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• CHAPTER TWO •

The Practice of News Blogging

Axel Bruns

What we need ... is to revive notions of a republican community: a public realm in which a free people can reassemble, speak their minds, and then write or tape or otherwise record their extended conversation so that others out of sight might see it.

—James Carey¹

As the broad range of perspectives assembled in this book demonstrates, the uses of blogs are many and varied. Among them, however, the practice of news blogging takes what is perhaps a somewhat special position—alongside only the traditional blog-as-diary approach, it is probably the most visible and best-known form of blogging.

Put simply, news blogging is the practice of covering the news through blogging—whether by doing original reporting or by providing commentary on the news as it is reported in other news sources. This also explains why news blogging has become so well known in recent years: as blogging has established a more prominent place for itself in the public consciousness, mainstream journalists reporting on the phenomenon have naturally tended to look for prominent blogs in the topical area that was closest to their own interests—the news. Further, the continuing trend in journalism away from investigative reporting and toward pundit commentary also makes blog-based commentary on the news highly compatible with mainstream news content.

On the one hand, then, this positive bias among professional journalists to report about news-related uses of blogs might mean that the position of news-related blogging in relation to other blogging sub-genres has been somewhat overstated. Indeed, there are relatively few blogs that are exclusively devoted to news blogging, while by comparison there are many more blogs that are almost exclusively used as personal online diaries or for social interaction among friends. However, a great many blogs do cover the news at least from time to time, when it becomes relevant and important for their owners to do

News Blogging:

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so. Blogger and journalist J.D. Lasica refers to such *ad hoc* news blogging as “random acts of journalism”: he believes that “that’s the real revolution here: In a world of micro-content delivered to niche audiences, more and more of the small tidbits of news that we encounter each day are being conveyed through personal media—chiefly Weblogs.”²

This observation also points to the fact that news-related blogs are read in a mode that is very different from that commonly associated with the newspapers and bulletins of traditional journalism: few readers of such news blogs will follow a specific blog day by day, in the same way that they might have subscribed to a newspaper or watched the evening television news. Instead, they are more likely to discover news-related blog entries on individual bloggers’ sites through other mechanisms: through links within the blogosphere itself, through meta-blogging tools such as *Technorati*, *Daypop*, or *Blogdex* (as well as news aggregators like *GoogleNews*), through scanning headlines on their favorite RSS feeds, or simply through information searches. Just as much as most news-related blog entries may constitute random acts of journalism, their discovery and reading tends to be just as random. We should note here that this does not in itself undermine the validity or importance of such news-related blog entries as a form of news reporting. However, as is frequently the case in the blogosphere, it is not the individual blog entry that is of foremost importance, but the (ideally interlinked) collection of blog entries on a shared topic, across the blogging world.

Practices in News Blogging

In their coverage of the news through their random acts of journalism, then, a variety of approaches can be observed. These range from first-hand reportage which is not unlike similar practices in professional journalism to a practice of what we will call gatewatching, which focuses more on providing additional commentary on the news as it is reported elsewhere.

If we conceptualize news as spanning a scale reaching from key world events through to the most mundane stories that affect only a handful of people, then first-hand reporting in news-related blogs can usually be found at either extreme of this scale. So, as Boczkowski notes, online news often “appears to present a micro-local focus, featuring content of interest to small communities of users defined either by common interests or geographic location or both.”³ Reporting such micro-news is a particular strength of blogs, as the bloggers doing so are often directly engaged in the news events themselves and therefore have access to more first-hand information as well as more interest in and knowledge of micro-news than the journalists employed by local news outlets.

Micro-News

Micro-news reporting through blogs can be regarded as a form of participatory journalism, then—a form of journalism where citizens participate as equal partners in the reporting of news. As Gans writes, this is a somewhat alien concept for traditional journalism, where often “journalists treat participants as deviants rather than as citizens, and whether they intend to or not, the news media discourage participation more than encourage it. Participatory news requires a reversal of these practices and should rest on the assumption that citizens are as relevant and important as public officials.”⁴

Gans also points out that such *participatory journalism* should not be confused with the concept of *public journalism*, which has been trialed by some news organizations in an effort to arrest readership declines and create a more inclusive feel for news publications. As he describes it, “public journalism privileges mainstream issues, prefers mild controversies, and is unlikely to go beyond the ideological margins of conventional journalism. In contrast, I see participatory journalism as more citizen oriented, taking a political, and when necessary, adversarial, view of the citizen-official relationship.”⁵ In distinction from the public journalism model, then, the participatory journalism approach has more clearly activist elements: it “should also include news that is directly helpful in mobilizing citizens. ... If the strategies available to professional politicians are newsworthy, so are the strategies open to citizens.”⁶

Unfolding World Events

By contrast, first-hand news reporting through blogs has also been prominent in the coverage of some of the key world events in recent times, from the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center in New York to the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to the Christmas 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean and the London bombings in July 2005. As Mitchell describes it, “especially when big news breaks, it’s tough to beat a Weblog”⁷—while the mainstream news channels and publishers are still in the process of scrambling their camera teams, re-arranging their Websites, or establishing lines of communication to their journalists in the field, in such major events bloggers are usually already on the scene and posting live updates to their sites.

In recent years, this trend has also been aided by the increasing availability of modern digital and wireless communications technologies. So, for example, the first photos from the aftermath of the London attacks were shot on mobile phone cameras and messaged directly to blogs and image sites such as *Flickr*, while workers in offices adjacent to the blast sites, or tourists in Internet cafés near the Thai beaches swamped by the tsunami waves, were able to post updates immediately as events unfolded. Such unedited, first-hand accounts have also come to have significance beyond reporting the news and contacting

friends and family, in fact—so, for example, investigators into the London bombings used mobile phone footage by survivors to reconstruct the timeline of events, while the U.S. Library of Congress has compiled an archive of online reports following the September 11 attacks as an important historical record.

News Commentary

While it is true, then, that “with the ability to publish words and pictures even via their cell phone, citizens have the potential to observe and report more immediately than traditional media outlets do,”⁸ such first-hand reporting practices nonetheless do not constitute the majority of news-related blogging, since they depend on the accident of the individual blogger’s being at the scene of an event as it unfolds, or on the blogger’s planning to attend and cover micro-news events. By contrast, a majority of bloggers still remain likely to encounter news events in a mediated form, through reports in the online and offline media (including other news-related blogs).

Such mediated access to the news does not rule out their own participation in the continued coverage of events and issues in the news, however—no more than it rules out commercial journalists’ coverage of news as it is reported to them through the wire services. News blogging in this context—which makes up the majority of the news scale between micro-news and world events—engages predominantly in the commentary on, and collation and annotation of, news reports in other news sources: commonly, bloggers briefly summarize the issue or event in their blog posting (where possible linking to other blogs’ or professional news sites’ reports) before adding their own views or drawing connections between issues that appear to have been underrepresented in existing reports.

Writing in 2002, Hiler noted that there may also be a natural trajectory between these two forms of news blogging:

I’ve met a good number of New York bloggers, and many of them have told me the same thing: “I had to start blogging after 9-11, just so my friends and family knew I was ok. Also, for the first time I felt like I had something to say—something worth blogging.”

There are so many post 9-11 weblogs that they’ve gotten their own name: *Warblogs*. Eight months after September 11th, Warblogs mostly dissect and analyze the news from the War on Terrorism. But immediately after 9-11, Warblogs provided a powerful form of personal journalism that captivated thousands of readers.⁹

This form of news blogging as commentary and annotation is especially powerful also in the coverage of continuing events, since the Weblog format’s underlying model of posting *ad hoc* updates is better suited to continuous coverage. By contrast, print news must almost always publish whole newspapers

for logistical reasons, while broadcast news must always repeat what it has already covered, since the ephemerality of the medium means that new viewers have no way of catching up with past coverage. News blogs, on the other hand, can publish even minor updates as soon as they come to hand, and serve as their own archives so that new readers can backtrack to the original report before reading more recent updates.

Blog-based news commentary may be a significant contributor to the overall rise of blogs as an informational medium, and its growing recognition by the wider public can again be linked to some key events—in the United States, for example, especially the 2004 presidential campaign. As a study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project reports,

by the end of 2004 32 million Americans were blog readers. Much of the attention to blogs focused on those that covered the recent political campaign and the media. And at least some of the overall growth in blog readership is attributable to political blogs. Some 9% of internet users said they read political blogs “frequently” or “sometimes” during the campaign.¹⁰

Gatewatching

As blogger Glenn Reynolds describes it, then, although some bloggers “do actual reporting from time to time, most of what they bring to the table is opinion and analysis—punditry.”¹¹ This focus on news commentary only mirrors a similar shift that has occurred in mainstream journalism for some time now—here, too, especially smaller operators have increasingly exchanged independent reporting for a greater reliance on sourcing content from the wire services (at best) and corporate and government PR departments (at worst). It would therefore be disingenuous to single out bloggers as regurgitators of second-hand news when in reality this practice is far more widespread. At the same time, some commentators have noted that in a time of immediate access to original information sources (especially through the World Wide Web), a fundamental change in the role of journalists is inevitable. For example, Barboel and Deuze suggest that “with the explosive increase of information on a worldwide scale, the necessity of offering information about information has become a crucial addition to journalism’s skills and tasks This redefines the journalist’s role as an annotational or orientational one, a shift from the watchdog to the ‘guidedog.’”¹²

This fundamental challenge to traditional journalistic practices can be summarized as a shift from what has long been known as gatekeeping to a new practice of *gatewatching*. Instead of firmly keeping the gates—that is, making a selection of what news will or will not be seen by audiences—journalists as well as others engaged in reporting and discussing the news (such as bloggers) can now only *watch* the gates through which information passes from news sources

Gatewatching:

the observation of the output gates of news publications and other sources, in order to identify important material as it becomes available.

to the wider public, and can provide a suggestion of what they feel may be the most relevant news to their audience (knowing full well that many further news reports are also available to them). Instead of following the *New York Times* motto of providing “all the news that’s fit to print” (which was always open to question, of course), it is now possible only to provide pointers to the news that may be most important to read, in the journalist’s or blogger’s judgment.¹³

This move to gatewatching over gatekeeping thus significantly reduces the power of the journalistic profession to affect public opinion. Gatekeeping in the mass media age exerted a measure of control over the public arena, but when gatekeepers lose their power to control the content of that symbolic arena, and when they are joined by an influx of alternative gatewatchers, “shared decision-making at the stage of gate-keeping changes the journalistic power balance ... and demonstrates a reconfigured world order at the press/media power centres, leading to a blurring of lines between the centre and the periphery in a critical journalistic practice.”¹⁴

Further accelerating this shift, gatewatching is iterative: the material passing through the output gates of news blogs is further watched as potential source material by other gatewatchers. News bloggers therefore form a distributed community of commentators who will engage with one another’s views on the news as much as with those expressed in other news sources. As Shirky describes it, “the order of things in broadcast is ‘filter, then publish.’ The order in communities is ‘publish, then filter.’ ... Writers submit their stories in advance, to be edited or rejected before the public ever sees them. Participants in a community, by contrast, say what they have to say, and the good is sorted from the mediocre after the fact.”¹⁵

Weblog News as Multiperspectival News

While the point can be made that “the posting of established media source material does raise the question of whether this simply re-legitimises those media as the authentic forum for news,”¹⁶ it is also important to note that the framing of that source material in a blog context creates a very different sense of the news than may exist in traditional journalistic publications. The focus on commentary and a kind of annotation at a distance of news reports found elsewhere on the Web, and the interlinkage and engagement between individual bloggers which is a fundamental feature of the blogosphere, turn Weblog news into a far more discursive form of news reporting than can

usually be found elsewhere. In doing so it approaches what Heikkilä and Kunelius have described as dialogic or deliberative news: they postulate that

[dialogic] journalism must openly encourage different readings (and search for new modes of stories that do so) and it must commit itself to [the] task of making these different readings and interpretations public. The challenge is to make the accents and articulations heard, to give them the power and position they need to argue on particular problems and to make them the objects and starting points for new emerging public situations and conversations.¹⁷

Deliberative journalism further advances beyond this by not only presenting these different readings, but enabling them to engage with one another directly and contribute to public deliberation: it “would underscore the variety of ways to frame an issue. It would assume that opinions—not to mention majorities and minorities—do not precede public deliberation, that thoughts and opinions do not precede their articulation in public, but that they start to emerge when the frames are publicly shared.”¹⁸ This removes distinctions of status and expertise from the participants in the deliberation, much as news blogging undermines the privileged position of professional journalists as commentators on the news: “in a deliberative situation expert knowledge has no privileged position. All the participants are experts in the ways in which the common problem touches their everyday lives. Thus, opinions and knowledge expressed in deliberation articulate the experiences of the participants.”¹⁹

Deliberative Journalism:

journalism that enables a conversation between different viewpoints without privileging one as being more informed than another, and that aims to develop rather than merely express participants’ opinions.

In contrast to the conflict-based stories of the mainstream media, such deliberative news coverage begins to realize a form of news that journalism scholar Herbert Gans has envisaged for some three decades: multiperspectival news. As he describes the concept, “ideally, multiperspectival news en-

Multiperspectival News:

news that represents as many perspectives as is possible and feasible.

compasses fact and opinion reflecting all possible perspectives. In practice, it means making a place in the news for presently unrepresented viewpoints, unreported facts, and unrepresented, or rarely reported, parts of the population. To put it another way, multiperspectival news is the bottoms-up corrective for the mostly top-down perspectives of the news media.”²⁰ It is not difficult to see news blogs as contributing to this goal.

News Blogs and the Mainstream News Media

Indeed, the rise of news blogging may be seen as a direct expression of news audiences' desire to increase the range of perspectives on the news that are available in the media. As a result, Bowman and Willis believe that "what is emerging is a new media ecosystem ..., where online communities discuss and extend the stories created by mainstream media. These communities also produce participatory journalism, grassroots reporting, annotative reporting, commentary and fact-checking, which the mainstream media feed upon, developing them as a pool of tips, sources and story ideas."²¹ By now, even beyond the first-hand coverage of unfolding events which we have already discussed, several cases have indeed emerged where coverage of news through blogs has shown an effect on the mainstream media's news coverage as well.

News-related blogs and other alternative news Websites could therefore be seen as a second tier to the news media system, acting as a corrective and companion to the traditional news media. This model is remarkably similar to the two-tier system that Herbert Gans envisaged in 1980 in his discussion of multiperspectival news. He conceived of a media

model, which combines some centralization and decentralization ... Central (or first-tier) media would be complemented by a second tier of pre-existing and new national media, each reporting on news to specific, fairly homogeneous audiences. ... Their news organizations would have to be small [for reasons of cost]. They would devote themselves primarily to reanalyzing and reinterpreting news gathered by the central media—and the wire services—for their audiences, adding their own commentary and backing these up with as much original reporting, particularly to support bottom-up, representative, and service news, as would be financially feasible.²²

In this environment, he writes, media in the second tier "would also function as monitors and critics of the central media, indicating where and how, by their standards, the central media have been insufficiently multiperspectival."²³ While clearly the technological and institutional setup of this second tier would have been impossible to foresee at the time, blogger commentary on the news appears to serve exactly these functions.

Today, as Lasica describes it, "on almost any major story, the Weblog community adds depth, analysis, alternative perspectives, foreign views, and occasionally first-person accounts that contravene reports in the mainstream press."²⁴ Journalists' response to such new competition and commentary from outside the profession has been mixed:

in the United States news organizations responded to the challenge by questioning what non-news people have decided to call "news" ... and have noted that newspapers' versions of news is [sic] purer than the new versions because their news is edited and compiled according to various journalistic standards, such as impartiality. ... Such defensiveness reveals the extent to which online communication technologies—which

give all who own them the chance to be mass communicators—threaten traditional bastions of power.²⁵

Indeed, the attacks by professional journalists (and some journalism scholars) against user-driven news reporting and commentary through blogs are often in direct parallel to the arguments (against all evidence) for why open source software development cannot possibly produce outcomes that are on par with commercial products. But what open source software development has already demonstrated is that Eric Raymond's theorem "given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow" tends to hold remarkably well. In other words, given a sufficient number of participants in a quality control process, significant errors will be identified and corrected. The theorem can be applied to news-based blogging just as well—and indeed the intercast of blogs in the blogosphere on a specific news topic constitutes exactly the form of fact-checking and exploration of backgrounds and motives that traditionalists claim is impossible without journalists.

What open source and news blogging do take for granted is that participants will exercise their own common sense in engaging in the software or news production process, however—and this seems to point to a significant distinction from professional journalism, which on average tends to have a relatively low regard for the intelligence of its audiences. Indeed, as Rushkoff puts it somewhat polemically, "the true promise of a network-enhanced democracy lies not in some form of web-driven political marketing survey, but in restoring and encouraging broader participation in some of the internet's more interactive forums. ... The best evidence we have that something truly new is going on is our mainstream media's inability to understand it."²⁶

(In fairness, some of the more progressive news organizations have begun to see the benefits of catering for and engaging with news bloggers, though. For example, *The Guardian* newspaper and *BBC Online News* both run some blogs of their own and offer newsfeeds that bloggers can incorporate into their own sites, thereby making it easier for news bloggers to cite from and link to these sources.)

From Lecture to Conversation, from Users to Producers

As blogger and journalist Dan Gillmor puts it, then, "if contemporary American journalism is a lecture, what it is evolving into is something that incorporates a conversation and seminar. This is about decentralization."²⁷ By making the news more accessible, discursive, and interactive (and for active bloggers even intercreative, since they can now contribute rather than merely receive news), news-related blogging might in fact generate more public inter-

est in the news again, rather than making the public “tune out” as they are overwhelmed with a multiplicity of perspectives on the news.

Engagement with the news is, and should be, an inherently social activity—but for a long time now the necessities and limitations of print and broadcast media, and the standard institutional structures of mainstream news organizations, have restricted the social aspects of news engagement to the sidelines of the news process, focusing on information dissemination rather than on a public deliberation on news topics. The news engagement practiced in blogs and other collaborative news Websites, on the other hand, is closer to what Hartley describes as redactional journalism: for him, “reporting is the processing of existing discourse. But redactional journalism is not dedicated to the same ends as public-sphere journalism inherited from previous media; it doesn’t have the same agenda-setting function for public affairs and decision-making as does traditional editing by editors.”²⁸ Ultimately, then, if redactionary approaches multiply, it may be the case that “even as its representative democratic function is superseded, journalism itself massively expands.”²⁹

This suggests the possibility that we might “move away from the notion that journalism is a mysterious craft practiced by only a select priesthood—a black art inaccessible to the masses,” as Lasica writes.³⁰ Regardless of whether or not the term “journalism” is applied to the practice of news-related blogging, a strict dichotomy between blogs and journalistic publications is no longer feasible in this redactionary environment. Surely not every blogger is a journalist, all of the time, but (also thinking back to Lasica’s description of news-related blog entries as “random acts of journalism”) many bloggers provide journalistic commentary on occasion—and this means that they step out of the news audience and into the community of news publishers.

Rushkoff similarly notes that “deconstruction of content, demystification of technology and finally do-it-yourself or participatory authorship are the three steps through which a programmed populace returns to autonomous thinking, action and collective self-determination.”³¹ In becoming active news publishers, commentators, and discussants, then, bloggers turn from users of the news to what we described in the introduction to this collection as “producers”—a hybrid of producer and user.³² If Rushkoff is right, their deliberative engagement as producers of the news looks set to have effects well beyond the realm of news in its narrow definition, however. While news is the lifeblood of democracy, a side-effect of the strong dichotomies between producers and audiences for news has been to turn citizens into passive audiences for, rather than active participants in, democracy, able merely to switch channels every few years by voting in elections. If they are now becoming engaged producers of the news, there is also a good chance for this change to affect their overall place in the democratic process. They could once again become active participants, users and producers or, in short, *producers* of democracy as well.

NOTES

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