

american media

New media devices create homegrown media critics, who question mainstream journalism and politicians – and they pay them out in their own coin

KURZFASSUNG

Der Artikel in 7 Sekunden

In Los Angeles traffic today, the distracting handset is rare as more people use in-ear listening devices that are worn like clothing. Media is a style accessory like sunglasses or designer shoes. But the beautiful **lifestyle** does not obliterate media criticism. Podcasts and blogs make anybody an instant journalist or media critic.

On every side it surrounds us – a bubble of recorded voices, enhanced photos, data discs, keyboards, videos, printouts, books, buttons, ringtones – information pressing everywhere and necessary as the air that we breathe. Media is embedded in home, work, and even clothing. Media is a style accessory like sunglasses or designer shoes. As it joins the world of fashion and beautiful lifestyles, is critical media harder to find?

The media bubble keeps us tuned to the ever-changing collective psyche. Radio is backdrop for travel to work; cell phones go in the pocket while hiking outdoors, and news clips flash on computer screens everywhere. We see what appears through the bubble, and occasionally we notice the bubble itself. Life exists, we know, outside, but we are not sure exactly where. The bubble is global, interlinked, and spins 24/7.

The iPod Nano was the big hit of Christmas 2005. Thousands of 8-year-olds and their elders now wear Nanos. The iPod success pulled Apple from the brink, and Apple wagers that the future is about style, fashion, design. The iPod makes a fashion statement as an exquisitely beautiful object. It fits easily into a pocket or purse. Unlike “technology,” the Nano shares a tiny footprint with cigarette lighters and lipsticks. Its shiny silver back with white or black face offers a fetish object for displaying full-color photos and playing 500 songs. The iPod earphones brandish bright white colors that announce: “I’m listening to an iPod.”

The iPod generated a new stream of content. Just as DVR changed television by using digital storage to time-shift scheduled programs, so too the “podcast” time-shifts radio, and the video iPod does the same with television. Podcasts are to radio what blogs are to newspapers: hundreds of independent voices addressing thousands of narrow niches. Download iTunes to your iPod and create a personal soundtrack for today. A similar fashion is on-ear headsets for cell phones. Instead of separate devices, like over-the-head earphones, new lightweight listening devices fit inside the ear. A year ago, you could see every second driver in Los Angeles traffic holding an awkward hand phone on crowded freeways. Today, the distracting handset is rare as more people use in-ear listening devices that leave hands free for driving or eating. Devices are worn like clothing. The new

plasma and LCD monitors – from tiny iPods to giant home theaters – are in themselves beautiful, with luminescent hues and flat-screen luxury. Infinite content is taken for granted while beauty commands the eye. The issue is not whether to find information but how cool the mode of accessing it is. The drawbridge drops and information floods in.

The beautiful lifestyle does not obliterate media criticism. Podcasts allow any individual with a computer microphone to publish audio alongside major networks. Apple “iTunes” ranks all podcasts, but ranking is based on download statistics rather than on professional gatekeepers or editors. Likewise with blogs, the ubiquitous web logs anyone can set up in minutes. Blogging software makes you an instant commentator or journalist, and the first thing many bloggers do is to criticize mainstream journalists.

Homegrown media criticism brought down CBS Evening News anchor Dan Rather and CNN news chief Ethan Jordan. Blogs attack journalists and counterattacks punch back: Newspapers have blogs, banks have blogs, new TV shows have blogs, and even the CBS Network has a blog. People who produce mainstream media are forced to explain their choices, why headlines follow certain stories and not others, why this photo is placed in that particular frame, and whether a photo has been modified in Photoshop.

Blogs and podcasts have focused critically on interviews with the former White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer, the CNN news president Jonathan Klein, and MS-NBC host Don Abrams. Bloggers have raised questions about the mainstream’s wall-to-wall coverage of the Lacey Peterson case, the run-away bride case, and Judith Miller’s reporting in the *New York Times* about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. Media criticism that began years ago with the Monica Lewinsky scandal and the O. J. Simpson trial – both exploiting a polarized population – attacked a media that seemed biased or incompetent, splitting viewers and making them angry with Clinton or with the media that reported the details. Bloggers are calling into question the judgments in the mainstream bubble.

The bubble is increasingly beautiful, sleek, and fun. But the other side of its seductive surface bristles with a thousand pin pricks to burst our comfortable effervescence. ■

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