“ABCD medium was the texture. CD-Rom was **the new form**. (...) It was an **experiment** with the forms. It had a professional and an audience success. We published more than 10 CD-ROMs. Three or four came out annually, and it went on for three years. ‘56 was a fashionable topic at the time.”* (Blumi, the founder, programmer and ex-owner of Blog.hu, who was also a member of the ABCD group)

Here is the first parallel with citizen journalism. Namely, that there is a new form, now the blog, then the CD-ROM, which has a transformative capacity over the modes of communication, besides enabling citizens, in this case academics, to publish their own material. The main difference was that making CD-ROMS required technical skills and financial resources, whereas blogs require none of these things.

The next step was the foundation of Internetto, an online newspaper, in 1995, by Nyíró András — one of the writers of the lexicon, and the leading member of the ABCD group. “The first two years were about genre-creation, or at least genre implementation, in the form of experimentations: they launched an up-to date IT newsagency and a chatforum; live reports with digital photos were becoming regular, mutations sprang up all over the country, and an on-line supermarket joined the portal signalling the break from the intellectual organ to be gradually replaced by a commercialised “daily”. (Bodoky: 2005)

*When at the time we started Internetto with Nyíri, somebody said this sentence, on a formative editorial meeting, the first time we sat down together, a very interesting branch, I was the only journalist. There was a professor of literature, two sociologists, no, three, whatever, one programmer and an IT specialist. It was the professor of literature who said that we were trying to **make a newspaper that we edit together with our readers**. It worked like that very nicely for a long time. The **first authors came from the readers, and** as a continuation of this policy, we still have some of them. Like Bori, who was seventeen at the time.*

JB. But those readers were not anybody. Wasn't it an exclusive circle?

***PU. Well, there were very few Internet users at the time. That is why communication could be alive.** It was around 98-99 that the threads started to dissolve, when the forums developed, and everybody flooded there. By that time there were about ten, twelve thousand readers, then thirty-fourty thousand, now three and four hundred thousand. (Péter Uj , chief editor of Index)*

Internetto was organised on a community basis, and it was Nyíró who collected the people around him. One of their projects, initiated by the young members, was to edit a technology newsletter, building on foreign sources.

*“This was the time of the modem and of Compuserve. When the news came out in the States, it was late at night in Hungary. We stayed up and provided news that readers would not get from anywhere else. It was a very tough job. The principle was to **write news that I was interested in. Boulevard-technology in its good sense.** There was also a newsletter version. That people could subscribe to. It was a very successful stuff. There were more than 30 000 “subscribers”. (Blumi, who worked for ABCD, joined Internetto, and founded Blog.hu)*

It is important to stop here to note the parallels again between the early Internetto and citizen journalism. Firstly, Internetto consisted of ‘enthusiastic amateurs’, secondly, they were writing news that *they* were interested in, meaning that subjectivity entered the sphere of newsmaking, as opposed to the “objectivist” type of conventional reporting. Thirdly, the roles of reader and writer were not mutually exclusive as in the case of traditional media - given the closeness and mutual reflexivity of the editorial- reporter work and of the chatforum; and the permeability of the two spheres, meaning that forum members occasionally became reporters and reporters were very much engaged in the forum discussions. Fourthly, the three young members did not get any wages for their news-editing work, it was a “hobby project” for them.

*“There was never any money issue around Internetto”,* said Blumi. But that does not mean that people did not frequently discuss how they could make money from it in the long term. One might wonder what symbolic profit they gained if they devoted so much energy to it. As one informant put it, it was “good company”. From his narrative it is apparent, that it meant for him that he belonged to the elite. In the beginning, the Internet was mainly used by intellectual academics. The then-famous Hix.hu (Hollosi Information Exchange) — mailing list and discussion forum — where the members of the Internetto also contributed was

launched by a Hungarian academic, who emigrated to the States. Gradually it became a ‘classic’ citizen journalist site, where comments appeared as ‘articles’, outsourced into diverse topics, under the category of ‘newspapers’. On the front page of the site, the visitor found the following explanation as to what hix.hu was about.

*Different for everybody: contact, news, information, knowledge, error, opinion, advice, humour. But primarily a community for all of us. „The human corner of the Internet” (<http://www.hix.hu>)*

According to my informants there emerged debates of very high standard on politics and other topics, a sort of rational discussion in the Habermasian sense. As they phrased it, there was a “healthy elitism”. If Internetto became a topic of discussions in these “high circles”, it gave satisfaction to the young members of Internetto — and a form of symbolic profit. One of my informants told me that Internetto was “read by the top-100 000” — the opinion-forming elite —, which gave them a sense of power and achievement. *The whole blogosphere is not about being read by many, but about the influence. The impact you can make on the world around you, the amount of attention you can trigger. It is indifferent that one million people read your blog. What counts is that one million **important** people read it.* (Blumi, who was a member of the Internetto team)

‘Making an impact’ had several manifestations in their accounts. Firstly, they felt they **presented news in a radically different interpretive framework** than other Hungarian news sources, as they had a first-hand access to international sources. Second, they broke into the Big Media, by exploiting the ‘convergence’ feature of the Internet. They transformed an already existing television discussion programme into an interactive one by digitalising it and channeling readers’ questions into it. They often appeared on television themselves, especially Nyíró, a brilliant communicator, who quickly became the Hungarian Internet guru in the mainstream media. Third, in line with the fourth estate role of journalism, they conducted real-time online interviews with top politicians, journalists, public figures, which

were edited on the basis of the readers' questions and broadcast by web cameras and in text forms, triggering such a massive traffic that the servers froze down. (Bodoky:2005) Fourth, they felt they managed to modify the negative, demonised image of the Internet, implanted by mainstream media, which often represented the Internet as a dangerous and immoral space with pedophils and bomb recipes. Fifth, they had a lobbying power and succeeded in forcing the Hungarian Telecommunications to keep the price of the Internet low in the evening time-range. So, these were the major achievements of Internetto, which *created a smoke around them*, as one informant phrased it.

Internetto, which was not financially profitable, ended in 1999 due to internal conflicts with its parent company, IDG Hungary. It was the same year that Index was born, with Nyíró assuming the position of chief editor to start on the path of commercialization.

To summarize the main points of this section, I showed through the different narratives that Internetto displayed many of the features that citizen journalist sites possess today. such as enthusiastic amateurs, who write articles, readers, who become writers, a living community whose members engage in dialogues, a political role, and convergence. Given these 'elective affinities', it seems even more logical that Index today does not hesitate to include blogs and citizen journalists in its news routine.

#### **4.5 Interpretative frameworks of 'civic' versus 'professional' journalism**

My interview subjects at Index used the concept of professionalism related to journalistic work in different contexts, thereby attaching different meanings and evaluations to it. These subjective interpretations are of crucial importance, if we wish to understand what roles the Index staff attributes to citizen journalists. Do they consider them colleagues, rivals, intruders, a threat, a joke?

Here I will summarise all the contrasting adjectives and words, that my informants used, to describe the dichotomy between professional and civic journalistic attitudes in Hungary. It is important to note that although my informants are professionals they do not identify with all the features they connected here to ‘professionalism’, which I partly explain with the ‘civic’ origins of the portal. Also, the picture they give is not representative even of Index, due to the small number of my interviews.

<b>CIVIC</b>	<b>PROFESSIONAL</b>
focus on community building	focus on professionalism, profit making
Parody	serious reporting
hobby journalist	glancing into the commercial sector <sup>16</sup>
casual, creative, original	writing in panels, mechanistic, robotistic
can be shallow or deep, gives room for extremes	bottom line
noise, trolls <sup>17</sup>	rational discussion
passion, enthusiasm, hobby-addiction	reliance on official sources, like press releases
Free and autonomous	controlled, conservative
personalised, subjective	objectifying
civic journalist	party liner
self-absorbed and sectarian	realist
entertainment, technology	politics, economics
innovative, spontaneous, garage feeling+,	Production line-, transparency+

<sup>16</sup> This pair is sticking out a little from the table, as it is about the internal divisions between citizen journalists, Professional here means ‘professionalising’ citizen journalist

<sup>17</sup> A **troll** is someone who intentionally posts derogatory or otherwise inflammatory messages about sensitive topics in an established online community such as an online discussion forum to bait users into responding. <sup>(Wikipedia)</sup>

lack of transparency -	
Risky	employs classical journalistic devices
neo-nomadic mentality	desk-bound work

The areas these adjectives and words relate to are motivation; style; content; news type; relationship to politics; economical and organizational aspects, work methods, public behaviour and disposition. Basically, there are only three areas, where my informants attached a negative meaning to ‘civic’ features, namely public behavior, disposition and work methods. Besides, ‘civic’ has a mixed evaluation, both negative and positive in terms of the decision-making aspect of journalistic work. Many of my informants complained of ‘trolls’ and noise dominating the Hungarian blogosphere as opposed to the golden age, when it was only the elite who were online and engaged in rational discussions, and also as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon blogger practices, where Hungarian journalists perceive ‘citizens’ to be much more ‘civilised’ in their debating culture. There is also a cultural differentiation in the meaning attribution of ‘professional’. The chief editor characterised the Anglo-Saxon amateur journalists as ‘workaholic’ and ‘professional’, while dismissing the Hungarian professionals as lazy and ‘pseudo-professional’. I believe that the perceived ‘sectarian’ and ‘self-absorbed’ disposition of bloggers and citizen journalists should be interpreted in light of the Bourdieuan struggle for autonomy. In order to carve out for themselves a place in the field of media, the newcomers must differentiate themselves from the ‘commercialised’ and ‘corrupt’ players in the field and claim that it is only them, who represent the ideal — public service — functions of journalism. Thus, drawing a clear boundary between themselves and mainstream online journalists is a must for their legitimacy and survival.



From a journalistic perspective, citizen journalism is a risky enterprise, considering lack of source validation, and of double checking, which is an inbuilt method of journalistic work, but which cannot be expected from citizen journalists. In order to avoid such events, the model that Index is applying is closest to the hybrid model in terms of the editorial freedom of the users (Babarasi:2002). At Index there is a three-member staff that edits and controls the user-generated content. I will discuss that issue later on in more detail.

As for the decision making aspect, my informants claimed that Index is deliberately 'civic' oriented in its editorial work, allowing for innovation, but decision making is not transparent enough, and feedbacks from the floor are not adequately channelled into the decision making processes. This means that the deliberately civic attitude results in the personalization of conflicts and debates instead of professionally managing them. On the other hand, professional decision making also has its perceived disadvantages, namely providing 'production line' solutions that do not allow for creativity, change, and adaptation to new demands.

#### **4.6 Index' civic identity interpreted as habitus**

As it is apparent from the table, most adjectives that journalists used referring to civic journalism were positive, whereas the professional attitude was mostly put in a negative light. This is revealing in terms of Index's position in the field and in terms of its self-identity. Many of my informants during the interviews regularly reminded me after some statements, that they meant it as a joke, that their claims should be understood in quotation marks. This is a disposition that the core members of the Index consciously cultivated and is meant to signal a 'civic attitude', but from their readership it is often interpreted as cynicism.

*“Since then, (birth of the Index in 1999) the whole of the Hungarian online thing moved away a bit from that line, what the traditional press is today, which both in its language and in its attitude is professional in the bad sense of the word. That is stiff... ours is funny... in the case of Index and the Internet, maybe that is also a civic attitude, that we take ourselves less seriously, and this whole story, it is sort of parodistic. Maybe I also left my personal style on it....Obviously I looked for people who fitted this. (...) Nevertheless there is also a normal..., we can say news-service. But, in its attitude there is a much more civic approach. And those people joined us, who could identify with it, so it went into this direction.” (Péter Uj , chief editor)*

Another informant characterised INDEX identity in the following way.

*Cooler than other journalists. Frankness is important. There are a lot of “deviances”, I mean different personality types are represented by their most extreme cases. That cultivates tolerance. It is very inspiring.* (a journalist at the Technology section)

However, there is a tiny minority, usually the younger journalists among the staff and who are active in the blogosphere, who feel that Index actually lost their anti-professional attitude and the online press in general started to become like the print media. They feel that the avantgard is exclusively represented by the blogs and citizen journalism. They also seem to represent a different form of habitus, and it actually creates internal conflicts within the staff, but they usually act it out in a light-hearted manner.

Gergő, previously working for a Hungarian daily, was hired by Index due to the success of his blog. He reported the following experiences.

*At Index it is the norm to sneer at everything. They are afraid to get enthusiastic about things. I have a lot of conflicts because of that. (...) The online media will go the same path – there is an old school and a new school. Now already there are the same cliches, only with a new surface. There is no difference in the attitude. It is an economic, a market question. An online journalist today is not more easy-going than a print journalist. Or a print journalist is not more accurate or prudent than an online journalist. A lot of money went to online media. There has been a professionalisation. But an avantgard part remained. I am convinced that the slow, over-burocratized print media will move to the quick, more profitable go towards the quick, more profitable online media.*

Lastly, neo-nomadic mentality requires some explanation, which Gergő feels close to, and is perfectly represented by ‘citizen journalists’. As my informants explained this mentality entails the possession of a laptop, complete independence, and lack of traditional workplace. The focus is on interaction with ‘citizens’ in cafes, public places, wherever the neo-nomadic worker happens to sit down to do his job. Clearly, there are a limited number of professions, where such transformations can be fully realised, but journalism seems to be perfectly suitable for it.

To conclude, the ‘civic’ habitus of the chief editor very strongly shaped the character of Index and I believe has contributed to its positioning in the media market. However, as one older informant remarked, today *there seems to be a generational gap* within the Index staff. Gergő’s internal conflicts confirmed his statement, and he seems to represent a radically new type of habitus within Index – which bears similarities with the neo-nomadic working mentality, and which might make him adaptive to the changing digital environment.

#### 4.7 Index's perceived role in the Hungarian public sphere

First, I review what role Index aims to play in the Hungarian public sphere. Secondly, I try to sketch what image it has of the public. Here I will draw on my oral interviews, complemented by the results of my questionnaire<sup>18</sup>. I must note again, that the sample was small, thus not representative of the Index staff.

The first statement on the questionnaire was that *“A reporter’s central mission is to report and analyse”*. The majority of my respondents ‘totally agreed’ or ‘rather agreed’ with it. They also tended to agree with the statement that *“Reporters should cover news from the average citizen up”*. Thirdly, most of them denounced the statement: *“The trend of “involving citizens in newsmaking is commercial”*. However, there was a great variety in the distribution of agreements and disagreements with the statement: *“Reporters have a great responsibility in building up and maintaining the democratic public sphere”*. One of my respondents in the oral interview connected the issue of public responsibility to the ‘manipulation of public opinion’, so she turned the question by saying what the media should avoid doing to be responsible. Another respondent had a more positive definition of the public responsibility of journalism.<sup>19</sup>

*It is easy to manipulate public opinion, but in spite of that I do not feel that the media or Index has a huge responsibility. I think that a few sections at Index fulfill this role, but in general it does not. People are working here too.* (Journalist, Women’s section)

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<sup>18</sup> The majority of the statements were adapted from Mark Tremayne factor analysis to identify reporter types. He distinguished between ‘objective egalitarians’, ‘independent existentialists’, ‘experimental reformers’, and ‘solution facilitators’. The rest of the statements were extracted from a study written by Eva Vajda in *A Hír értékei* (2001) (Values of the News)

1. <sup>19</sup> My question was: What is the reporter’s role and responsibility towards the public? Do you think that Index as a whole fulfills that role?

*To inform, teach, reveal old and new lies, and to entertain. We try to fulfill this role.*(one of the two chief contributors at Index)

In light of the results of the questionnaire and my oral interviews, I would risk the statement, that the staff of Index is closest to the ‘objective egalitarian’ journalistic type as defined by Tremayne (2007). “Objective egalitarians **do not consider themselves members of an elite; ...**

*Journalism has more genres. I write columns, which is applied literature. It is far from being an elite profession, especially since the spread of internet and blogging. Anyone can start it”* (one of the two chief contributors at Index)

*It is a profession, but I would not call it elite.* (Journalist at Women’s section)

*I don’t consider it a profession. Is driving an occupation? It’s a learned ability (..) There are a few basic things that you need. Language skills, cheekiness,,exhibitionism. Systematical thinking. It’s not a serious thing. Considering its prestige, it is very bad. People are afraid of it. They see what media can do to people. A lot of journalists misuse it;, if they get a wrong electricity bill, they threaten to write an article on it. They feel it is a power. People usually don’t like journalists.”* (journalist at Technology Section)

[Objective egalitarians] believe the **news should be reported and analysed from the average citizen up** rather than the expert down. They like the “**window to the world**” metaphor, and they believe **average citizens are capable of drawing intelligent conclusions from factual information.** (...) [they] **do not think they are responsible for making public life go well,** (...) and **do not see the “back to the people” movement as commercially motivated.**” (Morris 2002 136-138) .

Journalists at Index were not cynical about the “going back to the people movement”, but were highly skeptical about the revolutionary aspect of web2. As one of my informants told me, the majority of the staff dismisses it as a *hype, a new form, a balloon without content* (journalist at Technology section).

As far as Index’s image and perception of their public is concerned, they seem to have a mixed image of their public. On the one hand, they claim that high levels of expertise can accumulate in the chatforums, but in the midst of a lot of ‘noise’, i.e. irrelevant and disturbing information. On a negative note, many journalists complained of the high percentage of ‘trolls’ in the Index blogs, whose aim is to destroy communication.

Summarising the main points raised here, the Index staff seems to have identified with the liberal view on the media and public sphere. To refer back to Curran again, it means that the role of the media is to provide a check on government as a fourth estate; the media system is governed by a free market; the journalistic norm is disinterestedness, and the function of entertainment is distraction and gratification. Such a liberal ideal is embodied by the ‘objective egalitarian’ journalistic type, which I assume is dominant at Index.

#### **4.8 The commodification of citizen journalism – Blog.hu**

There are three main reasons why Index bought Blog.hu. The first was to attach a living community around itself, to guarantee a loyal and responsive readership. The second was to create potential target groups or niches for advertisements, and the third was to enrich its own content with the spontaneous production of user-generated content. I was told that the second and third considerations — one being more directly market oriented, while the other containing some quality considerations as well, — were not necessarily compatible

in terms of strategy making and triggered some internal debates. Index solved this problem by delineating some areas which it considers more its ‘own’, and where it will be attentive to keep up a standard of quality. In Blog.hu there is a section, where only Index blogs appear, i.e. blogs created by and written by Index staff or by paid freelancers. *We can’t expect production without money* — explained the editor, who is responsible for the content-enrichment of Blog.hu, jokingly titled the *Blog Minister* within Index.

Besides, Index editors monitor the entire Hungarian blogosphere to attract bloggers to Blog.hu. They offer readership and in certain cases income possibilities, provided that bloggers accept to become their *milking cows*. The closeness of the relationship between Index and the individual blogger is determined by the traffic that the blog generates. If it triggers many comments, i.e. there is living community around it, Index will try to profit from it by offering some sort of deal to the blogger. Either an advertisement sharing deal, or offering a position at Index, like an editing position at Blog.hu, or a journalist position at one of the sections of the news-portal.

*The hobbyist does not want to make money from it, but this whole blogging and the fact that it is channeled into the official press, means that they can make money from it. And if they can, why wouldn’t they earn with it?* (Péter Uj )

The commodification of blogging suggests that it is getting farther away from its original place in the gift economy. (see Jeff Jarvis in the Introduction)

#### **4.9 Softening the boundaries**

As I mentioned in the theory section, Bourdieu explained the emergence of the journalistic field in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a polarization between sensational newspapers and newspapers featuring analysis and commentary.(Bourdieu 1998 70). The “serious” journalists were interested in drawing a borderline between themselves and the

commercial press to legitimate their position. Index and the online media in general could succeed by annihilating this artificial border, by providing infotainment.

The spread of blogs demanded from the players in the field to reposition themselves and negotiate the internal boundaries.

*“The borderline between big media and small media is getting blurred. **Index** is softening its own borders. The peripheral material that interests fewer people will go into the blogs, but will remain within the empire. The blogs will form a transitional space between the unstructured Forum and the edited Index. Index will treat it with slight reservation, but similar principles will apply. There is a relaxation of norms.* (The founder of Blog.hu and its current developing and support director)

To summarise, this time it is the amateur and not the commercialised content that Index embraces. Meanwhile, it is also transforming itself by appropriating the blogformat, which in principle is a citizen medium. According to journalists, it is not a paradigmatic shift in their news routine, only an adoption of a comfortable format that has a liberating effect, and is more suitable for online news-making, where speed becomes one of the most important criteria. Many bloggers feel very attached to their blogs, I frequently heard blogs being referred to as ‘the **garden** I look after’; the **child** I nurse’.

*“One can form opinions more openly, its form is not as tied as a classical article, therefore the content is more hyped-up and updated more frequently.”* (journalist in Velvet section)

*“It is about implementing a comfortable format, and making possible a more intensive dialogue”* (one of the chief contributors of Index,. and the author of the most popular Index blog)



*“It is digestible, quick. The reader also helps in the content editing. (...) You feel it’s yours. You nurse it, it’s like your child. It is more interactive, and the reader can enjoy your attention.”* (journalist at Technology section)

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Below I will argue that the process I analysed in my Analysis, namely how Index is incorporating citizen journalism, does not necessarily deprive the originally partisan movement of its democratic potentials, but undoubtedly changes some of its core elements.

Hungarian media is currently catching up with the second and third stages of global mainstream reaction to citizen journalism. To recall, these were “embrace, if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em”, and “learn how to take advantage of active citizen readers to generate better product and lower costs, and to adapt to the changing environment” (Tremayne 2007). Index’s main aim is to guarantee their readership by riding the communitarian wave on the Internet. As I mentioned earlier, there are scholars, who see in this commercially motivated strategy a great threat to democracy.

“Absent established public expectations in this medium—and using the existence of alternative citizen journalism as a convenient foil—the captains of the news industry have grown bolder. They have concentrated production, limited coverage, and **laid in a course that promises to further restrict the number of voices in the mainstream** of the political discourse. (...)The reality is that the empty promise of a revitalized public sphere has given way to an even more tightly integrated oligopoly of commercial news networks. (...) Though the nature of the **technology does refuse the total domination of marginal players by corporate oligarchs**, it has been fashioned into a **powerful tool for undemocratic media**. (Scott:2005)

To answer Scott’s serious claim that the “captains of the news industry restrict the number of voices in the mainstream of the political discourse”, one can argue that at the same time they still increase the voices on the periphery. When I described the different models of community citizen journalist sites, I mentioned that the so-called hybrid model proved to be the most successful at **eliciting citizen contribution**. Index

implemented exactly this model with only 25% of editorial contribution, and 75% citizen-generated content. It is a true and valid comment that the channeling in of citizen voices into political debates is not automatic, and probably demands the conscious intermediation of the journalists, which is directly related to the public responsibility of the media in the new environment.

Furthermore, even if Scott admits that “technology does not refuse the total domination of marginal players,” he seems to undervalue the ‘spillover effect’ of distributed media. As I quoted Rheingold in my Introduction, “Communication in distributed networks becomes potentially transformative when networks spill outside the control of established organizations ... if not controlled, they embody the Internet’s potential as a relatively open public sphere in **which the ideas and plans of protest can be exchanged with relative ease, speed and global scope**” (Howard Rheingold in Bennett:2003 20). I believe that the control that mainstream media exerts on the blogosphere does not preclude such processes.

What is more, the theoretical dilemmas of Sunstein and the empirical studies of Babarasi (2002) showed that a self-governing system is not necessarily democratic. Extremism, fragmentation and new forms of power relations characterise the complex networks of the Information Society. Freedom of speech on the Internet is a sensitive issue and for a relatively young democracy its regulation seems to go against liberal ideals. In this context, journalists can indeed serve democracy to “manage complexity, complex systems, monitor the public, tend to a complex system, and save it from its worst natural instincts, because a democratic public sphere is not a necessary product of a self-organized public”. (Babarasi 2002) The Index staff hopefully will take on these roles, by managing its own estate, the Blog.hu.

As for the issue of the transformation of some core aspects of the partisan movement of citizen journalism, one crucial consequence is that it no longer belongs to the gift economy. As I showed in my analysis of Index, there is a commodification of the blogosphere, the professionals offer financial incentives for the talented and productive amateurs. On the one hand, I assume that such commercialisation would have happened without the intermediation of the mainstream press, maybe with worse conditions for the amateurs than the ones that Index set up. On the other hand, it is a question how the inherent power inequalities of the blogosphere are influenced by the intervention of the mainstream, which applies its own value system to select the ‘best ones’. As Bourdieu argued, “the journalistic field tends to reinforce the “commercial” element at the core of each fields to the detriment of the pure” (Bourdieu 1998 70). My interviews confirmed this, as the major criteria of “goodness” in blogs for the Blog-editor of Index was “visibility” and “amount of comments”. So their criteria resemble the “audience ratings” on television. It is a question whether they are making the blogosphere more conservative and uniform with time.

Journalists in the meantime profited from their changed roles. Firstly, simply by the fact that they are in a more direct relationship with their public, their sense of authority increases. Secondly, among journalists in Hungary the fluctuation between workplaces is rather widespread. Blogs allow journalists to prove how much attention they **individually** can trigger, to display their professional knowledge in a specialised area (many journalists open blogs on their hobbies), and to show their networking abilities. To conclude, their agency increases, they can better represent themselves, their autonomy enhances, which suggests that potentially they can better serve the public interest, hence democracy. However, this individuation (Beck in Benett 34) not only helps them to sell themselves better in the local

media market, but also allows them to form a cosmopolitan identity and find their places in the global network of professional groups (Boyer,Hannerz).

In terms of the localisation of the global movement, I must refer back to my points about the issue of journalistic professionalism in Hungary. As I discussed in the Literature chapter, the credibility and the legitimacy of journalists have been questioned as a result of the role they played in the communist regime. Today, their credibility is further eroded because many of them do part time work in the financial and PR sector of the competitive market, and because of the “buddying practice”, which means that public interviews with the elite members often take the form of private dialogues, and, lastly, due to their slow pace at doing investigative reporting. Besides, as my informants claimed, Hungarian journalism is generally characterised by a rigid language patterns, conservative attitude and bad working moral. Citizen journalists, socialised in Anglo-Saxon news media seem to provide a professional model for at least the online journalists in Hungary.

In the empirical work for this thesis, I focused on journalists’ perspectives, how they experience the current transformation of the mediascape, whether they see their roles as changing in the public sphere. As a next phase, I would conduct ethnographic research on particular communities, to see how citizen journalism transformed the lives and identities of their members and the social cohesion of the communities. To give an example, there is one particular small village, whose members are very active on Blog.hu, most prominently the mayor, who is writing a Hrabal-style online diary. Apart from rural communities, a similar inquiry would also be worthwhile doing among young people with IT education, as these days many of them are starting to experiment with blogs as a form of self-PR on the labour market. One crucial aspect that my thesis overlooked was people’s changing perception of the private

and the public spheres. I would presume that these ethnographic investigations could provide some insights into this intriguing theoretical issue as well.

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## APPENDIX

### QUESTIONNAIRE

**Dear journalist, editor! I would like to see what you as a reporter of Index think about your profession, your role in the public sphere, about the relationship between the media and civic life and about the collaboration with citizens. Thank you for your cooperation.**

**Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements: 1. I strongly disagree. 2. I don't really agree. 3. I agree and not agree. 4. I tend to agree; 5 I totally agree. 0 I don't know**

1. A reporter's central mission is to report and analyse.	1	2	3	4	5	0
2. Reporters should cover news from the average citizen up.	1	2	3	4	5	0
3. I think reporters are citizens first and journalists second.	1	2	3	4	5	0
4. A role of reporter is to create a forum for dialogue.	1	2	3	4	5	0
5. It's lazy journalism when reporters rely on citizens.	1	2	3	4	5	0
6. The need to "get back to the people" is commercial.	1	2	3	4	5	0
7. Reporters should understand what it's like to be a minority.	1	2	3	4	5	0
8. Hungarian reporters generally cannot ask properly.	1	2	3	4	5	0
9. In Hungary, the professional rules of journalism have not been laid down yet.	1	2	3	4	5	0
10 The majority has negative stereotypes about reporters (such as they are often late, they are poorly informed, shabbily dressed, etc)	1	2	3	4	5	0
11 Hungarian reporters tend to just follow events, instead of doing investigative journalism.	1	2	3	4	5	0
12 Point 11 does not apply to reporters at Index.	1	2	3	4	5	0
13 Reporters are responsible for building and maintaining a democratic public sphere.	1	2	3	4	5	0
14 News stories benefit from the incorporation of subjective elements	1	2	3	4	5	0
15 In the online environment hard news are increasingly replaced by infotainment.	1	2	3	4	5	0