

From: Jay Rosen <jr3@nyu.edu>
Subject: **Re: Responding to, discussing with, Nicholas Lemann**

Date: August 5, 2006 12:15:10 PM PDT

To: Mitch Ratcliffe <godsdog@ratcliffe.com>, jeff@buzzmachine.com, Debbie Galant <debbie.galant@gmail.com>, Rebecca MacKinnon <rebecca.mackinnon@gmail.com>

Cc: craig@craigslist.org, Doc Searls <doc@searls.com>, David Weinberger <self@evident.com>, nicholas_lemann@newyorker.com



Mitch: You're right that I didn't really respond to the reasons that you think NewAssignment is flawed, and will fail. I would like to know more about what those reasons are. Perhaps I am misinterpreting, but from what you wrote it would seem that human nature is to blame, and I have to admit I do not know how to alter that. But... I agree completely that it's only through critical discussion and examination that we can improve the damn thing so that it does not fail, which is the most likely outcome for something like NewAssignment.

I wish you would write a post on it, spelling out the argument a little more, and I will reply at PressThink; I would even invite you to do a guest post for PressThink, if you are so inclined. I wasn't kidding when I said, "thanks, Mitch" because reducing expectations for NewAssignment is, I believe, one key to its development.

What I was expressing with my contrasting quotes was not "who got there first?" (which I agree is pointless) but a certain frustration I felt reading Nick's article and, I should admit, your response to it. Are you interested in my frustration? Probably not (there are way bigger issues) but here it is anyway.

Does it matter what you write? That's my frustration. For me the evidence from "Amateur Hour" is that it does not matter.

How many times can you write that bloggers aren't about to replace journalists, and that the discovery that they won't is really common sense? Does it matter what you write, or can anyone say anything without bothering to look? Do you have a view on that one, Mitch? You didn't express it. But you did warn those hotheaded bloggers against minimizing Nick Lemann's argument. What are Nick's minimizing rights? To me they seem vast.

Maybe, since you feel we should welcome Nick's "discovery" (made 3,000 times before him) that bloggers and citizen journalists aren't about to replace the news media, you also think I should welcome it when I am vaguely associated with "grand journalistic claims" for volunteers and "soaring rhetoric about supplanting traditional news organizations," even though I haven't made any such claims and don't speak the language of "supplanting," which I regard as ridiculous, and which I have specifically warned against. Here's what I wrote a few weeks ago:

In fact it's not clear yet how we can take ideas and developments like... distributed knowledge, social networks, collaborative editing, the [wisdom of crowds](#), citizen journalism, pro-am production, decentralized newsgathering, [we media](#)... and turn them into actual investigations, published reports that draw attention because they reveal what was previously unknown— you know, *news*.

That says what Nick says: where's the work? It says: we don't have it yet, so we don't know if there is anything to these ideas, which make intuitive sense but lie unproven. Nick's minimizing rights get exercised here. Forgive another excerpt:

The first story ever described as open source journalism (see Andrew Leonard's [1999 article for Salon](#)) was about cyberterrorism. It was published in Jane's Intelligence Review, the "international journal of threat analysis." But first it was Slash-dotted and improved; therein lies the tale. The readers knew more than Jane's did, and the editors decided that was a *good* thing.

Bingo. Seven years later we're still trying to collect for having bingo back then.

Soaring rhetoric? Grand journalistic claims? Does it matter what you write? This is my frustration.

I wrote in my very first post that bloggers partake of the pamphleteering spirit and continue an experiment--that anyone can argue in print about public affairs--that is 250 years old. I put it on the front of my blog (upper right) so everyone could see it, and no one visiting my little corner of the Web would forget it. But according to you (I'm guessing, but maybe I am wrong...) I should pay very close and respectful attention, and even thank the man, when a New Yorker writer comes along three years later and says, "you know, guys, what you're doing isn't as new as you say..."

Grrrrrr. I ask again: Does it matter what you write? Or can anyone say anything without bothering to check? Do you have a view on it, Mitch? You didn't express it.

Lemann's article is about the dubious possibilities in journalism without journalists. That's a fair summary, isn't it? The editors thought so. They made it the subtitle. He associates NewAssignment with that idea and with the soaring rhetoric he decided he would finally take on, since it's getting so out of hand.

Now I know this is getting tedious and I sound really whiny, but in order to associate me with the dubious idea of "journalism without journalists, hooray!" he quotes something I did write.

The key to the idea, in Rosen's mind, is to give "people formerly known as the audience" the assigning power previously reserved for editors. "NewAssignment.Net would be a case of journalism without the media," he wrote on PressThink. "That's the beauty part."

Catch the switch, Mitch? I wrote journalism without *the media*. Nick wants me to be down with "journalism without journalists" so he can tell us what a bad idea that is. Does he point out the difference? He does not. Why does it matter? Because New Assignment is not about supplanting editors, even though Nick wants it to be. It gives editors a very prominent role and calls them the key people in the entire enterprise. They set standards; they stand, if necessary, against the mob. They do *not* hand over all their power to the mob. But Nick wants it that way so he can advise us that journalism without journalists is a terrible idea. Is New Assignment journalism without journalists? It isn't, at all, but from where I sit it doesn't matter what you write. And that's my frustration. Petty, isn't it?

Nick concludes this way: "As journalism moves to the Internet, the main project ought to be moving reporters there, not stripping them away." NewAssignment.Net is about moving reporters to the Internet, not stripping them away, but a reader of the New Yorker would never know that because *it doesn't matter what you write* when a journalist decides to go balloon popping.

This in all *on* the record, if anyone cares.

JR

PS Nick's New Yorker address is bouncing back.

----- Original Message -----

From: Mitch Ratcliffe <godsdog@ratcliffe.com>

Date: Friday, August 4, 2006 1:59 pm

Subject: Re: Responding to, discussing with, Nicholas Lemann

> Jay,
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> You seem to be racing me in the piece to see who wrote something
> first when you contrast our quotes. I wrote in April 2003, when I
> started Correspondences.org
> ([http://www.correspondences.org/archives/
> 2003_04.html](http://www.correspondences.org/archives/2003_04.html)):
>
> "No one can tell a story better than the people who participated
> in
> events. Whether you witnessed a crime, suffered a catastrophe or
> sat
> through a performance, you've got something to say about that
> experience. That's the essence of journalism. Our experience is
> that,
> tempered by editorial hands, those stories are the meat of
> existence
> from which we can all learn and in which we can share, no matter
> what
> the background and beliefs of the people involved might be.
> Sharing
> our stories makes life matter. Keeping to ourselves, accepting the
>
> stream of commercial messages into our homes and lives is only one
>

> way to live in a connected world, and Correspondences.org wants to
>
> give voice to the other, egalitarian way. Read and listen, watch,
> think and comment. Act through your intelligence, not just your
> choice in the supermarket."
>
> But that doesn't actually make me more right about it than you. It
>
> just means we both believe the same things are generally important
>
> and that we have different views on achieving those ideals
> occasionally ("occasionally" since I avoid the Aristotelean in
> everyday life). I would like to see more discussion of the reasons
>
> that I think NewAssignment is flawed, because I think we can
> improve
> it and other citizen journalism efforts through that debate.
>
> I'm certain that the self-criticism that characterizes great
> journalism is an essential ingredient in public discourse and hope
> we
> can encourage bloggers to embrace it when they intend to commit
> acts
> of journalism.
>
> Mitch
>
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> On Aug 4, 2006, at 2:18 AM, Jay Rosen wrote:
>
> > My reply to Nick and Mitch...
> >
> > [http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/08/04/
> > nicl_am.html](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/08/04/nicl_am.html)
>
> Mitch Ratcliffe — godsdog@ratcliffe.com — www.ratcliffeblog.com --
>
> blogs.zdnet.com/Ratcliffe/
> Media, technology, research and editorial services
> "My ignorance gives me as much occasion for hope as for
> fear"—Montaigne
>
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