

Review: Here Comes Everyone

Written by John Eager

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Last week I went to a citizen journalist day of film and events at the Courtyard, Hereford as part of the [Borderlines Film Festival](#). As a whole it was an interesting and informative day, but I can't help feeling that the organisers either hadn't anticipated their audience correctly or were assuming that citizen journalism was not a subject for the masses: Here Comes A Peripheral Few might have been a more indicative title.

The 'audience' seemed to be made up of the participants themselves, some senior citizens, the [Kington Blackboard](#) (strangely relegated from proceedings) and an indignant Hereford Times reporter who couldn't understand why she wasn't 'on the panel' - oh, and me. We were spoken to by eco-activists, a gypsy/traveller representative and an anarchist - hardly mainstream society. Conversely, we were also spoken to by a Conservative MP, a couple of old newspaper hacks and a professional photo-journalist who claimed to be a citizen journalist. I say spoken to, as there was very little time or opportunity for interaction with the various speakers.

The day began with a remarkable and disturbing film [Burma VJ - Reporting From a Closed Country](#). A brave group of Burmese citizen journalists at great peril to themselves document the uprising of the people and the monks against the [Burmese military junta](#).

Recording on camcorders their film is smuggled out of the country to Norway, where it is edited and put out on the Internet and major news agencies effectively ending back in Burma. The Burmese military aggressively end the uprising beating and killing monks as well as a stray Japanese journalist.

The film leaves me with a heavy heart and a bad taste in my mouth for authority. Questions burn in my brain - why do we not help these people? How long must they suffer? Is it our appeasement of China that stops us and the rest of the world from interfering in Burmese internal affairs? I am reminded of when I lived in Northern Thailand back in the 80s and the hill tribe people would annually migrate into Thailand to escape eradication by the Burmese military. Only when the monsoon rains came would they feel safe to return to their homes in Burma. All Thailand would do was protect their border.

The film was followed by a talk by [Christian Payne](#), the Jamie Oliver of photo-journalism, a one man walking production unit marching in and out of war zones streaming live video to his social network. He spoke of 'early adoptors', 'network credibility', 'augmented reality', 'networked

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intelligence' and told us that journalism was an action. Interesting, but hardly relevant to an audience of senior citizens who might like to blog about their garden's eco-systems or next week's stitch and bitch meeting. Still, he has persuaded me to go out and buy a mobile phone - that seems like a useful bit of kit (oh, didn't you know? I'm an absolute dinosaur when it comes to technology.)

The Get Local event provided four speakers. [Matthew Engel](#), Guardian journalist, told us that local newspapers existed primarily to make money, not to serve the public and that local journalism is 'critical' for local democracy. He was concerned by the lack of local media owned and controlled within Herefordshire. Maybe he was unaware of the grassroots shoots of citizen journalism of

[Wyenot](#), [Hereford](#)

[Heckler](#)

[Kington Blackboard](#)

[Ledbury Community Portal](#)

and

[Bromyard Info](#)

, or maybe he really did not value the importance of these fledgling citizen journalist websites.

Another professional journalist, Tim Beech, reminded the audience of how local newspapers were steadily declining, that their audiences had fragmented and people only looked at the local newspapers for real estate and used cars. At this point I wanted to sob. All this time local newspapers had been just in it for the money and now the public had turned away from them. Oh dear, oh dear.

[Jesse Norman](#), Tory campaigner and writer, waffled on about philosophy and truth and about the phoniness of political rhetoric developed by NAZI politicians that according to him is alive and well here in our political systems in 2010. Well, maybe it takes one to know one.

What did any of these speakers have to do with citizen journalism?

At last a real, bona fide Ci Jo (citizen journalist (my latest term)) spoke to the assembled. Unfortunately, Matt of the Hereford Heckler and his 20 strong anarchist group are just that - a bunch of anarchists. They might as well call themselves communists, because the word anarchy just conjures up fear and lawlessness in people's minds. They see burning cars, their houses squatted and a molotov cocktail revolution being played out on our streets.

Anyway, the [Hereford Heckler](#) is the mouthpiece of the [Hereford Solidarity League](#), which has a distinct anti-fascist, anti-BNP agenda. They blog using Word Press and distribute thousands of hard copy versions door-to-door in Hereford. Matt explained that they felt the need to do this because the established local media was driven by profit which meant they were unable to criticise Herefordshire Council, West Mercia police or their local MP. Matt insisted that these institutions needed to be held to account for their actions, and although he wasn't a journalist and didn't want to be doing this, he felt compelled to do something as an individual.

When the established institutions of control in society - local government, national government, the police and the media fail the people [global warming, credit/banking collapse, military-industrial complex that feeds off a constant programme of war, MP's expenses, politically biased media etc] do the people do nothing or do the people act individually and collectively to change or overcome those institutions that have failed us environmentally, economically, and politically? This is the anarchy/self expression of the Hereford Heckler. This is the direct action of eco-groups like Climate Camp. But is this the model of citizen journalism that the average Jo in the street or senior citizen in the Courtyard can relate to?

Go Global: Helen Iles of Undercurrents spoke about [Climate Camp](#), their training of citizen journalists and the film

Just

Do It

that they were making. Helen told the assembled that we had in our hands the means of production (camcorders, mobile devices, the Internet) and as independent citizen journalists we had no censor (save our own self-censorship and, as was pointed out by the man from the Kington Blackboard, our extreme libel laws.) Helen pointed to the shift away from the establishment and how the citizen journalist should not be overly concerned with a 'balanced' or 'objective' view. She argued that all media was subjective from its ownership, stance, opinions to its output.

Climate Camp's direct action paradigm was more on a par with the Burmese Ci Jos who are taking on and countering the state. But again, this is still representative of the fringes of our society and arguably relates little to the ordinary citizen concerned with down-to-earth everyday affairs.

Conversely to this campaign style of citizen journalism Jake Bowers gave an account of the [Travellers Times Online](#) that represents the English gypsy and romany community giving a 'voice for the voiceless' and

connecting the local traveller community to their wider global community. In many respects this highlights how the Internet is the perfect tool for making and connecting interest communities rather than local geographic communities.

As editor and writer for a local citizen journalist website my interest is in local participation and how to activate and engage people in what I like to call DIY media. Finally, Nic Millington of the [Rural Media Company](#) stood up and told us about a new, exciting website that they had developed for local communities -

[LocalEyes](#)

. With videos, forums, people's polls and citizen journalism this looked like something that could displace the Ledbury Community Portal.

Initially I was worried by this prospect, but then I got excited as I realized I might be able to replace the Ledbury Community Portal myself using this built-for-purpose software that was LocalEyes to improve Ledbury's citizen journalist project. I raced home and looked it up on the Internet. Within minutes I was deflated and then chuckling to myself. LocalEyes was using [Joomla](#)

software, the very same software that the Ledbury Community Portal was built with. The Ledbury Community Portal has been up and running for two and a half years, while LocalEyes is still in its pilot infancy. Blimey, we didn't even pilot the Portal, we just got on with it.

Closer examination of LocalEyes made me cringe. Apparently set up in conjunction with the [Transition Towns](#)

movement it looks very prescriptive. For example, readers/writers can choose only one or two topics to discuss each week, make suggestions and vote on them. What if you want to discuss something else? What if a new story breaks half way through a week? There is no such limit/control on the LCP.

Even more bizarre I found this odd agenda wrapped up in LocalEyes. Apparently LocalEyes believes that we are disconnected from the songs of our local culture in our workplace. Their suggestion? We go into schools and teach the children environmentally friendly local community songs that they will sing communally later in life in the workplace. Why? Don't ask me - this sounds like social engineering, something you might find in a Japanese corporation or Chinese sweatshop. Not very English, not very Radio One and certainly not citizen journalism.