

Weblogs and Journalism: Do They Connect?

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By Rebecca Blood

We are entering a new age of information access and dissemination. Tools that make it easy to publish to the Internet have given millions of people the equivalent of a printing press on their desks and, increasingly, in their pockets. Unless we understand the difference between amateur reporting and personal publishing—and recognize Weblogs as just one form these activities might take—we will not be able to fully understand the implications they have for culture, journalism and society.

Let's start with the Weblog—a frequently updated Web site, with posts arranged in reverse chronological order, so new entries are always on top. Early Webloggers linked to selected news articles and Web pages, usually with a concise description or comment. The creation of software that allowed users to quickly post entries into predesigned templates led to an explosion of short-form diaries, but the reverse-chronological format has remained constant. It is this format that determines whether a Web page is a Weblog.

Note that the form preceded the software. Easy-to-use software has fueled the fast adoption of the form, but Weblogs may be created without it. The Weblog is arguably the first form native to the Web. Its basic unit is the post, not the article or the page. Bloggers write as much or as little as they choose on a topic, and although entries are presented together on the page, each post is given a permalink, so that individual entries can be referenced separately.

Hypertext is fundamental to the practice of Weblogging. When bloggers refer to material that exists online, they invariably link to it. Hypertext allows writers to summarize and contextualize

complex stories with links out to numerous primary sources. Most importantly, the link provides a transparency that is impossible with paper. The link allows writers to directly reference any online resource, enabling readers to determine for themselves whether the writer has accurately represented or even understood the referenced piece. Bloggers who reference but do not link material that might, in its entirety, undermine their conclusions, are intellectually dishonest.

Are Weblogs a Form of Journalism?

The early claim, “Weblogs are a new form of journalism,” has been gradually revised to “some Weblogs are doing journalism, at least part of the time.” As even the enthusiasts now concede, Weblogs used to record memories, plan weddings, or coordinate workgroups can't be classified as journalism by any definition. So in any discussion about Weblogs and journalism, the first question to ask is: Which Weblogs?

The four Weblog types most frequently cited are:

- Those written by journalists;
- Those written by professionals about their industry;
- Those written by individuals at the scene of a major event;
- Those that link primarily to news about current events.

Weblogs maintained for respected news organizations will certainly qualify as journalism if they uphold the same standards as the entire organization. But some argue that independent sites maintained by journalists automatically constitute journalism, simply because their authors are journalists. A Weblog

written by a journalist does not necessarily qualify as journalism for the same reason a novel written by a journalist does not: It is the practice that defines the practitioner, not the other way around. The case of Jayson Blair, recently fired from The New York Times for fabricating stories, illustrates that whatever the journalist's reputation or affiliation, journalism is characterized by strict adherence to accepted principles and standards, not by title or professional standing.

Some advocates of Weblogs as journalism point to the Weblogs produced by industry insiders as the future of trade journalism. They argue that, while reporters tend to rely on only a few sources even when reporting very complex stories, Weblogs written by the people working in a field will naturally convey a more complete version of the news about their profession. But those with a stake in the public perception of an issue—as working professionals invariably have—are those we can rely upon least for an unbiased perspective. Their commentary, done with integrity, can be a great source of accurate information and nuanced, informed analysis, but it will never replace the journalist's mandate to assemble a fair, accurate and complete story that can be understood by a general audience.

Personal accounts are more problematic: Is an eyewitness account journalism and, if so, when? Depending on the event? Depending on the inability of another individual to compile a more complete version of the story? Depending on the skill or training of the person writing the account? The standards used to determine when a personal recollection becomes a journalistic report are likely to vary from case to case.

This leaves link-driven sites about

current events. There are certainly similarities between the practices behind these Weblogs and some of the activities required to produce a newspaper or news broadcast. Just as a newspaper editor chooses which wire stories to run, the Weblog editor chooses which stories to link. But bloggers are never in a position to determine which events will be reported. And just as opinion columnists use news accounts as a springboard to present their interpretation of events, bloggers are usually very happy to tell you what they think of what they link.

But is blogging a new form of journalism?

Frankly, no. I'm not practicing journalism when I link to a news article reported by someone else and state what I think—I've been doing something similar around the water cooler for years. I'm engaged in research, not journalism, when I search the Web for supplementary information in order to make a point. Reporters might do identical research while writing, but research alone does not qualify an activity as journalism. Bloggers may point to reader comments as sources of information about the items they post, but these are equivalent to letters to the editor, not reporting. Publishing unsubstantiated (and sometimes anonymous) e-mails from readers is not journalism, even when it's done by someone with journalistic credentials. Credible journalists make a point of speaking directly to witnesses and experts, an activity so rare among bloggers as to be, for all practical purposes, nonexistent.

Instead of inflating the term "journalism" to include everyone who writes anything about current events, I prefer the term "participatory media" for the blogger's practice of actively highlighting and framing the news that is reported by journalists, a practice potentially as important as—but different from—journalism.

Weblogs as Participatory Media

So when I say Weblogs and journalism are fundamentally different, one thing I mean is that the vast majority of Weblogs do not provide original reporting—for me, the heart of all journalism. But Joan Connell, the former executive producer for opinion and communities at MSNBC, has said she believes Weblogs are journalism only when they are edited. This will be poorly received by those journalists who have embraced the form for its freedom from professional standards and processes. Of course, bloggers unaffiliated with news organizations may state their

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opinions quite frankly, unworried about placating editors, offending advertisers, or poisoning relationships with sources.

When bloggers do report the news, the form is usually incidental to the practice. When policy analyst David Steven decided to document the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, he set up a Weblog so that he could easily post reports on each day's events. He attended news conferences. He interviewed conference speakers. He summarized the proceedings in the Daily Summit¹. But this was not a triumph of the Weblog form. It was made possible by the free availability of easy-to-use publishing software. That the end product was a Weblog was irrelevant to Steven's purposes—and to those of his readers. For two weeks, Steven was on the frontline, reporting, editing and publishing news from the Summit. Journalism? I believe so, though Connell might disagree.

Perhaps the biggest reason millions of amateur writers produce Weblogs is that the easiest-to-use Web publishing tools produce only that format. Blogs have become the default choice for personal Web publishing to such a degree that the two ideas are conjoined. When commentators talk about Weblogs as the future of journalism, they sometimes seem to mean, "personal publishing is the future of journalism," or "amateur reporting is the future of journalism"—but neither of these need manifest in the Weblog form.

Whether personal publishing and amateur reporting begin to appear in different forms will depend on the availability of tools that allow nonprofessionals to create and contribute to other kinds of publications. A Korean Web site called "OhmyNews" employs more than 26,000 "citizen reporters" who submit articles on everything from birthday celebrations to political events. The publication is credited with helping to

elect South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, who granted his first postelection interview to the site. This is amateur reporting, but it is not blogging.

I see the wide adoption of Weblogs as just the first wave of an age of online personal publishing. As Weblog software evolves into content management software, look for a surge of other kinds of online publications, many of which will be updated periodically instead of continually. If these publications employ a Weblog, it will be as an annotated table of contents rather than as the focus of the site. Amateur reporting will become more widespread, particularly with the proliferation of mobile devices that can upload photos and text. These devices will be pervasive, but little of this content will be widely seen, partly because there will be so much to pick through. Such content will be widely distributed only when it has the import of the Rodney King video.

Weblogs will be used in mainstream journalism, without question. But the vast majority of bloggers will continue to have a very different mandate from

 ¹Daily Summit <http://www.dailysummit.net/>

journalists. It is unrealistic to apply the standards of journalism to bloggers who rarely have the time or resources to actually report the news. In my book, "The Weblog Handbook," I deliberately reject the journalistic standards of fairness and accuracy in favor of transparency as the touchstone for ethi-

cal blogging. As media participants, we are stronger and more valuable working outside mainstream media, rather than attempting to mirror the purposes of the institution we should seek to analyze and supplement. ■

Rebecca Blood is the author of "The

Weblog Handbook." The chapter about Weblog ethics can be found at www.rebeccablood.net/handbook/excerpts/weblog_ethics.html. Her Weblog, *Rebecca's Pocket*, can be found at www.rebeccablood.net.

✉ rebecca@rebeccablood.net

Is Blogging Journalism?

A blogger and journalist finds no easy answer, but he discovers connections.

By Paul Andrews

Are bloggers journalists? Certainly they can be. Several journalists keep Weblogs, although only a handful of them actually get paid to do so by their news organizations. The vast majority of journalists do not blog. Over the past few years I've asked a number of them why they don't, and the most prevalent responses are that it is not in their job description and doing so would not serve their purpose. They use their best reporting in the stories they write. What is left over for a blog?

When I mentioned on a panel once—speaking to a group of veteran journalists—that I spend an average of two hours working on my Weblog each day, an audible gasp could be heard throughout the room. Who could afford to take two hours from their reporting tasks every day? It's a reasonable question. I'm a freelancer now, so I can do this, but I know from 25 years as a full-time reporter that there would have been no room for blogging in my daily workload.

On the flip side, most of the million or so bloggers (it's a tough crowd to estimate) would not call themselves journalists. Many are teenagers, working through their own identities and connecting with other like-minded kids. The majority of blogs are simply personal Web sites, posted because blogging software automates much of the HTML coding needed for Web publication. This convenience appeal has led some to predict that the medium

will fade once the even greater convenience of real-time, word processor-like editing of any Web site becomes the norm.

Perhaps a better question to pose would be, "Is blogging journalism?" Does the Australian hip-hop laddie's categorization of his favorite local bands qualify on some level as reporting? Is the blog posted by a corporate information technology manager for internal staff consumption serving as a journalistic venue in some sense?

Though reportorial contributions have been made by the Web generation, it is fair to say the vast majority of blogging does not qualify as journalism. If journalism is the imparting of verifiable facts to a general audience through a mass medium, then most blogs fall well short of meeting the standard. Many blogs focus on narrow subject matter of interest to a select but circumscribed niche. And the blogs that do contain bona fide news are largely derivative, posting links to other blogs and, in many cases, print journalism. The top "news" blog, Jim Romenesko's Poynter Online site, is composed almost exclusively of linked references. Consider Google searches: When you search on current news topics, you get established journalism sites. By contrast, searches on abstruse topics are often headed by blog links.

Without the daily work of print journalists, one wonders if even the news-conscious blogs would contain any real news.

Bloggging's Effects on Journalism

Yet I believe that blogs—in tandem with another much-underestimated medium, the e-mail list—are transforming the ways in which journalism is practiced today and perhaps are giving impetus to new journalistic venues that have not yet clarified themselves. Author Elbert Hubbard once said editors separated the wheat from the chaff—and then printed the chaff. Bloggers print, link and comment on the wheat. In doing so, bloggers often nudge print media to richer and more balanced sourcing outside the traditional halls of government and corporations. A recent example is the potential for touchscreen voting machine fraud—an issue that bloggers and e-listers have aired for months but that is just beginning to get attention from mainstream media. Just as importantly, blogs serve as a corrective mechanism for bad journalism—sloppy or erroneous reporting. To the extent that a blogger knows something about a particular topic, he or she can take a news report into a more detailed and illuminating realm. And the personal viewpoint tailored to Weblogging has always played a vital role in journalism, from standing columns to the op-ed pages.

So where's the disconnect? If bloggers can be journalists and blogs contain aspects of journalism, why aren't more journalists bloggers? And why isn't more blogging journalism? As