

Guerilla Media: of, by and for the people

Rajeev Srinivasan

Guerilla media is interesting, because technology is allowing everyone to be a journalist and a creator of news, not only a consumer. There is something endearingly democratic and equitable about this. In particular, given that India has a dominant mainstream media that is extraordinarily skewed – what is considered ‘centrist’ there would be considered ‘far left’ in any normal country – there is a place for media of the people, by the people, and for the people, bypassing the gatekeepers.

Much has been said about the cravenness of the Indian media, especially the English-language media (ELM). The ELM is borderline seditious, supports anti-national activity, and is unremittingly hostile to the conservative, and in particular, the Hindu perspective. In effect, there is virtual censorship on anything but certain “approved” sentiments. Anybody who speaks against this will simply not get the column inches or the airtime. The establishment perspective includes a few beloved axioms, including being anti-Hindu.

Their modus operandi consists of the age-old tactic of propaganda – Joseph Goebbels would definitely approve – of “truth by repeated assertion”. By constantly repeating an almost-plausible falsehood, they eventually manage to make that the conventional wisdom.

There are ways to tackle this, including a campaign to attack the offending media where it hurts – in their pocketbooks; but that is beyond the scope of this note, which looks at the issue of how to create alternative media especially by using advanced technologies that are bypassing traditional media.

One of the interesting observations in the US is the diminishing clout of the print media¹, and the correspondingly increasing weight of Internet-based media. This is not only in areas related to editorial content, where the role of traditional large newspapers in reporting breaking news and analysis is now increasingly being challenged by citizen-reporters armed with nothing more than camera-phones and subscriptions to flickr and twitter. In India, however, the print media is not yet in such bad shape.

Even in the mainstay of print media, the Classifieds, the usurpers are making inroads. Craigslist, a grass-roots internet medium, now rivals some of the local papers in terms of its availability of classified advertisements. In India, sulekha.com, now funded by venture capitalists, may play the same role.

In some ways, the success of the Barack Obama campaign in the US is an exemplar of this trend towards social mobilization using technological means. Obama was able to overcome the much-better-organized Hillary Clinton campaign machine using the power of crowds, and the innovative use of technology by his young and enthusiastic supporters. Guerilla media counts similarly on the passion and creativity of those who are anti-establishment.

Giving the oppressed a voice

¹ A recent report considered the market value of the New York Times, which showed that it was barely greater than the breakup value of the paper; thus the enormous goodwill – read clout – that even this paper of record has held has been diminishing

There are case studies about how, in the teeth of heavy-handed treatment, either by governments or by media barons, small, alternative, grassroots, and “guerilla” media have been able to survive and thrive:

- Samizdat or underground press in the Soviet Union (and similar efforts in other fascist states) where the circulation of material through an informal network helps to undermine the information monopoly held by the formal media
- The alternate media people like Rush Limbaugh and O’Reilly’s and the Drudge Retort which have become prominent despite relentless hostility in the traditional liberal media in the US
- Ohmynews² in Korea, set up as an informal medium by a gentleman named Oh. It became popular as students would print out the single-sheet paper and post it on walls. Over time, it became such an opinion-maker that it is credited with the overthrow of one of Korea’s military dictators

Undoubtedly, there are other such instances. What this shows is that if there is commitment and energy, an army of volunteers can create an alternative medium that will be able to reach large numbers of the public and possibly mold opinion. In other words, you are going over the heads of the establishment and creating a direct relationship with real people.

This model has a lot of relevance for India’s conservatives. There was a recent article³ in the *American Thinker* which talked about the tentative steps being taken by Indian conservatives to get their voices heard. The fact of the matter is that, despite years of brainwashing in the left-liberal perspective, there are journalists who feel that the one-sidedness of the current dispensation is simply unethical. This means there are professionally trained people who can support those who are deeply concerned about the unfairness of the media, but have no very good idea about how to about creating their own alternatives.

This note is addressed to that cohort: not professional journalists, but normal citizens who are not trained in the nuances of media, and do not understand how to be a brilliant media personality. If properly channelized, their energies can have enormous impact, and can make things happen.

Create or distribute content?

There are two separate issues: one is the creation of attractive content, and the other is the distribution of this content. If you attempt to tackle both these simultaneously, then you end up with a large problem: you are in effect attempting to create a newspaper (which of course includes the large amounts of capital required for operations as well as distribution – I have heard numbers of the order of Rs. 10 crores to get a new newspaper going). This is a major problem, as has been seen in the recent case of the Pioneer newspaper’s entry⁴ into Kerala. It is almost entirely dependent on the ability to

² I have to acknowledge Arindam Banerjee of the Bay Area, California, who first brought this to my attention in 2005 or so

³ “Indian conservatives struggle to build alternative media”

http://www.americanthinker.com/2008/05/indian_conservatives_struggle.html

⁴ After a promising beginning, the Pioneer’s Kerala edition has become defunct, partly because of problems with the local franchisee and his staff, partly because it wasn’t able to create a dent in terms of readership

generate advertising revenue: if you are able to do so, you can enter a new market⁵ with some amount of success.

The guerilla mediaperson does not have to worry about advertising because he operates on a shoestring with practically no cost. But that doesn't mean there's no possibility for ad revenue. Even a modestly popular website can, with practically no investment, generate some small revenues using nothing more sophisticated than Google Adwords. For a trivial investment, guerilla media can get off the ground.

Guerilla media must concentrate on one or the other facet: creation or distribution. Let us look at the former, which is more appropriate for the cohort under discussion. The fact of the matter is that anybody can create content, if they can think logically and present their facts with a fair amount of clarity. But there is a difference between competent content and attractive, compelling content, and that makes all the difference, and we shall come back to this issue later.

Creating content 101: The Blog

Where do you create content, and how do you create content? It is mostly a matter of technology. If you have a digital camera, and you happen to be in the right place at the right time, you can be a citizen reporter providing images. If you have a website or a blog, you can upload your images and your commentary there, and you may get instant credibility⁶. If you can induce a lot of people to write on or read your blog, you can get to some credibility as a source of information.

Thus a blog is the basic atomic unit of consideration. Anybody can create a blog by going to some source like www.blogger.com or www.wordpress.com and signing up, generally for free. The trick, of course, is to become popular. There are several simple ways of doing this:

- Write well, and clearly, and have a regular theme
- Update your blog often (but not too often) with news and opinion
- Get lots of others to visit your blog and to be repeat-visitors
 - The best way to get others bloggers to visit yours is by adding them to your blogroll; if you are generating traffic to their blogs, they will come to yours
 - If you respond gently, decently and with patience⁷, to people who post comments on your blog, you will get a dedicated audience of repeat visitors
- Get other ways⁸ of directing traffic to your blog
- Work on improving your content
 - Interview interesting people

⁵ As seen in the case of the Times of India entering the Bangalore market, and the Deccan Chronicle and the Times of India entering the Chennai market

⁶ in the wake of the 2006 Christmas tsunami, a hitherto unknown blogger named Amit Varma became widely recognized in india, as he toured the affected areas and put everything up on his blog, providing instant updates

⁷ Nita Kulkarni (<http://nitawriter.wordpress.com/>) is a particularly good example of someone who responds well to comments. Nita's blog is also very well-written, although I may or may not agree with her political perspective

⁸ I was able to direct a significant amount of traffic to my blog by referring to it in my columns on rediff.com, but I was fortunate in already having a voice

- Provide book reviews on topics that fit into your theme

All this may get you a well-regarded blog, but beware! Your audience is fickle. Unless you keep on providing reasons for them to come to your blog, they will soon disappear. Keeping up a blog involves a significant investment of time. You have to define your core audience, and appeal to them, although individuals may drift in and out of the habit of reading and writing on your blog. There are two important factors: utility, and novelty. The blog must be useful in some way, either because it provides information or insights, or at the very least entertainment, to the reader. Novelty is important because a blog that is not updated frequently is stale, and soon loses its readers.

There must be literally hundreds of articles on the web about how to set up your blog, how to make it appealing to an audience, and how to keep them coming back for more. From the point of view of a conservative Indian blogger, the key would be to figure out what his audience needs, while balancing his justified criticism of the Indian establishment with a little sense of humor and irony.

There are several good Indian conservative blogs⁹, which may have different agendas and perspectives. Unfortunately, some of them come and go, based on the time commitments of their authors. It is a challenge to balance life, work and scribbling on the internet, so it might well be a good idea to create a loose team whose members may also come and go, whereas the blog itself may continue¹⁰. There are various shades of Indian conservative thought – ranging from purely economic conservatives to social conservatives to religious conservatives to what might be called (pardon the contradiction) ‘radical conservatives’ and every combination thereof so that there is a whole spectrum of beliefs that can be expressed.

There are also a number of conservative American blogs which may give you good ideas that might be applicable if suitably modified for India.

The next step

Once you have a reasonably popular blog, the trick would be convert this into something more akin to a newsmagazine. Blogs do suffer from their very nature, which is that of being FIFO (first-in, first-out) and linear. Despite the ease of setting up a blog, this fact makes them quite limited. What you really want is the equivalent of a newsmagazine on the web, with sections and interests.

This requires talents that the majority of bloggers many not have, because it involves layout, typesetting and graphics design skills, which might be outsourced to experts. The advantage with this is that it might be turned into a print product. One of the examples of this is the blog nationalinterest.in which has

⁹ I like, for instance, Brahma Chellaney’s extremely sensible blog on strategy which is largely a collection of his writings in a number of publications <http://chellaney.spaces.live.com/>; swamijyoti’s on vivekodaya; the anti-cpm blog; the blogs that concentrate on the newspaper that calls itself, misleadingly, ‘The Hindu’

¹⁰ I did this on my blog <http://rajeev2004.blogspot.com> where I have invited a number of fellow-bloggers to contribute as a team. On the other hand, I kept a separate blog <http://rajeev2007.wordpress.com> which is purely my own

created a print product named Pragati, which ought to look attractive if printed out on quality paper; their business model also allows potential “distributors” to print it out and sell it.

Moving to audio-visual

But blogs have another trick up their sleeve: the podcast and its cousin, the videocast. A podcast is an audio recording; in effect it is the equivalent of a radio program, and can be as simple as someone reading a prepared text, or it can be as complicated as a talk-show with multiple listeners calling in. A videocast is the same, only it gets into video as well.

Creating a podcast is technically trivial. All that is required is a \$25 headset and some audio recording software. One example is Audacity, which is freely downloadable from a variety of locations on the net. It is a studio-quality program that allows you to create and manipulate audio in many ways. But it can also be used as the digital equivalent of a Dictaphone. If you download another free application Lame, you can create mp3 output of your audio, which can then be easily downloaded to an iPod or heard as streaming media on the net. In fact, I have created an mp3 version of this note using just this mechanism.

There is one problem with these efforts: that the average blogger or aspiring guerilla-media person normally does not have the faintest idea about how to go about being a radio jockey or video jockey. It turns out that just reading something out is intensely boring. A trained voice-model can work miracles on material that is not all that compelling; or to put it another way, it is necessary to figure out how to become a good narrator, with good diction, a voice of authority, and an appealing accent.

There is an analogy with the early days of desk-top publishing. All of a sudden, word-processor users had access to technology that was hitherto jealously guarded by print-shops: all sorts of fonts, all sorts of things you could do to the printed page. But the result was a whole lot of extraordinarily ugly output from people who had neither taste nor training in how to handle these technologies. You want to make sure that your podcasts are not ugly, nor distressing to the average listener.

It is even harder if you aspire to be a radio-talk show host. There is a certain art to this: you have to be witty and quick on the uptake as well. There will obviously be callers who are going to abuse you; your success will be based on how well you handle these and still manage to get your point across. I submit that talk radio is not for the faint of heart, but you can become tolerable at it if you practice diligently. There, once again, is a free service offered at <http://www.blogtalkradio.com> that will allow you to set up your own talk show, which can be accessed via a US phone number.

Videocasting is an order of magnitude more complex than audio podcasting. This is because most of the video you shoot would be of little interest to anybody. Making the equivalent of a documentary video is a huge enterprise, involving the special talents of dozens of highly trained experts. So unless you have the resources to make video that would compare well to a professionally-done television documentary, you shouldn't expect miracles with your videocasts. They may have a decidedly small audience, mostly your long-suffering friends and family. On the other hand, there is a lot of crummy video on youtube.

If you happen to be on the spot when something momentous is happening, obviously your video and your still photographs, uploaded from a camera-phone to flickr or something, can make you the toast of town. So the rough rule of thumb would be: do video if you have unique access to breaking news before professional TV types show up; otherwise, for material with less urgent immediacy, stick with audio podcasts.

There is also a caveat with podcasts: if your material becomes popular, then you need to set up a dedicated server, because the bandwidth required by large numbers of people downloading tens of megabytes will overwhelm normal hosting servers. There are several audio-hosting services, but the better ones are not free, and give you gigabytes-worth of bandwidth for under \$50 a month.

The Wikipedia approach

One more mechanism to get your opinions heard is to use the wisdom of crowds, by becoming a contributor to Wikipedia. If you have some time to spend, it is possible to establish yourself as an author on Wikipedia, to modify existing articles or to create new ones. With the increasing credibility of the online encyclopedia, getting one's ideas online and getting them to be "truth by repeated assertion" is a high-return investment of your time and effort.

However, you cannot become a trusted Wikipedia contributor overnight. There are plenty of arcane rules used by Wikipedia editors, including questions about "neutral point of view" and "notability". Your lovingly worded article may be decimated or marked for deletion by a motivated and savvy opponent. I have noticed this in several contexts: in one, someone I know waged a long battle to establish an interesting point about the politics of Nehruvian India, but was finally forced to give in because of a concerted effort by a bevy of opponents.

In another case, when I wrote a Wikipedia entry on a noted journalist, somebody who apparently keeps track of every new article (and has authored some articles clearly showing his biases and lack of a neutral perspective) succeeded in getting the entry removed, and it took a lot of effort to get it reinstated.

The fact is that there are large numbers of – I have to assume paid – nihilists and rabble-rousers on the net who are congenitally opposed to the Hindu/Indian point of view. Not all of them are Indians, but the majority of them are from the Mullah-Missionary-Macaulayite-Marxist persuasion, and they are a force to reckon with.

The other part: distribution

In many ways, distribution is the harder part of the media business. Now that you have created some awesome content, how on earth do you get the great unwashed to know that you have done so? How will they know to come and read your pellucid prose or listen to your dulcet voice or watch your lovely self in action, holding forth on matters of great import?

If you are able to create compelling mp3 audio content, you should be able to get it up on the grand-daddy of all Internet media distribution mechanism, Apple's iTunes. That might, to a large extent, solve

the problem of distribution, because of the tremendous reach that iTunes has: it is reputed to be loaded on 500 million personal computers and laptops. Similarly, if you are able to create good video, it can be put up on things like youtube, rediff video or other video-hosting services.

However, there is no question that distribution is a much larger problem than content creation. It basically needs marketing, which translates into money. For instance, you could be buy space on Google as an advertiser, thereby directing traffic to your sites.

Another way of getting distribution muscle depends on your willingness to spend time networking with others. If your blogroll consists of a large number of other blogs that you visit frequently and comment upon, it is quite likely that those blog authors will appreciate it and reciprocate, thus potentially driving eyeballs to your own blog (or other content mechanisms).

Things to watch out for

The fact that there are many who are highly motivated to denigrate the conservative point of view is something that needs to be taken into account. As part of their propaganda war in India, I suspect certain political parties as well as religious entities and foreigners with vested interests have hired people to surf the web and flood their opponents' perspectives with invective and flaming. This has the effect of drowning out any decent discussions and intimidating authors. A thick skin would be of considerable value to the would-be guerilla mediaperson.

Conclusion

There are several significant problems confronting those who would get away from the vicious stranglehold of an anti-Hindu and anti-national cohort on the media in India. One is the difficulty in going over the heads of the media and directly reaching an audience, which is an expensive and difficult proposition. One way out, barring the substantial expenditure of money, is to create guerilla media that practices hit-and-run tactics. The issue with this is in both the content and the distribution. On the one hand, the quality of a lot of conservative writing is poor – both in logic and in the use of language. On the other hand, the ability to get distribution – eyeballs – is limited, and it is necessary to be creative.

Rajeev Srinivasan is a management consultant and columnist who has spent roughly equal amounts of his adult life in California and India. His columns appear on rediff.com, the New Indian Express, the Pioneer and India Currents magazine. His writing has appeared in Outlook, the Indian Express, the Hindu, and other publications. His blogs are at <http://rajeev2007.wordpress.com> and <http://rajeev2004.blogspot.com> ; his rediff columns are at <http://www.rediff.com/news/srinivas.htm> and his podcasts (as well as other things) are at <http://rajeev.posterous.com>. His blogtalkradio activities have been stymied by technical problems, but he's working on solving them.