

OhMyNews: Anyone can be a reporter

Pradip Thomas

Which on-line news service recently played an instrumental role in the election of a President? The South Korean on-line news service 'Ohmynews' is probably the only example to date of a Net-based initiative that has made a decisive difference in a presidential election. In December 2002, Roh Moo-hyun was elected as the president of South Korea. He did not belong to the traditional political structure and the conservative, mainline media, had ignored him. However, his non-establishment origins and his willingness to listen to the younger generation - appealed to a large swathe of South Korean 20-40 year olds. And they used the technology that they knew best to make a difference.

South Korea is probably the most wired country in the world. The statistics on broadband penetration, internet usage, technological innovation and use are phenomenal and any visitor to Korea would be hard-pressed to come across a Korean who does not own the latest 3G mobile phone with GPS, internet, digital imaging facilities.

WACC General Secretary Randy Naylor, Director of the GSP, Pradip Thomas and the the Asia WACC Ex-comm officer, Young-Cheol met with the founder of Ohmynews, Yeon-Ho, Oh, during a recent visit to South Korea. This service was established as a fledgling operation in 2000 with 4 staff. Oh firmly believes that anyone can be a reporter - and this has made Ohmynews into a formidable alternative news service. With 26,000 netizen reporters and a daily average of 70 per cent of content sourced from these netizens, Ohmynews is an example of participatory communications in action. People's opinions are valued and all responses are included. Its coverage of the death of two schoolgirls in an accident involving a US army vehicle in June 2003 led to massive anti-US demonstrations. They supported the candidature of Roh and used the service as a platform for a dialogue on democracy and politics. And it worked. During the 2002 presidential elections, Ohmynews had 20 million hits on a single day. To the chagrin of mainline media, the first media interview given by the newly elected President Roh was to Ohmynews. Today it ranks the eighth most influential media channel in South Korea.

While the context of Ohmynews' success - people's loss of confidence in the mainstream media in a networked society, a perfect match between IT and Society - makes for interesting copy, its re-drawing of the boundaries of journalism and turning up-side down of contemporary mainstream media norms - the professional journalist as expert, gate keeper, power-broker, opinion maker along with faith in netizens - is even more significant. It heralds a change, like Al Jazeera, to mainstream media norms, and is a potential challenge to the power of media monopolies and the corporate manufacture of news.

The softly spoken, disarmingly modest CEO of Ohmynews continues to be amazed at the rapid success of his news service. In 2003 staff strength was 53 including a business manager and 40 full time journalists. However his core values remain as strong as it has ever been . "Koreans" he observed "have lived through industrialism, dictatorship and democracy in a short period. People have learned that if they participate they can change society for the better".