

The invention of the printing press revolutionized communication. No longer was the control of information confined to the hands of those who could write it down. In the centuries that followed its invention, the printing press, and its successors, was instrumental in the democratic and industrial revolutions by facilitating better and more efficient distribution of ideas. Now, due to technological advancements, the next step in the evolution of information is not on paper, but on screen, and online. The internet is revolutionizing personal and mass communication, changing the social dynamic of information in society. Not only has the internet become an indispensable information resource for personal and business use, but it has also been used to fuel political change and expose the flaws in the structure of more conventional and mainstream forms of communication.

Over the past decade, the internet has become entrenched in many people's daily lives. The statistics alone are staggering. "The number of adult Americans using the Internet increased 50% from 2000 to 2003, reaching 126 million users in 2003."¹ Also, two thirds of people aged 18-29 are online.² Not only are more and more people using the internet, but they are also using it more often. 62% of American people surveyed in 2003 agreed that the computer had become part of their daily routine at home.³ The internet's range of use has also widened in recent years. Many people use the internet for daily

¹ Hoffman, D. L., Novak, T. P., Venkatesh, A. Has the Internet Become Indispensable? *Communications of the ACM* (July 2004). p38

² Hoffman, p38

³ *ibid*, p39

activities like shopping and financial management instead of traveling to the store or bank, respectively, and social community management has moved online as well.⁴

Indeed, the internet has become an indispensable tool for people in their daily lives, and as a result, it has gained influence in information distribution. In the February 15th, 2005 edition of *Library Journal*, an unflattering editorial on “Blog People” was published.⁵ Due to the overwhelming response to this editorial, it had to be followed up by another editorial explaining the decision to print the first one, and the results of doing so.⁶ The reason there was such a large response to this anti-blog article was due in large part to “Blog People” themselves, posting reactions and counterarguments to the one presented in the original editorial. This recognition of a strong online presence in the information market is not unprecedented. Many journals, such as *Issues in Science and Technology*, are turning to the web log in order to provide content in a more direct and timely fashion and gain a presence of their own in what is now a highly-influential area of communication.⁷ The acknowledgement of the internet as a useful, practical, and even essential, information tool by other forms of media is on the rise, as both of those journals have learnt.

However, the implications of the internet’s influence on the way people and businesses gather and distribute information goes beyond web logs and journals. There are much broader social implications, the most immediately recognizable of which is its use in affecting political change. Such was the case during Ukraine’s Orange Revolution. A study of website use and resulting web traffic for both sides of the political struggle showed some clear differences, with Viktor Yushenko’s supporters being much more

⁴ ibid

⁵ Fialkoff, F. The Power of Blogs. *Library Journal*, (Apr 1, 2005). p8

⁶ Fialkoff, p8

⁷ Finneran, K. To Blog, or Not to Blog. *Issues in Science and Technology*, (Winter 2006). p24

active in the online realm.⁸ With the Ukrainian government in firm control of all of the traditional media, such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, the internet was the only choice for those wishing to critique the actions of presidents Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovich.⁹ These journalists used websites to expose the corruption of these regimes, and led the drive for support of Yushenko during the 2004 presidential campaign.¹⁰ On Election Day, websites ran constantly-updating exit polls, which helped expose the fraud of the official results, which claimed Yanukovich as the winner.¹¹ Massive protests followed, and Yushenko was eventually given the victory.¹²

The use of the internet by the opposition in the Orange Revolution also helped the struggle gain international attention, and changed the way media is looked at in political campaigns. The fact that the opposition in Ukraine had no access to traditional information channels did not stop their relentless attacks on Yanukovich from gaining an audience.¹³ The international attention also led to sympathy protests in other parts of the world, including North America.¹⁴ The success of the Orange Revolution was a shining example of the potential impact the internet can have on social change.

The internet has also been used in a more introspective way, exposing issues and inciting changes within other forms of more conventional media. This is different from other forms of media venturing onto the internet, as discussed above, because instigator of this change has been internet-based, disseminating outward from websites.

⁸ Kyj, M. J. Internet use in Ukraine's Orange Revolution. *Business Horizons*, (2006). p78

⁹ Kyj, p72

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*, p79

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*, p74

The exposure of James Frey's bestselling memoir *A Million Little Pieces* as a fraudulent and fictionalized tale by the website thesmokinggun.com was a prime example of the internet's use to expose problems in the structure of conventional media, and a major event in its young history. The story of Frey's vast exaggerations in a supposedly true book was broke by thesmokinggun.com, in an exposé posted on January 8th, 2006, entitled *A Million Little Lies*.¹⁵ It detailed how various events in Frey's bestselling novel were grossly exaggerated (such as the amount of time he spent in an Ohio jail) or made up entirely (his relation to the story of two young girls in Michigan who were struck and killed by a train). The book, about Frey's struggles with drug addiction and criminality, shot to fame after being featured in Oprah's Book Club, where it was presented as a heart-moving and honest confession of a former addict.

Thesmokinggun.com's article on the book gained widespread attention and raised questions about the memoir's authenticity. The publisher, Frey himself, and Oprah all maintained their stance that the book was a work of non-fiction (Frey even threatened legal action),¹⁶ but the evidence compiled in the exposé eventually overpowered their conviction. In a later episode of her show, Oprah had Frey back on, but this time it was to shame him for deceiving all of his readers with his exaggerations and lies. She also raised the question, to the publisher of the memoir, of how this was allowed to occur. The simple answer was that there was no serious attempt at fact-checking before it was published, and that was true for most memoirs.

One aspect of this whole issue Oprah failed to acknowledge on that episode was the fact that all of this was coming to the surface because of thesmokinggun.com, a

¹⁵ Everything talked about in this section is based on the aforementioned article, found at <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/0104061jamesfrey1.html>. I apologize for not being able to find scholarly sources on this event.

¹⁶ <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/jamesfrey/freysides/singerfrey1.html>

website with no conventional media affiliate. If it hadn't been for the internet, the lies in *A Million Little Pieces* would have remained as truth in the perceptions of many people's minds.

James Frey, Viktor Yanukovych, and Michael Gorman (president of the American Library Association and author of the *Library Journal* editorial on "Blog People") have all experienced first-hand the influence of the internet on public opinion. These days, there is no denying the social value, and importance, of this new medium. The revolution of information access that the internet is creating continues to affect both personal and mass communications in a society where information control is a very valuable commodity. Like the democratic and industrial revolutions before it, the information revolution has started out with grand and noble ambitions behind it. The idea of free access to information is an enticing prospect, but we must not forget the beginnings of this modern movement, as seems to have happened in the two previous to it. If power is defined as access to resources, then we as a society have an opportunity to capture the vast power of information. The importance of this opportunity should not be overlooked.