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JOURNALISM MATTERS

'Citizen journalism' is not news

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For media analysts, the real story of the Robert Pickton trial is not what it reveals about the heart of man, but what it reveals about the future of news.

The British Columbia trial of the alleged serial killer is a fascinating case study in how media are adapting to the Internet age.

Two important lessons are already clear: All news is global in cyberspace, and citizen journalists will never replace dedicated professionals.

The trial shows that Canadian judges can no longer control what Canadian jurors and Canadian citizens do and don't see, hear and read.

Canadian law bans the publication of evidence before it is presented to a jury. Canadian reporters have known the grisly details of the Pickton case for years, but haven't published any of it. Several foreign news outlets have ignored the Canadian law, publishing the grisly details both in print and on websites accessible to any Canadian with a keyboard.

Fox News was publicly chastised this winter for flouting the Canadian law, but it isn't just the conservative broadcaster everyone loves to hate that has printed details of the crime. Similar details have appeared in some of the most respected newspapers in the world.

This can be lamented, but it can't be changed, short of imposing Chinese-style national restrictions on the Internet. Judges could attempt to keep foreign reporters out of their courtrooms, but they would still get the information. Judges could try to fine foreign publications, but that would take years to sort out and might not work.

The trial also shows that Canadian media face global competition not just on international stories, but on local ones. More than 300 reporters are covering the trial. In the past, Vancouver residents might have marvelled at all the international attention, but they would never have known what those reporters filed. Now they do. They can compare the coverage of their own newspaper, television and radio stations to the coverage provided by news outlets around the world.

The most important lesson, however, may be that so-called "citizen journalists" will never replace the real thing.

There has been a lot of interest in the last two years in both bloggers, who create online journals, and people with no journalism background who contribute to online news sites.

One online news site – Orato.com – asked two former sex-trade workers to cover the Pickton trial. It is a fascinating experiment, but it is not news. The two writers have focused almost entirely on themselves, their own emotional reaction to the trial, and how their own lives echoed the lives of the victims.

Those who want to know about evidence and testimony, about what Pickton is alleged to have done and about his defence, will not find it at Orato.com.

One of the writers, Trisha Baptie, has formally given up any pretense of journalism, warning Orato readers that she won't tell them what she witnessed in court that day.

"I hope you read the horrors and the tragedies somewhere else first," she wrote recently.

"I don't know if I can live with myself knowing that I am the one who caused you to go into the land of knowing. I will give you the story of how it feels and how it affects women to live the lifestyle associated with this case. I will even tell you the inner working of my mind and my emotional state, but I do not think I can bear the burden of giving you knowledge."

The Pickton trial is featured on hundreds of blogs and amateur news sites, but there is no original reporting about the crime or trial on any of them. None. The blogs and the "citizen journalism" are all opinion, emotion, and reaction, not news.

Someone still has to tell people what is going on. It takes skills to do that. It requires the ability to quickly analyze mounds of data to figure out what is most important; to focus on an event, not one's own reaction to it; and to tell a story in a clear, concise and powerful way.

In other words, it requires journalists who have honed their craft through practice and training.

Baptie's confession is honest and sweet. It should be required reading for those predicting the death of professional journalism.

"I guess I will never be a real reporter or journalist," she wrote in the same column.

"I am someone with a different way of looking at this trial, and that is what you will get from me. But I would not at all count on me for the synopsis of the day's events."

Kelly Toughill, a former Star journalist, is an assistant professor of journalism at King's College in Halifax.

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