Netizen Journalism and the UN by Ronda Hauben

"New Media and the Challenge of Reporting from the UN"

[Note: This is a slightly edited version of a talk I presented at "The International Conference on Soft Power" on September 8, 2009, at the Tsinghua International Center for Communication Studies, in Beijing, China.]

I want to share some lessons that have been learned in the three years I have been reporting from the United Nations (UN) as a resident correspondent for the online South Korean newspaper, "OhmyNews International".

This past December, I won the Silver Award for Excellence in Print and Online Journalism presented by the United Nations Correspondents' Association in honor of Elizabeth Neuffer, a Boston Globe reporter who died while on assignment reporting from Iraq.

In the brief remarks I made accepting the award I referred to the importance of the judges presenting this award not only for me, but also for other reporters at the United Nations who are willing to write about the issues or viewpoints that are rarely covered by the mainstream western news media.

For example, one of the articles that were the basis for the award was an article about a meeting of the UN Security Council where there was discussion over whether or not to have a public debate about the issue of the Middle East. (1)

The meeting took place on January 30, 2008. The South African Ambassador to the UN at that time was Dumisani Kumalo. Kumalo told the Security Council, "My delegation believes that silence on the situation in the Middle East is more dangerous than even meetings where there might be a raising of temperatures or heat."

He was responding to a comment by the British Ambassador Sir John Sawers, who proposed that perhaps it was better not to have debates in the Security Council on the Middle East since these issues brought up expressions of strong differences among the delegates.

These comments followed a week of discussion among delegates marked by different views on Israel's action closing the border crossings into Gaza. This was a year before the attack on Gaza by Israel in December 2008.

Some member nations of the UN claimed the closure of the border crossings into Gaza was an action contrary to the obligations of Israel as an occupying power in the Gaza Strip. Another member of the Security Council, notably the US, said that the issue was that Israel was under siege and it was not appropriate for the Security Council to condemn Israel's actions. Instead the US wanted a statement to condemn the rocket attacks being fired into Israel as coming from "terrorists".

After a number of days of various efforts, it became evident that no agreement on the wording of a statement by the Security Council was possible. This led South Africa's Ambassador to remind the members of the Security Council that the United Nations "has a special responsibility in supporting a peaceful resolution in the conflict in the Middle East."

The Indonesian Ambassador to the UN, Marty Natalegawa, agreed with Kumalo, telling the Security Council that its silence on this issue "is indeed a deafening silence."

This example of reporting about UN Security Council issues helps to highlight a situation that American journalism professors and media critics have recognized as a problem with the mainstream media in the US. These media scholars explain that much of the US media too often watches to see which side has the most power and represents only that singular view of an issue or phenomenon.

In reporting from the UN, what is interesting is that there are often a range of views from different nations on issues that are being discussed. But too often nations, as in closed meetings or consultations of the Security Council for example, do not make their views on issues available to journalists at the UN. Only when the full range of views is available to the press and the public, is it possible to have a meaningful public discussion to clarify what is in the public interest. The challenge for the media covering the UN is to report on the broad range of views among different nations on various issues, rather than on only the viewpoint of the most powerful nation or nations.

There are a number of examples of issues where there have been different views expressed by different nations, but too often one view continues to dominate mainstream western media coverage. These issues include:

1) What is happening in Darfur.
2) Security Council action regarding North Korea.
3) Security Council action regarding Iran.
4) Security Council action on the listing and delisting of individuals or organizations related to Security Council Resolution 1267.

For example, on the issue of Darfur, the book, "Saviors and Survivors: Darfur Politics and the War on Terror," by Columbia University Professor Mahmood Mamdani, presents a different narrative of the problem in Darfur than that presented by much of the mainstream western media. (2) The book is based on a five year study of the current conditions and the factors leading up to the current situation.

Mamdani presents significant evidence that the changing weather patterns and environmental conditions in Darfur, along with the role Great Britain played as a colonial power, changed the conditions which formerly had made possible coexistence among the different strata of Darfurian society. This account has been discussed in blogs, in online reviews, and in Youtube videos, as well as in programs aired by the Iranian English language news on Presstv. Journalists familiar with Mamdani's book had the facts and analysis to determine that what is happening in Darfur is not a genocide but instead a civil war.

Another challenge to the mainstream media narrative is being presented with respect to the reporting about North Korea and the Six Party talks. Some scholars of Korean studies and some media sites on the Internet have presented the frustrations of North Korean negotiators, rather than focusing on the point of view of the American government, as in the reports by the mainstream western media. (3)

The book , "Meltdown" by the former CNN journalist Mike Chinoy, along with articles by US researchers like Leon Sigal and Rob Carlin, also help to make the case that the position the US government presents on the problem related to North Korean nuclear development is a problem that needs to be understood from the perspective of North Korea's need for a means of defense to protect itself from hostile US actions.

In analyzing the problem with the mainstream media in the US, W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston, authors of the book "When the Press Fails", explain that the "American mainstream news code favors those who wield the greatest power, even when what they say is subject to serious challenge." (4)

A presentation of different perspectives on international issues is the basis for a better understanding of these issues, than is any single viewpoint. Just as American mainstream media coverage of US related issues is harmed by the fact it is too often limited to one dominant viewpoint, similarly, for an understanding of complex international issues, it is important that various views be presented and debated publicly in the international media and at the UN, rather than only during closed door consultations. This is, I want to propose, a means to develop not only a more accurate understanding of the issue. It is also the basis for a form of journalism that presents a process of debate over the facts and analysis of an issue or phenomenon, rather than just the presentation and acceptance of one viewpoint or one conclusion.

The form of journalism that offers this broader perspective on issues, a journalism that provides for a debate on such issues, I call netizen journalism. Netizens and the new Internet media help to make this broader discussion of issues possible. (5)

Scholars like W. Lance Bennett and his colleagues point out the poor practices of the mainstream US media. In order to be able to develop a form of international media that can present a broader point of view of issues, it is important to understand this critique and encourage the debate over different views. Similarly, when considering the issue of soft power, as has been discussed at this conference, it is important to critique practices used by other nations, rather just adopting what may be poor or deceptive practices. I propose that one goal for journalism is to foster better communication among nations and peoples. A media to facilitate such communication is needed everywhere. Communication between peoples and between nations is based on an equality between those involved in the act of communicating. Thus communication is different from exerting power in the process, whether it be soft power, in the terms advocated by Joseph Nye, or other forms of power.

As one former Tsinghua student, Lili Xiao, who did her master's degree paper studying netizen discussion of the Tibet riots of March 2008, recently wrote about the goal of netizens and so also, of netizen journalism:

"Maybe in some ways we are part of the netizen family because we want communication to help connect people so there is a better world".

Notes:

1. Ronda Hauben, Security Council Fails to Act on Gaza Crisis 'The silence is deafening,' says Indonesia's UN Ambassador", OhmyNews International, February 7, 2008.

http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?no=381689&rel_no=1

2 Ronda Hauben. Untangling the False Narrative of a 'New Humanitarianism' for Darfur [Book Review] Mahmood Mamdani's 'Saviors and Survivors'", OhmyNews International, March 31, 2009.

http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?no=385005&rel_no=1

3. Ronda Hauben, US Policy Toward North Korea Fails to Engage [Opinion] UN Security Council should be neutral in its dealings with North Korea", OhmyNews International, June 6, 2009.

http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?no=385338&rel_no=1

4. W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston, "When the Press Fails", University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007, p. 30.

5. See for example: Ronda Hauben, Netizens Defy Western Media Fictions of China, OhmyNews International, May 9, 2008.

http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?no=382523&rel_no=1

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http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2009/10/18/netizen_journalism_and_the_un/
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