The Amateur Computerist

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OhmyNews International Pioneer of Transnational Journalism

In May 2004, the Korean language online news site *OhmyNews* began an English language edition. They called this English language edition *OhmyNews International*. It was also known as *OMNI*. It was ended on Aug. 31, 2010.

This issue of the *Amateur Computerist* newsletter is a special issue focusing on the experience and implications of the six years of *OhmyNews International*.

During most of these six years *OhmyNews International* was under the editorship of Todd Thacker who provided a helpful and supportive environment to contributors. A number of these contributors, especially in the early years were journalists or other specialists in various subjects from countries around the world.

There were articles for example by Wooksik Cheong on inter-Korean relations, Ramzy Baroud on Palestinian issues, John Horvath on Eastern European developments, Alex Krabbe on E.U. and German events, Tim Savage on nuclear developments, Chris Gelken on events in Iran, the Middle East, and on China, and Ronda Hauben on the social impact of the Net and netizens and on UN related issues. These are but some examples of articles that continued over a period of time in *OhmyNews International*.

Along with articles by a set of featured writers, there were contributions from journalists or volunteer reporters (called citizen reporters or news guerrillas) from around the world.

From 2005 to 2008, *OhmyNews International* held a yearly international forum in South Korea. The first three forums made it possible for journalists from a number of different countries to meet for the few days of the forum. Some formed friendships lasting years afterwards. Some of the journalists who wrote for *OhmyNews International* played pioneering roles in the development of online journalism. In the summer of 2008, the fourth forum featured journalists who had covered and documented the 106 day candlelight demonstration in Seoul that spring.

Going to the first *OhmyNews International* Citizen Reporters' Forum in the summer of 2005, one journalist noted the spirit and vision of several of the other *OhmyNews International* writers. These writers and Todd as the editor had a sense that there was a need for a publication that supported the quest for a better world. We would mention from the early period among others Alex Krabbe, Trung Nguyen, James Fontanella and Rupesh Silwal.

An essential aspect of *OhmyNews International* was its ability to draw contributions from journalists around the world, often journalists for whom English was a second language or a language they wanted to learn. The content of *OhmyNews International* was able to reflect a

transnational perspective rather than a narrow national viewpoint which is characteristic of many other news publications.

Some remarkable coverage found its way into *OhmyNews International.* It featured coverage of the large demonstrations in South Korea against the effort to impeach President Roh Moo-hyun in 2004, of the struggle in Nepal after King Gyanendra assumed direct power and declared a nation-wide state of emergency in 2005, and of the struggle against the removal of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry in Pakistan in 2007.

Another aspect of *OhmyNews International* was that it would print articles covering diverse viewpoints on an issue. When in 2005 there was a struggle in France against the EU constitution or in 2006 against an employment law expanding the ability of employers to get around the regulations providing for permanent employment, *OhmyNews International* had articles reflecting pro and con viewpoints. Similarly, in the debate over whether or not it was a freedom of speech issue to print the cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in disrespectful ways in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, *OhmyNews International* included articles with opposing perspectives on the issue.

OhmyNews International showed that with minimal resources and a hard working editor it was possible to gather important articles on an ongoing way over a substantial period of time.

Another aspect of *OhmyNews International* is that it gave the international community a peek into the potential that *OhmyNews* founder and CEO Oh Yeon-ho had put forward as a vision for a more grassroots form of media. (See the article "Background: *OhmyNews Korea*," this issue p. 3)

We have not mentioned the aspect most often associated with *OhmyNews*, the promotion of the notion of citizen journalism. One reason we have not featured this as part of this description of contributions by *OhmyNews International* is that we see the importance of defending a broad concept of 'citizenship.' That concept has its roots in the social and civic participatory activism as practiced by the citizens who declared themselves the sovereigns in place of the King during the French Revolution.

If there was to be a support for something called "citizen journal-

ism" a broad conception of "citizen" needed to be established as the basis for this form of journalism. Mr. Oh referred to this broad conception of citizen at times when he talked about how it was the netizens who were the basis for *OhmyNews*, i.e. those who had a view of a better society and saw their participation in *OhmyNews* as a contribution to that vision. Too often a narrow view of citizen has been adopted as the basis for citizen journalism. For the mainstream media, citizen journalism became a means of getting on-the-scene reports from volunteers rather than articles from citizen watchdogs that reflect a broader vision of journalism.*

By summer 2007, three of the part-time editors of the international edition were dismissed. *OhmyNews* explained that it did not yet have a means of supporting financially the international edition. A scaled back edition continued to be published until August 31, 2010 when the site no longer allowed new articles to be submitted.

During its six years of existence it was a noble endeavor. We want to thank those who put their heart and soul into making it something important. In the pages of this issue of the *Amateur Computerist*, we have contributions from a small sample of the many people who contributed to *OhmyNews International* over these years. While this small set of articles does not in any way constitute a summary of the significant achievements or problems of *OhmyNews International*, it does give a flavor of what the experience meant to some of its participants.

This issue begins with the article, "Background: *OhmyNews Korea*" which tells some of the story of the Korean online news site. *OhmyNews* (*OMN*) pioneered major content submitted by citizen reporters and edited by experienced journalists. It set out to be a significant progressive alternative news media to provide a counter to the dominant South Korean mainstream conservative press. Its early success encouraged its founder Oh Yeon-ho to sponsor *OhmyNews International*.

Next follow nine articles viewing *OhmyNews International* from the different points of view of the editors, feature writers and citizen journalists who sent their submissions for this issue and an article by Ulla Rannikko who shares some of her observations from her experience of doing a Ph.D. thesis, in part about *OhmyNews International*.

Ramzy Baroud wrote to us: "It was truly sad that *OMNI* had to close; I do believe that it served a very important mission at an important juncture, and also inspired many writers and online developers…. I think it is very important to reflect on." We hope that this issue of the *Amateur Computerist* will encourage others to reflect on and write of their experience with *OhmyNews International*.

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*See for example the article "Netizenship in the 21st Century," which explores how citizenry, empowered by the Internet, and hence acting as netizens, can watchdog their societies and attempt to check the abuse of power by government officials. It is available at: http://ais.org/~jrh/acn/Paris-7-13-10.doc

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[Editors note: The following background of the *OhmyNews* project is taken from "Online Grassroots Journalism and Participatory Democracy in South Korea" by Ronda Hauben. It is a chapter in *Korea Yearbook 2007* published by Brill (2008). A draft of the chapter appears at: http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/other/netizens_draft.pdf]

Background: *OhmyNews Korea*

The Korean language online news site *OhmyNews* began in February 2000 with the explicit objective of bringing about a shift in the balance of power of the media in South Korea. *OhmyNews* was started by Oh Yeon-ho, formerly a journalist for the *Monthly Mal*, an alternative magazine owned by the Citizen's Coalition for Democratic Media. Oh worked for *Mal* as a journalist for the decade following 1988. In July 1994, he published a story based on his in-depth investigation of the 1950 No Gun Ri massacre[1] of South Korean civilians by U.S. soldiers during the Korean War. The mainstream conservative Korean press ignored the story at the time, though there was a reference to the Mal story in the progressive daily newspaper *Hankyoreh*.

Five years later, in 1999 some Associated Press (AP) reporters wrote about the incident. The mainstream Korean news media from the

Korean Broadcasting System to *Chosun Ilbo* wrote articles based on the AP story, as if it were breaking news, explained Oh. Not only did the South Korean government take it up, but the AP reporters won a Pulitzer Prize for their article. While the AP story included accounts from U.S. soldiers who had been involved, an element which had not been part of Oh's story, this experience led Oh to conclude that it was not the nature of the news that governed how much attention a story received, but the power of the news media organization that determined what was to be considered as news.

As a reporter for a small alternative publication, Oh experienced discrimination in his effort to cover stories. Nor did journalists for the mainstream conservative media treat him as a fellow journalist. Oh observed that power was maintained by the mainstream media via their ability to set the standards for what was considered news, news gathering and news distribution. With the creation of *OhmyNews*, Oh was determined to make fundamental changes in the process of news gathering, production and distribution.

One basic change that *OhmyNews* instituted was to welcome netizens to become journalists. Describing his philosophy, Oh writes:

> Every citizen is a reporter. Journalists aren't some exotic species, they're everyone who seeks to take new developments, put them into writing, and share them with others. This common truth has been trampled on in a culture where being a reporter is seen as something of a privilege to be enjoyed. Privileged reporters who come together to form massive news media wielded power over the whole process of news production, distribution and consumption.

Readers of *OhmyNews* could submit stories which would be considered by the editors for publication. Articles which were accepted were fact-checked, edited and then published. Those who contributed articles were called citizen journalists or citizen reporters. The citizen reporters whose articles appeared in *OhmyNews* would be paid a small fee; the amount depended on whether the article appeared on the front page or elsewhere in *OhmyNews*. Oh explains that instead of the standard of most mainstream journalists, 'I produce and you read,' *OhmyNews* had substituted, 'We produce, we read, we change the world

together.' The concept of 'news' was transformed by *OhmyNews*. Articles could include opinions as long as the facts were accurate.

Oh started *OhmyNews* with a small staff of four reporters and limited resources. He was helped by online production of the newspaper, with the Internet providing a platform that would make possible readers' comments and discussion on articles and the means to distribute the newspaper. In order to produce this Internet newspaper, given its small staff, Oh adopted a strategy that he called 'selection and concentration.' The staff would decide on a focus for their coverage and put their resources into providing substantial coverage of these stories. Though at the beginning priority was given to news about Korean politics, society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), other sections, including international news, business and culture, were added as the newspaper developed.

In the business plan for the OhmyNews Foundation, several aspects of *OhmyNews* are explained in greater detail.[2] The long-term strategy is to produce 'an Internet daily newspaper superior to Digital Chosun.' *OhmyNews* will bring innovations to 'journalism culture by a revolution in news production, delivery and consumption culture,' and will provide a 'pivot for the federation of reporter-like reporters.' News form and content will be transformed with the goal of 'destroy[ing] the standardized form of news report,' striving for the 'best investigative reports,' and reporting 'vivid sounds of the field: live reports, audio plus video, if possible.' The third aspect, after strategy and transformation of work methods, will be to 'fire arrows toward specific targets: attack corrupted and privileged areas.' The targeted audience is the 'Young N-generation, progressive activists, and reporters,' including 'high school students, college students, 386 generation, NGO[s], local activists and reporters.' The philosophy proposed is labeled 'open progressive.' This means that 'We are to pursue open progressive perspectives, criticizing unproductive and stubborn progressives and supporting productive and conscientious conservatives.' While the group PSPD (Peoples Solidarity for Participatory Democracy) worked to build solidarity among civic activists as an NGO, *OhmyNews* also sought to create an 'NGO'– News Guerrillas Organization – for solidarity among 'news guerrillas.' Oh explains this term as follows: "The dictionary definition of guerrilla is

'a member of small non-regular armed forces who disrupt the rear positions of the enemy.' Citizen reporters can be called guerrillas because they are not professional and regulars and they post news from perspectives uniquely their own, not those of the conservative establishment."

The goal in the business plan is to replace the 8:2 ratio between conservative media and progressive media in South Korea with a 5:5 ratio.

2002 Candlelight Demonstrations For Two Dead Girls

In June 2002, an armored military vehicle driven by two U.S. servicemen ran over and killed two Korean middle-school girls. At the time, however, most Koreans were focused on the World Cup celebrations taking place in South Korea. By November 2002, the mood had changed, and there was a clear desire among many Koreans that the soldiers concerned should be punished. The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the U.S. and the Republic of Korea provided that the soldiers be tried by U.S. courts, not under Korean law, and they were found not guilty. A documentary about the trial and its outcome was shown on Korean television. A few hours after watching the documentary, an *OhmyNews* citizen reporter, using the name AngMA, posted a message on several forums on the Internet including one at *OhmyNews*, which read:[3]

> We are owners of Korea. We are Koreans who deserve to be able to walk in Gwanghwamun.[4] I cried when I watched the TV documentary broadcast of the event, because until now I didn't understand those who struggle so strongly.
>
> It is said that dead men's souls become fireflies. Let's fill downtown with our souls, with the souls of Mi-seon and Hyo-soon. Let's become thousands of fireflies this coming Saturday and Sunday. Let's sacrifice our private comfortable lives. Please light your candle at your home. If somebody asks, please answer, 'I'm going to commemorate my dead sisters.' Holding candles and wearing black, let's have a memorial ceremony for them.

Let's walk in Gwanghwamun holding a lighted candle. Let's commemo-

rate the lives of Mi-seon and Hyo-soon, who were forgotten in the joy of June. Will the police prevent us? Even if they forbid it, I will walk in Gwanghwamun, even if the police attack me. We are not Americans who revenge [sic] violence with more violence. Even if only one person comes, it's OK. I will be happy to say hello. I will talk about the future of Korea in which Mi-seon and Hyo-soon can take a comfortable rest. I'll go on, this week, next week, the following week. Let's fill Gwanghwamun with our candle-light. Let's put out the American's violence with our peace.

AngMA posted this at three different online sites on 28 November 2002 at 04:00, five hours after he had seen the TV documentary. The next day he posted it at *OhmyNews*. Fifteen thousand people appeared at the first candlelight vigil for the two dead girls on 30 November. The rally was due to netizens and the Internet. The movement continued to develop and expand. So too did the online discussion and debate. By 14 December more than 100,000 people gathered in Gwanghwamun.

Roh Moo-Hyun's Election Campaign

The candlelight demonstrations of 2002 occurred during a period leading up to the presidential election campaign held that year. Developments in the election campaign were another part of the power struggle between the conservative print media and online discussion by netizens on the Internet. During the campaign, criticism in the print media stirred interest in Roh Moo-hyun, a candidate who was considered to be outside of the political mainstream. The narrow focus of the conservative print media was countered by a broad discussion online of the issues of the election. This discussion utilized a variety of online forms, including discussion groups, online polemics, and online journalism. Responses to the print articles were posted and distributed on the Internet.

Up until March 2002, Roh was scoring far behind Lee Hoi-chang according to polls such as one reported in *Chosun Ilbo* (5 March 2002), which gave Lee 38.7 percent of the vote, and Roh 25.2 percent. In online publications, however, there were signs that the election was going to be more of a close race than was apparent in the print press. An online publication, *Digital Times*, as early as February 2002 showed Roh ahead of Lee. The significant aspect of the election campaign for Roh was the

fact that his candidacy was strongly opposed by the conservative print press. For example, during the primary election, the 'major newspapers almost everyday carried articles that both implicitly and explicitly criticized candidate Roh Moo-hyun.' Surprisingly, the attacks by the print media served to increase the public's interest in Roh and his campaign. As Yun Seongyi suggests, '[a]s a result more and more voters must have wondered to themselves "Just who is this Roh Moo-hyun?"' In his study of the activity on the Internet during the 2002 election, Yun Young-min documents the 'sharp increase in the number of visits to Roh's website' and judges 'that must have been the reason why "Roh Moo-hyun" became one of the most popular search terms in the news section of portal sites.'

Criticism of Roh by the major newspapers had a David and Goliath effect, with Roh being regarded as the brave David able to slay the more powerful Goliath. Attacks on Roh that appeared in the conservative print media were quick to draw responses and discussion in online newspapers and discussion forums. If there was a reference in the print media to a speech that Roh gave, the whole speech would be posted online with a response to the article that had appeared in the print media. Similarly, online discussions were common, and supporters of Roh would send each other articles they found of interest. The online discussion and exchange of views found particular favor among the younger generations who had previously found politics uninteresting. A feedback loop developed between the articles published in the conservative major print publications and the comments and discussion that occurred online. To Lee Eun-Jung, the election of 2002 was 'a power struggle between the main print media and the Internet,' and 'for the first time in Korean history, the power of the so-called netizen…made itself felt.'

Role of netizens in the election campaign

Prior to the election, most experts would have assumed that it was impossible for Roh. But after the election, these same experts would agree that the Internet had played a significant role in the victory. Though he is cautious about claiming causality without further study, Yun Young-min proposes that the 'so-called experts' should exert caution when making their predictions about 'such events in the future.'

Summarizing Roh's victory, Yun Young-min writes:

> Cyberspace is making it possible for citizens to choose a political position free from the influence of the mainstream press…. Public opinion, which has been almost exclusively minted by a few mass media, can no longer be hidden beneath the control of the press. The…effect is expected to break the old equation, 'the opinion of the press = public opinion = prevailing opinion.'

Lee Eun-Jung agrees that something important happened: 'In a sense the netizens mobilized themselves into the political realm, exercising their power as citizens…,' and concludes that 'with their electoral revolution the netizens had transformed political culture in Korea.'…

OhmyNews and the netizens played a critical role in the hours leading up to the election scheduled for 19 December 2002. Oh and other *OhmyNews* journalists and citizen reporters covered the events continuously throughout the night. As the election approached, Oh realized he had watched netizens supporting the Roh election phenomenon for two years. Oh wondered if it would be possible for netizens to succeed in their campaign for Roh given the opposition of the conservative media. He describes what happened. Around 22:30 the night before the election, Chung Mong-joon, Roh's partner in the campaign, withdrew his support for Roh. *Chosun Ilbo* announced the event, urging voters to follow Chung's lead and withdraw their support from Roh. *OhmyNews* continually updated its coverage. Oh reports that the discussion boards on *OhmyNews* were flooded with comments. The article in *OhmyNews* about Chung's withdrawal of support received 570,000 hits in the ten hours following the announcement. With the hits it received later that day, making a total of 720,000, it set a record for the most hits on a single article in *OhmyNews* in one day. Instead of being dissuaded by Chung's action and *Chosun Ilbo's* efforts to change the course of what would happen in the election, netizens rallied round Roh, discussing what to do about the turn of events, and urging their family, friends and others to vote. This episode led Oh to the conclusion that the importance of the 2002 election was that it was not based on support for Roh personally, but was a manifestation of 'the desire of

young netizens for political reform.'

After the election victory, reporters from *Chosun Ilbo* and other conservative news media called to congratulate Oh and other *OhmyNews* reporters. According to Oh,

OhmyNews did our job as the media by giving the Roh Phenomenon its worth as a news story. For example, on a scale of 100 we gave the Roh Phenomenon a 95 in terms of newsworthiness. Korea's conservative dailies, however, gave it only a 30. Through our own abilities, we did what the media naturally should have done. We rejected their standards and through on-the-spot coverage we were able to decide just how newsworthy the Roh phenomenon was.

On 19 December, 2002, Oh wrote that '[t]he power of the media dominated for 80 years by *Chosun Ilbo*, *Joong Ang Ilbo* and *Dong-A Ilbo* has finally changed. The power has gone from the printed newspaper and the professional journalists to the netizens and citizen reporters.'

With this strong start in its first three years, *OhmyNews* was in October, 2003 ranked sixth in a survey of "Korea's Most Influential Media."[5] In 2004, *OhmyNews* added an English language news site *OhmyNews International*. In 2010, *OhmyNews* succumbed to the same financial difficulties as other media. The company changed from an advertising dependent to a subscriber model for funding its operations. On August 31, it ended support for new submissions to *OhmyNews International*.

Notes

1. In the 1990s, thirty South Koreans filed several petitions to the U.S. government, alleging a mass killing of refugees by American soldiers at No Gun Ri, a small village in South Korea, during the Korean War. In the spring of 1994, 73 year old Eun-yong Chong, a survivor's husband, published a factual novel called *Do You Know Our Agony?* (*Kudae, Uri Ui Apumul Anunga)* based on his own research and collection of information about the incident. This novel caught the eye of some Korean journalists. Upon investigation, the massacre was found to be an incident during the Korean War in which an undetermined number of Korean civilians were killed by soldiers of the U.S. 7th Cavalry Regiment and from the air between July 26 and 28 near the village of No Gun Ri.
2. Oh, Yeon-ho (2004), 'Business Plan,' Daehanminguk Tuksanpoom, *OhmyNews*, Seoul: Humanist, pp. 327-353, Translation from Korean into English by Lee Jin-sun.

3. Message translated from Korean into English by Lee Jin-sun.
4. Gwanghwamun is the area in downtown Seoul where the U.S. embassy is located. It was off limits for demonstrations.
5. *Sisa Journal*, October 21, 2003.

Closure of *OhmyNews International*
A sad event for citizen journalists*

by Proloy Kumar Bagchi
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I don't know whether people will really believe me when I say that I got a wrench in my heart when I opened the mail from *OhmyNews International (OMNI)* and learned about the decision of the promoters to close the site. That the site that inspired many others to come out into the cyberworld would one day fold up was unthinkable. Everyone looked up at it for its values – moral and journalistic – and tried to imbibe some, if not all, of it. For six years it remained as a shining star of participatory journalism. Unfortunately soon thereafter, one presumes, it came face to face with problems that at least I am not privy to.

That there was that tell-tale sign of difficulties had become obvious for a few weeks now. Yet, I, for one, never lost faith in the belief that the site would soon revive. I kept uploading my pieces and, lo and behold, they were being viewed by hundreds although they were continuously kept under editorial review and never made it to the Home Page. It was so satisfying.

In fact, for me, sitting in the central Indian town of Bhopal, *OMNI* has been a great way for reaching out to the wider world. My topical and environmental pieces were read and occasionally commented upon. On two occasions researches on citizen journalism from the U.S. and U.K. even got in touch with me – the latter even interviewed me on Skype. For a retired civil servant who had taken to writing only to contribute to society it was a great recompense.

I hoped that Mr. Oh and his colleagues would somehow pull through and keep the site going. That they would decide to close it never

occurred to me. *OMNI* had such a wide sweep. One could write about any and everything for it, the only requirement was integrity and dignity. I still nurse the hope that somehow the site will be kept alive even if another one, with far narrower perspective, is mounted.

If that doesn't happen, here are heartfelt thanks to *OMNI* for hosting me and its readers for reading my pieces. And, of course best of my wishes for *OMNI*'s new venture and its talented team.

OhmyNews From the Frontline

by Todd Thacker,
OMNI Editor 2004-2009
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It's an honor to share some of my reflections on 5 years at *OhmyNews International* – a formative time in my career. I must admit that after *OMNI* shut its doors as a full-fledged (professionally edited) citizen journalism site this year, I moved on. A new family and job as managing editor of a print paper on Jeju Island, Korea, were also new challenges. But *OhmyNews Korea* is still going strong and I keep in regular touch with *OhmyNews* staffers – many of whom have also gone on to other things.

Though we were making it up as we went along, and made our fair share of mistakes along the way, *OMNI* thrived on the idealism of our staff, the owner Mr. Oh Yeon-ho and his investment of time and (a substantial amount of) money and thousands of citizen reporters who participated over the years. We worked hard to develop a new form of international cooperative journalism.

Back in early 2004, we were given a couple of desks and computers in an office separate from the main Korean newsroom. The Web site was

developed from the Korean system. The back-end interface where all the editing was done was in Korean.

Since we were *OhmyNews International*, we put a lot effort into keeping the operation as close to a 24-hour editing cycle as possible. At first I did all the heavy lifting but soon we hired copy editors in the U.S. and later in the U.K. to keep up with the steady stream of incoming articles. At one point we had five full time and part timers on call.

We also came up with new ways to use the Web for collaborative editing (like Google Docs after Writely was acquired). In fact, it was so efficient that I brought that system with me as managing editor of my new paper, *The Jeju Weekly*. Our whole office is in the cloud.

Speaking of which, upon reflection, now that I have simply a local news patch, I can appreciate the shear variety of stories our editing staff were responsible for. We learned so much about the world from the hundreds of citizen reporters, 99% of whom I never met in person, who contributed to our site. Moreover, though we published thousands of stories, I'm very pleased to say we only had to deal with a small handful of complaints and/or threats of litigation – a miracle in my book.

It wasn't all smooth sailing, of course. *OMNI* seemed to be put on the back burner for other projects like the *OhmyNews* blog, *OhmyNews Japan* and upgrades to the Korean operation (admittedly, the money maker). Our site infrastructure was Microsoft-centric (just like all of Korea back then). We also didn't really know how to make *OMNI* profitable and who our target audience could be.

On the positive side, though, we made a lot of good friends from all over the world and we banded together to try to get another side of the news out to a larger audience. *OhmyNews International* had a very centerist editorial policy (quite independent of the left-leaning Korean operation) and we treated our non-Korean citizen reporters the same as Korean ones in terms of payments.

As for the significance and role *OMNI* played overseas I'll defer to the historians and experts. Personally, though, working with smart people like Tim Savage, Jason Sparapani, Andrew Petty, Shane Tasker, Yujin Chang and Claire George was a great privilege. I enjoyed interacting with all sorts of people – from Afghanistan to Zaire. The Haubens in particular standout in my mind as true advocates and friends

of *OhmyNews*. And I was very pleased to help our citizen reporters build their portfolios and write recommendation letters to help them further their studies and get jobs.

I traveled quite a bit around the world for *OhmyNews* (Qatar, Moscow and Harvard College being highlights) and it was striking that a small company in Korea could build such a recognizable brand, particularly from 2002 to 2005 when *OhmyNews International* had little by way of competition overseas.

I think if we had had access to the social networking tools of today back in 2004, we might have been able to parlay our efforts into a successful business. But as it stands, our personal and professional networks remain intact (and social, on Twitter and Facebook) and *OMNI's* archive is still live on the Web.

It was a great ride. Thanks to you all.

OhmyNews Has Long-Lasting Impacts on My Life

by Trung Nguyen
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It was not until I saw Ronda Hauben in Virginia in October, that I realized how quickly time had flown. It has been five years since I first met my fellow citizen reporter-turned-friend at a forum organized by *OhmyNews* in Seoul, in 2005.

It was a short visit to Korea but a significant one which has made long-lasting impacts on my life. That was the first time I went abroad and attended such a large conference with amazing people.

I remember vividly that at one point we were standing side by side, raising our own national flags on stage in a huge auditorium in June 2005. I was so moved as I was representing Vietnam among dozens of fellow reporters with different nationalities. At that time, I thought of my two-month old daughter, saying to myself that I would try my best to make her proud.

Before that, I made my first speech ever in front of a large number of other reporters, stressing that I joined *OhmyNews* as I wanted to enhance my reporting skills in English and to expand my network of contacts as well as to seek chances to further my studies.

It is obvious that by writing for the citizen news site and reading others' articles, my writing skills have improved so much that some pieces that I contributed to BBC World Service and VOA News were published on their sites.

It is also through *OhmyNews* that I have acquired many friendships that I treasure until now. For a long time, I got access to *OhmyNews* site at least once a day, waiting for my articles to be published and wondering what story others would write on that date.

For me, it was like the atmosphere in the close village where I spent my childhood. People know you and care about you. I have also been culturally enriched by reading articles from different corners of the world.

Given the media restriction in my country, I was excited because of the fact that I could reach out to the world with my articles. I love the interactive function of *OhmyNews* as readers could comment on each of my pieces and even wrote directly to me through e-mail. The *Wall Street Journal* even got in touch with me to have an interview relating to my articles about the Korean 'cultural wave' in Vietnam.

It is undeniable that an online content managing system helped me communicate effectively with editors just like I was working in a newsroom. Moreover, thanks to the reference letter of Senior Editor Todd Thacker, I was awarded a scholarship to pursue a Masters degree in the U.K., and subsequently have chanced to work in the U.S.

It is so sad to hear that *OhmyNews* English is no longer operational, but still, I am pleased that I have some friendships which I believe will last forever.

OMNI Citizen Journalism:
A Good Start to an Unfinished Journey

by Michael Werbowski
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My journey as an *OMNI* citizen reporter began back in 2007 with a piece about a UN biodiversity conference in Brazil. It ended with the Greek protests of 2010 against austerity measure being imposed on the country by the E.U. and IMF. During this transitional period in my life and reporting career, I wrote music reviews, did interviews, and even dabbled in poetry; several were published on the news site. *OMNI* gave me an important venue to express my opinions and also contextualize news events. This experimental forum enabled me to "push the envelope" in new directions. That is, I attempted to write my articles from a "bottom up" approach, instead of the opposite. Often in my news reports, commentary etc., I took the point of view of the citizenry, and how they might be impacted by events or local happenings. Often my views were at odds with those peddled by the corporate media.

This stood out perhaps in my "on-site" reports on international issues which often had great local impact. Such as the building of a radar station in a small Czech village. The issue was extremely controversial at the time, and also looked as if NATO would have the installation built there. But tremendous public pressure and organized opposition managed to prevent the radar project to get of the ground, which was to be located on a nationally protected park land. I recall visiting the village and then taking to the locals for *OMNI*. The report, I found out later, made a huge impact and was commented on several Czech blogs. Hence, I become aware of the positive influence citizen journalism and in particular *OMNI*, had on developments whose outcome almost seemed to be predestined or pre-determined.

As an *OMNI* citizen reporter, I also felt that covering news stories was more of a mission than and not just profession. I took up causes related to environmental issues, such as the annual Canadian seal slaughter. Most of my *OMNI* pieces were unabashedly opinionated, and I became a regular commentator on international issues and events. I

tried not to let factual clarity be distorted by my perhaps biased views. There were many pieces which were written not so much with objectivity in mind, but more of a sense of duty to raise awareness on a topic left out of the mainstream media. Deaths related to police incidents involving individuals restrained by 'tasers' for instance. This was under reported at the time in North America.

While writing for *OMNI*, I embarked on a "Quo Vadis" series of articles. Each one usually examined the state of an international organization, or country which was in the news at the time. Again, being with *OMNI* at the time gave me great flexibility and freedom to analyze, delve into, and hopefully spur discussion on the topics I raised in my writings.

One of the more memorable *OMNI* reporting experiences was during the 2007, Turkish legislative elections. Just after returning from the *OMNI* Citizens' Forum meeting in Seoul, I came to Istanbul, Turkey. There I immediately plunged into the pre-electoral frenzy in the country. My reports where filed in "real time" and the final elections results and projection results were dispatched as quickly as those filed by major news agencies. This time, I realized it was possible to compete with the "big guys" in the business with very limited resources.

There are of course drawbacks to citizen journalism such as *OMNI*. Working without a deadline can be tedious, as you have to constantly motivate yourself to get a story out.

The reward (remuneration) is minimal. Moreover, a CJ's resources are very restricted, in the sense he or she lacks a newspapers' usual network of vast contact and immediate access to those 'in the loop." However, in my three years as an *OMNI* citizen reporter, I was able to improve and refine my reporting skills and at the same time perhaps make a difference in the world. In this sense my days at *OMNI* were a rewarding part of my life.

Dec, 2010, Vienna Austria

OMNI and Reporting from the United Nations

by Ronda Hauben
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I learned about *OhmyNews* from an article in the *Financial Times* in February 2003, when Roh Moo-hyun took office as the President in South Korea. The article I saw described how the netizens of South Korea had elected the President of the country. After reading the article, I posted on a relevant Usenet newsgroup asking for more background on this. I soon learned about how online users who considered themselves netizens, with the support of the Internet newspaper *OhmyNews,* had worked to nominate and support the Roh Moo-hyun candidacy.

One of the netizens who responded to my post, helped me to make contact with someone who worked on *OhmyNews*. He had written an article in English describing how the newspaper had been founded. As I did research and learned about *OhmyNews* I realized that the Howard Dean campaign for the nomination to run for U.S. President on the Democratic Party ticket had similar characteristics. I wrote an article comparing the Roh Moo-hyun campaign and the Dean campaign. My article was translated into Korean and published in *OhmyNews* in English and Korean several months before the International, English language edition began.

Subsequently I learned that *OhmyNews* was planning an English language edition. I continued to submit articles which were published. A few months later, the English edition was started and I was able to register to submit my articles on my own.

When the editorial staff was increased, it also became possible to become a featured writer. I became the first female featured writer for the English language edition of *OhmyNews*.

By October 2006 the second 5 year term for Kofi Annan as the Secretary General of the United Nations was soon to end, one of the main contenders to become the 8th Secretary General of the UN was the Foreign Minister of South Korea, Ban Ki-moon.

I had gone to one United Nations event on a press pass I was able

to get based on my writing for *Telepolis*, and the experience proved very interesting. This event was the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) which took place in Tunis, Tunisia in November 2005. Also I had watched with interest some of the press reports of the speeches made by heads of state at the 2006 opening of the General Assembly session. I thought that it might be interesting to go to the UN and cover the activities for *OhmyNews* if the new Secretary General would be the Korean candidate.

On October 9, 2006, Ban Ki-moon won the Security Council nomination. This nomination was to be approved by the General Assembly on October 13.

I thought this would be a historic event for South Korea. I asked *OhmyNews International* if I could get a letter for a press credential for the UN. They said yes and I was able to get my credential in time to go to the General Assembly meeting when the General Assembly voted to accept the Security Council's nomination of Ban Ki-moon.

I was surprised that some of the speeches welcoming Ban as the Secretary General elect were speeches critical of the domination of UN procedures and activities by the Security Council. Also I was surprised that the U.S. Ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, made no pretense of both welcoming Ban and of expressing his dissatisfaction with Kofi Annan, the outgoing Secretary General.

It was a thrill, however, to be at the UN witnessing the vote for a new Secretary General who was from South Korea. I wondered if the Internet would be able to have any impact on Ban and on what happened at the United Nations, since the Internet had been able to make it possible for netizens in South Korea to impact politics.

The very next day after Ban's nomination was approved by the General Assembly of the UN, the Security Council took up the recent nuclear test by North Korea. The Security Council voted for sanctions on North Korea, not giving the North Korean Ambassador to the UN, Pak Gil Yon a chance to respond until after the sanctions had been voted on.

It impressed me that just as a new Secretary General from South Korea was being chosen as the new Secretary General of the UN, at the same time sanctions were being imposed on North Korea.

I wrote an article about the election of Ban Ki-moon as the 8th Secretary General, documenting some of the problems I became aware of that were raised in the welcoming speeches. The article, "The Problem Facing the UN." was carried in English in the weekly Korean print edition, as well as in the online English edition.

January 2, 2007 was Ban Ki-moon's first day at the United Nations building as the new Secretary General. He came down to the staff cafeteria to eat his lunch, with his communications staff person. I saw them standing near where I was eating and invited them to sit with me. They looked a bit lost, and smiled at my offer, but sat at the next table which was larger and more in the center of that area of the cafeteria. Some UN staff people saw them and sat at the other end of their table, appearing to be timid about sitting near the Secretary General. Other people came over and spoke to them standing up, greeting them and joking about how the cafeteria should carry kimchi, the national Korean food.

I decided to ask if I could join them. They said yes. I sat down and spoke briefly to Ban, explaining I was from *OhmyNews International,* the English edition of the Korean *OhmyNews*. He said he knew *OhmyNews* and had been interviewed by reporters from it.

Also he said he hoped the press would treat him kindly. His communications staff person did not seem too happy with my sitting with them, so I soon left. Ban briefly motioned me to come back and we spoke for a few more minutes. I wrote an article about this experience which was then translated into Korean, and published in both the Korean and English editions of *OhmyNews*.

In general I paid attention to Security Council developments, particularly with regard to the meetings imposing sanctions on North Korea and then Iran. I also particularly followed the meetings of the Security Council and the General Assembly when Security Council reform was being discussed.

The Six-Party Talks and the Banco Delta Asia Story

In January 2007 there were reports in the press about a meeting that had taken place between Christopher Hill, the Assistant Secretary of State for the U.S. and Kim Kye-gwan, the Deputy Foreign Minister of

North Korea.

By way of background, an agreement had been reached on September 19, 2005 between the six parties to the talks about the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. The six parties were North Korea, South Korea, the U.S., Japan, Russia and China. Shortly after the agreement was announced in Sept 2005, the U.S. Treasury Department announced that it was freezing the assets of the Banco Delta Asia (BDA) a bank in Macao, China, which held $25 million of North Korean funds.

The result of this action was that North Korea lost access to these funds, and also to the use of the international banking system. North Korea's response was to leave the 6-party talks in protest of this action which it considered hostile and politically motivated.

In July 2006, North Korea tested a missile. On October 9, 2006, North Korea carried out a test of a nuclear device.

On January 16 and 17, 2007, Hill and Kim held talks in Berlin and came to an agreement. Though not officially announced, it is believed that the agreement was that the $25 million being held in the Macau BDA, along with access to the international banking system would be restored to North Korea. In exchange North Korea would return to the 6 party talks. The Berlin meeting broke the deadlock and the 6 party talks were held again starting on February 8, 2007. An agreement was announced five days later on February 13, 2007.

On March 5 and 6, Hill and Kim held bilateral talks in New York City.

Despite the agreement reached in Berlin, however, the U.S. Treasury Department issued a finding on March 19 against the BDA under Section 311 of the U.S. Patriot Act. This move again deadlocked the 6 party talks, even as the delegates arrived for the talks in Beijing. The deadlock continued for the next few months, with much of the mainstream U.S. press blaming North Korea for continuing to insist that its $25 million be returned, via a banking transaction, before it would agree to any further steps in the 6 party talks. The North Korean delegate said he understood that the agreement in Berlin with Christopher Hill had provided for the return of the $25 million from the BDA as a money transfer via the international banking system. The U.S. Treasury Department officials claimed that their decision against the BDA left it

up to the bank to return the funds. The decision against the bank, however, meant that it had no means to return the funds as a money transfer as the Section 311 finding against the bank meant that it lost access to the international banking system.

During this period, there were rumors that a bank had been asked by the U.S. State Department to make the transfer. The bank allegedly considered the request. Eventually, however, the bank refused based on its fear that it too would be frozen out of the international banking system by the U.S. Treasury Department, as the BDA had been, if it offered to help make the transfer of funds back to North Korea.

The McClatchy newspapers, in a way that is different from much of the rest of the mainstream media, carried articles which helped to reveal the issues underlying this dispute between the U.S. and North Korea.

One of the McClatchy newspaper articles described some documents the newspaper had acquired including a complaint to the U.S. Treasury Department protesting the decision against the bank. Also there was an article in the paper discussing the function of the bank in helping North Korea sell its gold. Other banks in Macau, the article indicated, had played a similar role with regard to North Korea, but only the BDA had been singled out for sanctions. The article suggested that the U.S. Treasury Department's actions were not based on actual criminal activity by the bank or by North Korea, but for some political purpose.

The McClatchy newspaper article had referred to legal documents filed by the owner of the BDA. I tried to find a way to get a copy of the documents. I tried to contact the law firm and even wrote to the McClatchy reporter, but none of these efforts succeeded.

I did, however, find a copy of the Patriot Act on the Internet, and read section 311, the section being used against the bank. I was able to see that the section of the law was such that the U.S. government did not have to present any proof for its actions.

In March 2007, I did a story documenting how the use of Section 311 of the Patriot Act against the bank was a political act, rather than a criminal determination. The U.S. Treasury Department did not have to provide any evidence and acted as the accuser and judge in the case. ("North Korea's $25 Million and Banco Delta Asia")

The stalemate continued for a number of months.

In May 2007 Chris Hill gave a short talk at a dinner celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Korea Society. I was able to attend as press. He indicated that he would persevere until a means was found to break the impasse over the $25 million dollars so as to make it possible for the 6 party talks to continue.

There were several Korean journalists covering the event for their publications. They were particularly interested in what Hill said, but Hill's talk in itself didn't seem to represent a newsworthy event.

In the next few days, however, it appeared that an important story was developing.

I again found a helpful article in the McClatchy newspapers which referred to a blog which was providing background on the issues involved in the BDA situation. The blog was called "China Matters" written by an anonymous blogger who goes by the pseudonym 'China Hand.'

The blog had put online copies of the BDA legal petition challenging the finding against the bank and a statement by the bank owner. The blog also gave a link to the web site for a Congressional hearing that referred to the aims and practices of the U.S. Treasury Department in freezing North Korean funds.

I now had copies of several significant documents in the BDA the story. The U.S. government's findings were general statements providing no specific evidence of wrong doing on the part of the bank. The bank's explanation refuted the Treasury Department's charges of illegal activity. The refutation also helped to demonstrate the political motivation for the U.S. government's allegations rather than any actual illegal activity on the part of the bank. The U.S. government had targeted a small Macau bank to scare the many banks in China. "To kill the chicken to scare the monkeys," as the government document explained, quoting an old Chinese proverb.

At last I had the news peg for an important story. I wrote an article, submitting it around 5 a.m. my time to *OhmyNews International*, using the software provided for submitting articles. By noon the next day, my story appeared. That was May 18.

Also on May 18, the *Wall Street Journal* carried an Op Ed by the former U.S. Ambassador to the UN, John Bolton. The article scolded the

U.S. government for negotiating to return the $25 million to North Korea.

In late May I was an invited speaker at the International Communications Association (ICA 2007) conference in San Francisco. I summed up my experience writing for *OhmyNews International*, particularly describing the BDA story. I ended my talk saying:

> There is not yet an *OhmyNews* in the U.S. So my story about the connection of the U.S. government's policy toward China and the U.S. government actions against the BDA is not yet likely to be able to impact how the mainstream news in the U.S. frames the story with North Korea and the six-party talks. But the need for a U.S. model of *OhmyNews* becomes all the more urgent when one has the experience of exploring what it could make possible.

Voice Of America News

Little did I realize when I gave my talk in San Francisco, however, that my experience with this story was not ending, but actually a new episode was beginning.

When I returned home from the ICA 2007, I decided to do a follow-up story to the two earlier stories I had done about the BDA issue. I wrote an article comparing what was being required in the BDA situation to what had happened with the WMD pretext the U.S. used to justify the invasion of Iraq.

A short time later, on June 11, I found a surprising e-mail in my mailbox. The e-mail was from a reporter who said she worked for Voice of America News Korea (VOA News Korean Service). VOA is the official U.S. government news broadcasting service.

She began:

Hello Ms. Hauben

She introduced herself as a reporter with the Korean service of the Voice of America News in Washington D.C.

Her e-mail continued:

While I was working on a story about BDA issue, I read your report, 'Behind the Blacklisting of Banco Delta Asia.' I thought you made some valuable points about the BDA issue in this report, I was wondering if I could have a conversation with you in this

matter. Since I am on deadline, I'm trying very hard to get a hold of you. So I would really appreciate it if you call or e-mail me back ASAP.

She gave her phone number.

The VOA News is now part of the U.S. State Department. I wondered if it was advisable to speak with her as VOA News has a reputation of being a promoter of U.S. government policy, rather than a news service seeking the facts. I asked my editors at *OhmyNews International* and also spoke with a Korean journalist I know who covers stories at the U.N. for another Korean newspaper. They all encouraged me to speak with her.

I called her as she had asked. She said she wanted to interview me by phone. I asked her to let me know what she would want to speak with me about. She sent me an e-mail elaborating.

Her e-mail explained:

The questions I am planning to ask you during the interview are going to be about both the content of your article and how you did it. Although I'd like to ask you, first of all, how you came up with the idea of writing this article, the focus of this interview is not just on how you prepared the article.

The purpose of this interview is to let our listeners know what is going on regarding the BDA issue and how the BDA issue is developing. When I read your article, I thought you made valuable and critical points about the BDA issue, and I thought it might be very important to let your idea about the BDA issue be heard by our listeners.

She listed questions she would ask me in the interview:

1. How you came up with the idea of writing this article? How you prepared it? About your sources.
2. Briefly summarize your findings or main points of the article?
3. What you are trying to accomplish by writing this article? What needs to be done to resolve the BDA issue?

Finally, I wanted to ask you if we could do this interview sometime between 9 a.m. and 9:30 a.m.…. Thanks again,

she wrote ending the e-mail.

She called at the arranged time. We had a half hour telephone conversation discussing my stories, the sources I had used and the problem represented by the American government freezing the BDA funds. She also asked for the URLs to follow up on the sources I had cited. These were basically material I had found on the Internet, including several government documents, and copies of the legal documents submitted by the Bank owner to appeal the Treasury Department ruling against the Bank.

The VOA News reporter said she was interested in contacting the former U.S. government officials who were responsible for crafting the plan to freeze North Korea's bank account assets. She wanted to ask them to respond to my article.

Just as this contact with the VOA News journalist was happening, there were news stories describing the ongoing efforts to find a solution to the roadblock that the frozen North Korean funds represented.

Soon there were reports that the Federal Reserve Bank of New York had agreed to transfer the funds from the BDA to an account held by a Russian bank for North Korea. In the following weeks, the funds transfer was done.

The VOA News reporter wrote me saying she had other stories to do and was not for now going to pursue this story any longer.

Regardless of her motivation, however, the VOA News reporter had contacted me before the situation was resolved. Whether the contact had any impact on the resolution I can only speculate. At the very least, the articles I had done had caught the attention of someone at the Voice of America News which is part of the U.S. State Dept. I was given the chance to explain how I framed the BDA story and to explain how I understood the controversy surrounding it.

So my story did indeed have some impact and more than I had thought possible when I gave my talk at the ICA 207 in San Francisco.

The reason I have taken the time to tell this story is that it represents for me a taste of the power that such online journalism makes possible.

OMNI – Thanks for the Memory

by John McFarland
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Even though I haven't done any serious copy editing since my two very enjoyable years with *OMNI* and Associates (Eugene Chang, Todd Thacker, Tim Savage and Claire George), I've retained the sense of creativity combined with captiousness that helped me define copy editing from a citizen journalism (CJ) perspective. I've kept my edited pieces in a stack that got be nine inches high.

Getting assignments, mostly from Eugene, I never knew what would be coming next – first-hand reports of the Nepalese civil war from native speakers that had the feel of being machine translations, as did many submissions from CJs in developing countries; summary reports of cricket matches, usually between South Africa & Pakistan. Having less knowledge of cricket than I did of water polo, I had to bluff my way through, (with a lot of help from Google); a report I especially remember was of a typhoon menacing Vietnam in real-time, which meant a feverish turnaround, and many others.

Points for CJs to consider:

a) Are we willing to direct our work toward a particular market we've identified and to satisfy a corresponding audience? How will we pick our stories? I know this sounds a bit like professionalese, but it can only help our credibility.

b) Can CJs focus on investigative journalism? I like to think we would have more advantage in garnering information by word of mouth about abuses than would professionals flashing a press card.

c) Could CJs come to recognize our common interests in forming a cooperative with other CJs, to form a kind of democratized *OMNI*? As far as I know, the cooperative control of online newspapers has yet to take off. 1) We have to define CJ more precisely and not just as the output of 'volunteers' or 'amateurs.' A stock put-down of citizen journalism has been: would we willingly drive a car designed by a 'citizen' engineer or appear before a 'citizen' judge? These nonsensical slurs are directed toward straw men of the critics' imagination. 2) Could

the great IF Stone, an expert journalist if there ever was one, be considered a CJ, relying as he did solely on his readers' subscriptions & donations? An established CJ might develop into another IF Stone without sacrificing our amateur status. 3) Hmm, 'amateur' – applies to an activity undertaken solely for its own sake. CJs can certainly be amateurs without necessarily producing 'amateurish' work.

d) Are professional journalists necessarily 'expert'?

e) Would it be doable to embed CJs in addition to professionals, say, in a situation of social unrest?

The Plight of Participatory Journalism in the Post Dot-Com Era

by John Horvath
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Without exception all sectors of society suffered as a result of the financial crisis of 2008, albeit some more than others. Indeed, the negative effects were not always so obvious. A case in point is that of citizen journalism and its variants. Indubitably, the decline of citizen journalism is a process that has been ongoing for the past several years; the financial crisis merely quickened and deepened this process somewhat.

It's generally assumed that the rise of citizen journalism coincided with the so-called "digital revolution" of the late 1990s. This is a common mistake, foremost because the rapid expansion of information and communications technology (ICT) indubitably aided in the rapid expansion of citizen journalism both in terms of consumption and production. Yet despite the positive effects technology has had on citizen journalism, it nevertheless has deep roots and is not necessarily associated with ICT. Indeed, the notion that citizen journalism and ICT are intractably linked is a common myth which ends up confusing and complicating our understanding of what citizen journalism really is.

While it can't be said that ICT led to the creation of citizen

journalism in and of itself, it nonetheless did give rise to a unique subset of it: participatory journalism.* As the notion of citizen journalism began to fragment in the Third Millennium in conjunction with the advancement of ICT as newer forms of expression began to clog the so-called "information superhighway," participatory journalism increasingly came to represent what citizen journalism had initially stood for. The main difference between the two is that ICT is an integral component of participatory journalism.

Given the online nature of participatory journalism, this form of information production and consumption is inherently fragile, so much so that the political and economic stresses of the past few years have had a devastating effect. The rise and fall of *OhmyNews International (OMNI)* perhaps best reflects this sad state of affairs.

This South Korean online publication was unique in many respects. First and foremost it provided an additional outlet for those already working in the area of citizen journalism while at the same time making it easy for those who had no journalistic experience whatsoever. Unlike publications such as *Telepolis* or *Toward Freedom*, both of which fit the classic mould of citizen journalism, *OMNI* was open to all and accessible "from the street." To become a member of the *OMNI* community was simple and straightforward: a plain registration process and account-like structure enabled anyone to become a writer for the Korean-based publication, rendering the concept of journalism as truly participatory. In conjunction with this the editorial process (something which markedly differentiates participatory journalism from other forms of online expression such as blogs) conveniently operated in the background. As a result, writers for *OMNI* weren't bothered by the pressures and constraints of the profession, something which invariably affects the work of conventional journalists.

What helped to make *OMNI* truly participatory was the fact that writers were offered more avenues for exposure and feedback. As a result, the payment for published articles was not a major factor. Indeed, for those living in Europe and North America the amount received per article would make such an endeavor appear not worthwhile if one was to solely make a living from it. On the other hand, *OMNI* somehow was able to extend its reach globally, to the extent that articles often reached

audiences as far as Europe, North America, and Australia. Furthermore, articles which appeared on *OMNI* were often cited by major mainstream media outlets. Other similar sites, such as *Telepolis* (Germany), *Orato* (Canada), or *Toward Freedom* (U.S.), were only able to extend their reach to local and niche areas. Thus, some writers took advantage of the fact that *OMNI* provided additional exposure to areas they would otherwise not have had.

In addition to widespread exposure, another advantage for authors who wrote for *OMNI* was that it brought readers and writers closer together, thereby reinforcing further its participatory aspect. For example, the ability of writers to immediately view the number of times an article was read helped to provide instant feedback as to what subjects were of interest to readers. Likewise, the ability of readers to directly contact writers through the site helped to bring both sides of the media equation together. Not only did *OMNI's* own message center help to preserve the privacy of journalists, readers were also provided with instant and direct access to authors. This is something which is increasingly missing from the spotlight and applause associated with mainstream, professional journalism. It goes without saying that the discourse generated as a result often ended up providing new and alternative ideas for articles.

While for many the amount paid to writers wasn't the primary motive for contributing to *OMNI*, for others it was nonetheless important. These writers were foremost from developing countries. In a way, the mix of different writers from such different backgrounds – political, economic, and social – further added to the unique character of the articles featured on *OMNI* as well as the civic discourse it stimulated. Along these lines, the idea of readers tipping authors for articles they liked was an interesting experiment that provided a conceptual framework for an alternative means of funding. Furthermore, the *OMNI* cyber cash system helped to reinforce the independent nature of writers by making the business side of things transparent.

In the end, however, survival ultimately became dependent on the question of finance. The unique model introduced by *OMNI* has been unable to overcome this universal axiom. Not only was the practice of tipping for an article not very widespread, but the concept was unable to

properly develop given the economic realities in wake of the financial crisis in 2008. To be fair, this wasn't only a problem for *OMNI*; even organizations with more traditional forms of funding, such as Telepolis or Toward Freedom, have been suffering and trying to find ways to overcome the problem of providing quality content online for free.

In many ways, this problem lies at the heart of citizen journalism in general and reflects its Jeffersonian nature. The Jefferson ideal of the "gentleman farmer" is very much applicable in this case. This ideal is centered on the notion that individual self-interest can be tempered through self-sufficiency. In a democracy this helps to reinforce the communal and participatory nature of the political system. Similarly, in terms of online media people are more likely to pay for content if they happen to be fiscally secure.

With the increased stresses brought about by the financial crises of 2008, however, this ideal (which in many ways is still in its embryonic stage in terms of citizen journalism) came under enormous pressure. In place of self-sufficiency as a regulator of self-interest, the financial crisis of 2008 intensified the desire to get as much as possible at the lowest possible cost – be it physical, intellectual, or even emotional capital. Voluntarily paying for online content, therefore, was a concept whose time has yet to come.

In addition to this, the challenges faced nowadays by those claiming to be citizen journalists are in many ways reflective of the present dilemma faced by democracies around the world. In essence, democracy is in crisis, caught between the opposing forces of tyranny on the one hand and mob rule in the other. Hence, in much the same way, participatory journalism has been undermined by opposing forces, with professional journalism (representative of tyranny) pulling in one direction and blogs and social networking sites (representative of mob rule) pulling in the other. In effect, many of those which started out with a strong commitment to making journalism participatory have in due course been compromised to various degrees by either striving to become more professional or succumbing to financial pressures and thus becoming nothing more than an elaborate blog in a futile race to the bottom.

All the same, this doesn't fully explain or excuse the decisions taken by some in their response to an ever-changing media landscape. In the

case of *OMNI*, while the attempt to build a truly participatory form of journalism eventually ended in failure, it nevertheless provided a unique example of how such a model can function. At the technical and operative levels *OMNI* seemed to fulfill the requirements of what would be expected of an organization committed to the notion of participatory journalism. The editorial level, meanwhile, was perhaps in need of a little more refinement as it wasn't always clear to writers why some articles appeared more favorable than others, this given the fact that articles which were more popular with readers didn't always find themselves on the "front page."

There is no doubt that the biggest problem facing citizen journalism in general, and that of participatory journalism in particular, remains the enigma of funding. The Internet is anything but a level playing field. Unfortunately, some of the unique alternatives introduced by *OMNI* to help pay for content, such as tipping, ended up being more useful as a means of feedback rather than remuneration. The problem, therefore, remains acute: only when both readers and writers alike are able to break free from the constraints of economics can attempts at participatory journalism have a chance to succeed.

For now, *OMNI* and others appear to have retreated from their original position. This may be just a temporary condition; whether or not they rise again to the challenge, or others move in to take their place, depends on how well they are able to reconcile the future in light of the past.

*The author is making the distinction between letters-to-the-editor, pamphlets, leaflets, newsletters and other forms of paper citizen journalism and the enhanced form of such journalism made possible by the internet. The latter he calls 'participatory journalism'.

OMNI's Focus Was Too Broad?

by Claire George
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What do the New York Knicks and citizen journalism (CJ) have in common? They both attract fanatical devotion. During my time working as an assistant editor for *OhmyNews International (OMNI)* [2006-7] citizen journalism was being spoken of as the antidote to the world's ills. This attitude was probably at least partly responsible for the anti-CJ backlash in the mainstream press. It looked too puppyish. It rubbed mainstream journalists the wrong way.

It's easy to understand why everyone was so excited. The media had previously been closed off to people who lacked the opportunity to get into paid journalism. Everyone knew that news agencies were ignoring important stories because they were not deemed interesting enough. In London researchers found that journalists were prioritising the stories that were most relevant to their target audiences. So when citizen journalism appeared on the scene it was just plain cool. For the first time anyone, anywhere, could report on anything.

In my work behind the scenes at *OMNI*, I was excited but also disappointed. We had no control over what type of stories were reported on, so readers never knew what to expect when they came to the website. This was great for citizen journalism fans because they valued the unpredictability of CJ content; but it prevented *OMNI* from building up a mainstream readership. Websites attract readers when they have a consistent theme. Korean *OhmyNews* is still with us because readers know it is about Korean current affairs. *OMNI*'s remit was too broad. It attempted to cover every country in the world and it had no theme. That is why it couldn't survive without the support of the South Korean mothership.

I was also disappointed because on some days *OMNI* carried very little real reporting. Like the mainstream press we published a lot of opinion pieces. Sitting at my desk I would often find myself thinking "oh no, please no, not another five anti-Iraq war stories." Citizen journalism is supposed to be about the first hand experience of reporters.

When reporters are simply giving their opinions on stories they have read in the newspapers, that is blogging. Opinion-led blogging is important and often politically influential, but it isn't citizen journalism. If we had been 100% firsthand reporting I believe that would have attracted more readers and more respect from paid journalists.

If *OMNI* had been given more time and money it could have been developed into a commercially successful website without betraying its CJ credentials. It needed a larger editorial staff so that more reporters could be coached in how to write about what they saw with their own eyes. A larger *OMNI* consisting of sections with fixed themes would have given the site the consistency that attracts readers. *OMNI* never developed in that way because it was understaffed. All our energies were devoted to sub-editing stories and putting them on the website. For many years the website ran with just one hardworking editor. I imagine he must have been hallucinating verbs by the end of each working week.

Genuine citizen reporting really does deserve our puppyish excitement. It is hard work and it is a wonderful thing when citizens give up their time and energy to do it. I can say that with my hand on heart because I am not a reporter. I dabbled in citizen reporting and lacked the dedication to it properly. I can admire citizen reporters in the same way that I admire athletes. I can see their value because they do what I cannot. I wonder if that's why reporters in the mainstream press seem to have difficulty appreciating them. Maybe they are too close and too similar, like siblings.

OMNI's Legacy

by Proloy Bagchi
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The call of the *Amateur Computerist* for an article on *OhmyNews International (OMNI)* set me thinking as to how I landed on this South Korean site. I am, after all, from small-town India, from a place known as Bhopal which happens to be the capital of the central Indian province

of Madhya Pradesh, mostly unknown to the world, barring, perhaps, for the wrong reason of being the site of the world's worst industrial disaster in 1984.

Notwithstanding the place's rather uncomfortable recent history, I chose this town to spend the rest of my life after retirement from one of the civil services of India. Soon enough, because of a somewhat acute sensitivity, I started writing on local civic and other issues in the city-supplement of a national daily. This continued for as many as six years – give or take a few months. I was lucky as the resident editor was enlightened and independent-minded, free from any hang-ups. If he saw an unsolicited piece, found it relevant and well-written, he would promptly publish it in his column reserved for guest-writers. He had a certain affinity for the town for the civic improvement of which others and I used to write. The pieces would hit out at the local civic adminis-tration or the provincial government, sometimes even its ministers but the editor wouldn't squirm in his seat. He apparently took it as a service to the community, and that, indeed, had somewhat of an impact.

Like everything else in life, all this had to change and that happened when the editor opted for greener pastures. The ones who succeeded him did not seem to have, firstly, that attachment for the town and, secondly, they, seemingly, did not wish to ruffle any feathers in the administration. In the process, the contributions, which more often than not had some criticism of the administration, would invariably go to the bin. I got the message soon enough and I stopped sending my pieces to the newspaper. Around that time a features' syndicate which used to take my other contributions also folded up. I had, therefore, necessarily to look for alternative outlets for my, one might say, outpourings.

That is when I looked for online sites and found an Indian one – merinews.com. The uploaded pieces would be subjected to an editorial scrutiny and then would be published. Finding a decent response from online readers I started looking for more such sites. After all, what a citizen journalist wants is a greater access to readers, wherever they might be. That is when I decided to go transnational and, lo and behold, landed on *OMNI*. I didn't know that it was a Korean site, though I did find the name "OhmyNews" a little peculiar. As long as it accepted English language write-ups, it served my purpose.

I was frightfully impressed when I saw the site the first time. It had everything in it that one could wish for in a newspaper. Politics, diplomacy, environment, entertainment, women's issues, technology, art and life, you name it and it had all that. What's more, located far away in the tiny peninsula of Korea in the Far East it would cover the entire world – all the continents and countries and their regions. Contributions came to it from world over. It had news and it also had analytical views that were published, more importantly, shorn of all petty considerations of politics, commerce or suchlike. It asked for nothing except decency, objectivity and integrity in reporting matters that could improve and help communities and enhance the knowledge of their constituents. I found it a clean and sanitised journal – virtually verging on to the ideal.

I, for one, had very happy experiences with it. I would upload stuff that pertained to my city or the province I lived in and it would be published for whatever it was worth without any alteration. I even uploaded some of my reminiscences which too were published. All these got pretty large number of hits, were read and even commented upon.

OMNI surely set off a trend and today there are any number of English language citizen journalist sites in India and abroad. I have been contributing to quite a few of them located in India, the U.S. and elsewhere. There is one which apparently is so fastidious about non-partisan reporting (obviously from non-professionals) that it calls itself "The Third Report" and its reporters "third men." There is another that encourages journalism students to hone their skills and provides an outlet to the non-profits. The basic idea behind these sites seems to be to provide platforms to non-professionals having access to news for reporting and analysing the same in an unbiased manner. What the reader gets, therefore, is a view that is not blinkered or even doctored to serve any interest. It is pure and unadulterated – originating from, what one might call, the ground level.

Infected as it is by interests of various kinds which could range from political to corporate or commercial, the mainstream media has its own agenda to promote and pursue. Recent developments in India have brought out in bold relief the kind of acute infection its media suffers from. Leave alone the promoters, even established and well-regarded editors were found wanting in integrity – lobbying for a particular

politician to harvest benefits for certain corporates. The facts were kept well under wraps by virtually every Indian print or electronic media house – however, they could not do so for long as 'chatterati' on the net induced an explosion that blew in their face.

No wonder people are turning to online news sites, particularly the citizen journalist sites like what *OMNI* was which, seemingly, unwittingly spawned a movement of a kind for dissemination of neutral and unbiased news and views. These sites are likely to remain the only option for voicing honest and non-partisan opinions – until of course the same distracting overbearing interests are able to take control over them. Hopefully, however, there will always be an *OMNI* or a "Third Report" or a "GroundReport" around to provide alternative sources of information. Surely, the trend set off by Mr. Oh Yeon-ho will be carried forward.

Showcasing the Concept "Every Citizen Is a Reporter" to the World

by Ulla Rannikko*

This article discusses the strengths and limitations of *OhmyNews International (OMNI)* from my point of view as a researcher, who studied this English-language edition of *OhmyNews* alongside two other participatory media organisations in the latter half of the 2000s. The analysis draws on research interviews with the USA-based reporters of *OMNI* and its staff, and on the observations that I made during the *OMNI* Citizen Reporters' Forum in Seoul in summer 2007. It is hoped that the article feeds into a discussion about the viability and value of an online participatory news media that is international in scope.

OMNI was launched in 2004 to showcase the concept of *OhmyNews* – every citizen is a reporter** – to a potentially global audience and to people who wanted and were able to write articles for *OMNI* in English. While Seoul-based *OhmyNews (OMN)* had been catering rather successfully for Korean-speaking readers and contributors, whether in

South Korea or abroad, *OMNI* hoped to bring together news, views and analysis from a range of reporters from around the world. Not just striving to be a global news website informing its readers about a variety of issues that affect people in their localities from their points of view, which in itself can be seen as an ambitious undertaking, *OMNI* had the potential to facilitate people's engagement in discussions following articles and to encourage the formation of networks among reporters and between them and their readers, as it was possible to send messages directly to the reporters via the website.

It appears that the momentum that led to conceiving the international edition in 2004 was at least in part created by increased interest in *OMN* outside of South Korea. Unsurprisingly, the focus of much of the news coverage by well-known news organisations such as *The New York Times* and the *BBC* was on *OMN's* revolutionary approach to producing news online; that is, how the website, the content of which is edited by professional editors, combines articles written by ordinary people and staff reporters. However, *OMNI*, albeit arguably a showcase, differed from the South Korean edition. Although *OMNI* had editors, it was not feasible to employ in-house journalists who would cover events as they unfold because of its broad geographic reach. For the same reason *OMNI* was unable to organise training sessions for its reporters, unlike *OMN* which teaches reporters in its own journalism school near the capital of South Korea, Seoul.

People's motivations to submit articles for publication on the website varied greatly even amongst the USA-based reporters. There were writers who hoped to be able to contribute to building a better society by creating media. It was the negative perception of the state of the traditional mainstream media that motivated some reporters to do what they could to improve the situation. As Ronda Hauben, one of the reporters, explained "I thought there's a need to sort out what, how there can be a better press and that's some of what I feel I'm trying to do in terms of the writing and the work I do as part of citizen journalism." The freedom to write on themes that were perceived not to be accepted by the traditional mainstream media and having an outlet for them in *OMNI* was of importance to some of the interviewed reporters. It was therefore considered that writing for media like *OMNI* granted more flexibility in

choosing a topic and how to approach it than is possible in the main-stream media.

A few of the interviewed reporters indicated that, on one hand, they wanted to provide information in the USA and to the rest of the world about the democratic spirit of American people, and, on the other, about the reality of American society. As one reporter, Cody Lyon, noted in relation to why he contributed to *OMNI* "…maybe to give a little of my thoughts, my feelings and like, you know, to open up a window into something that may not be provided of the American dream in the media … I think that it's an important role. I don't take it lightly."

There were also reporters for whom writing was mainly a leisure-time pursuit that they found personally rewarding. Dona Gibbs, one of the interviewees, explained what motivated her to contribute to *OMNI* as a reporter "My impetus to do this is that I really have written all my literate life, and it is a wonderful outlet. I also find that I enjoy events more if I feel that I am also there to be eyes and ears for others. I am a writer, and I have to write."

A few reporters' motivation involved either an aim to pursue a career in journalism or a goal to develop sufficiently in order to have work published elsewhere. One such writer, Shannon McCann, noted "I love to get some feedback, because that's the whole point. It's to improve…. I'm looking more, actually, for people who don't enjoy it versus the ones who do, because I'm looking to improve my skills, expanding the audience, because again, this is all just to work toward a book." Regardless of reporters' aims, or what motivated them to submit articles to *OMNI*, the website seemed to be able to accommodate their contributions.

Although *OMNI* did not have reporters who could be assigned to write an article on a specific topic, editors informed people who contributed to *OMNI* of what was happening in their localities in the hope that they might want to take it up. Reviewing other media for interesting news stories in places where *OMNI* had contributors and prompting reporters to write about them was an integral part of the editors' work. As occasionally *OMNI* would be offered several very similar articles on the same topic, the editors could also suggest that reporters from the same area organise the coverage amongst themselves.

For *OMNI*, such coordination increased the probability of receiving coverage of a broader range of topics, whereas the benefits for reporters included the reduced possibility of an article being rejected because similar pieces had been offered for publication.

Payment for articles published in the edited main sections of the website, which is how *OMNI* used to reward reporters before switching to awarding the best articles monthly, seemed to be one of the reasons why very similar articles were sometimes offered for publication. Discussions with editors revealed that payments encouraged some reporters, from countries where the fee of $10-20 is a significant amount of money, to submit articles that were not always original, but were rehashed from other sources, or that were not of adequate quality in terms of, for example, spelling and structure. At the time of the interview, former Assistant Editor Claire George explained that this led to a situation where the website "was kind of like battling against plagiarism and people just trying to milk the website for money."

Despite the attempts to overcome the lack of a steady flow of articles on a range of current topics from around the globe, the content of the *OMNI* website tended to offer a collection of articles that did not necessarily reflect what was happening in the world or even in those places where *OMNI* had reporters. Mainly for this reason, the website appeared refreshingly different from much of the news media that often seems rather uniform in their selection of content and focus. It was not rare to see articles written by people who were living in places that did not attract much attention in most of the media, articles that had been written from a fresh point of view, and articles that covered issues that had not been of much interest to the other media.

What is more, because *OMNI* did not pose restrictions on whose contributions would be published on the website based on, for example, people's cultural or racial identity, political leaning, social class or religious beliefs, occasionally one could come across articles that offered different, sometimes heavily contrasting points of view on the same topic. Editors typically labelled these articles as "opinion" to separate them from more factual news content. Those who were posting on the website had to accept that their views may be positioned next to those of someone who could portray a very different opinion. In this

sense *OMNI* differed from much of the so-called alternative media where restrictions on who can contribute are not uncommon and that have a tendency to interest like-minded people as their readers.

In comparison with some other participatory media such as the websites of the Indymedia network, *OMNI* had a more traditional organisational structure in which reporters had a fixed role beyond which they were not expected to become involved. Thus, the registered reporters offered content for publication on the website and the editors decided what was published. In its editing process, *OMNI* drew on practices that are common for many news organisations; the editors moderated all content on the *OMNI* website and articles that were published in the main sections of the website were edited. Editing involved both checking that the facts in an article were correct and fine-tuning the text. Other typical tasks performed by editors included preparing reporters' pictures for publication and changing headlines and captions. One part of the editing process was ensuring that articles were not rehashed from other sources; such contributions were rejected, as were articles that did not meet the required level of quality.

In 2007, the then Senior Editor of *OMNI*, Todd Thacker, estimated that 80% of the contributors were non-native English speakers. For editors of *OMNI*, the majority of the stories being submitted by contributors whose first language is not English meant that correcting articles for spelling, grammar and punctuation was a central part of their work. Because of the physical distance between the reporters and *OMNI's* editors, by and large, editors provided advice for reporters through email and online instant messaging, but sometimes also through voice services available online such as Skype.

At the time of the interview, the Director of the International Division, Jean K. Min, who had been working for *OMNI* since its launch, commented on the role of the organisation in training reporters "We want to give them [*OMNI* reporters] some minimal, at least a minimal level of writing and communication skills so that their stories can be more effectively communicated to our readers." He did, however, also emphasise that the key to becoming a skilled reporter was learning by example and learning through doing. The possibility that reporters can learn by practising and by observing their fellow reporters is an

important point, but it should not be taken to undermine the value of offering appropriate support for those who require it. As Claire George pointed out "…they [*OMNI* reporters] do need to know how to express themselves. Or they need an editor who can help them."

The interviewed reporters valued having access to editors who prepared articles for publication and checked that the facts were correct. The credibility of the *OMNI* website was seen to rest on it being edited and the fact that the reporters for the main sections of the website were required to register and to publish under their real name. However, some reporters felt that editors could have been even more firm when it came to, for example, deciding what could be considered to be a purely factual news article and what should be labeled as opinion, as well as to what extent articles should be edited to enhance their quality.

In not allowing people to post anonymously, *OMNI* seemed to draw on the school of thought that asserts that reporters are more likely to stand behind their writing and less likely to spread unconfirmed information or lies if they are required to use their own name. On very few occasions, however, editors did allow reporters to use an anonymous by-line to protect them from persecution. Typically, this was in cases where revealing certain information could have compromised the safety of a reporter, for example, because of the restrictions on women's freedom of speech in some countries. According to Todd Thacker, in addition to the necessity of a good reason why a reporter needed anonymity, editors had to have known the reporter well so that they could make an informed decision about the integrity of an article.

Claire George argued that the consequences of requiring reporters to register and to write under their real name are not entirely positive. According to her "I just think the fact that we would only take stories from people with their real names, I think that really limited us. Because I think, I don't know whether this is a gender thing, but I think some people, maybe women, are not going to really feel confident." Claire George based her view on her own experiences as a reporter for participatory media websites, as well as on her observation that *OMNI* was "really lacking female writers." The perceived shortage of female contributors possibly had to do with the abusive comments they would, according to Claire George, sometimes receive on the articles. Thus, it

seems that, at least occasionally, the system failed to prevent offensive comments from appearing on the website. This is despite the fact that *OMNI* endeavoured to keep the comments section clear of abusive content, as editors moderated comments on articles, and people were prompted on the website not to post personal attacks.

Despite the website having the potential to facilitate the formation of networks and discussions following the articles, in the interviews with USA-based reporters of *OMNI* only a modest amount of evidence emerged to support the realisation of this potential. The website covered a wide range of topics submitted from many parts of the world, yet the categorisation of the articles was fairly crude, which might have in part contributed to why people rarely seemed to use the opportunities to debate the topics covered in the articles. It also seems that unlike, for example, the *OMN* website which brings people together to debate the issues in South Korean society, an international audience is fragmented and it does not necessarily share the same interests.

Those reporters who were invited to the Citizen Reporters' Forum in Seoul recounted that the event provided valuable opportunities to network and to share their experiences with other reporters from around the world, including reporters from the South Korean edition. Based on my observations from attending the forum in 2007, in addition to meeting one another, reporters heard about and were able to debate participatory journalism, as the programme consisted of presentations by reporters themselves, as well as experts and facilitators of other participatory journalism platforms.

It was clear from the interviews with reporters that they appreciated having an outlet for their contributions in the form of *OMNI*. However, discussions with some of the reporters also revealed unfamiliarity with *OMNI's* business model and with the ownership of the company. Moreover, some of the ways in which *OMNI* functioned were not clear to all reporters. For example, many did not know that *OMNI* rewarded reporters by inviting some of them to an expenses-paid trip to visit the Citizen Reporters' Forum, let alone on what bases the decisions regarded who were asked to attend were made. Relatively little also seemed to be known about the selection of featured writers and that *OMNI* had granted a few trusted reporters business cards, whilst strictly prohibiting

reporters from making their own *OMNI* cards. It seems that *OMNI* would have benefitted from greater transparency regarding these practices.

As part of the same business, the international edition was dependent on the South Korean *OMN* for resources such as funds to pay staff and reporters, equipment and office space. Although *OMNI* was launched as a showcase, the other two *OhmyNews* websites in South Korea and in Japan were the main priorities for the company, or "the real operation," as Jean K. Min called the latter two websites. He stressed that rather than focusing on a global audience, which he saw as a "fuzzy concept," the company was keen to launch countrywide websites that would serve a local news audience in their own language. The consequence of this approach was, in the words of Todd Thacker, that "*OhmyNews International* always takes the back seat to anything the main site [*OMN*] is doing."

Despite the reported difficulties in keeping the company profitable in recent years, *OMN* retained the international edition until 2010. The signs of the financial struggle had been apparent for quite some time as, prior to the closure of the *OMNI* website, it had ceased to employ editors. In an attempt to compensate for the situation, *OMNI* had recruited unpaid volunteers from amongst the reporters to help with editing. Before closing down the website and launching a blog that focuses on discussing citizen journalism in summer 2010, the company had also stopped paying reporters for articles published on the website. Another change that had taken place since the launch of the international edition was that *OMNI*, like the other two editions, had begun to place advertising on the website. It is obvious from these changes that *OMNI* was experiencing serious financial problems.

It seems justified to argue that the lack of commitment to develop the international edition hindered *OMNI*. Nor was a long-term sustainable way to fund the international edition discovered. Undoubtedly *OMNI* was important for many of its reporters who might have hoped for its revitalisation and were disappointed to see the website closed down. Despite *OMNI* attracting many devoted reporters, some of whom might have been willing to take a more active role in the organisation, and skilled editors who believed in *OMNI*, its potential as a global news

website was never fully explored. The hope is that another international participatory news organisation will seek to build on *OMNI's* strengths and to learn from its weaknesses in a quest to fill the gap in the online news media left by its closure.

Comments on the Closing of *OMNI*

I was sad to hear about the developments at *OhmyNews* – it was and remains a unique experiment.   David McNeill (Tokyo, Japan)

It was truly sad that *OMNI* had to close; I do believe that it served a very important mission at an important juncture, and also inspired many writers and online developers…. I will not be able to contribute to the special edition; I truly regret that, especially as I think it is very important to reflect on the *OMNI* experience.

Ramzy Baroud (Seattle, Washington)

OMNI did seem unique in many respects. It gave voice to many citizen reporters from various countries who hoped to make a positive difference.

Unlike many of the blogs that I see, it seemed less atomized and more inclusive of divergent opinions. Many of the stories that were told were important and generally well researched. Hopefully something will

replace it.   Joe Spielman (New York City)