



Weblog Journalism: Between Infiltration and Integration

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There has been a great deal of buzz recently about the potential for Weblogs (blogs) to revolutionize journalism, to make it more democratic, and to help demystify the craft by exposing the wizard behind the curtain of the media establishment. These claims, however, are only partially correct and are derived more from speculation based on the potential of the medium rather than from actual results. We need to move beyond the utopian claims and wishful thinking if we are to understand the impact that Weblogs have already had and will continue to have on journalism. Weblogs have begun to augment traditional journalistic practices, providing the seeds for an incremental, rather than radical, change in how the media reports and disseminates news. News-oriented blogs have created a **real-time virtual feedback loop** that disrupts the temporality of the traditional news cycle. Furthermore, they are helping to usher in a new form of hybrid journalism that merges traditional newsroom practices with the decentralized intelligence of individuals and groups spread across the Internet. The Weblog "revolution" is more a prolonged infiltration than a sudden overthrow.

Weblogs have not, and will not, eliminate or replace established media outlets; rather, they will be integrated into the ever-evolving palate of complementary media available to journalists and to the public. Over the last two centuries, new communications technologies, from the telegraph to the Internet, have revolutionized the way in which news and opinion had previously been collected and distributed by offering technological advantages over previous methods and platforms. Rather than eliminate previous media, as often predicted, these communications technologies have been integrated into the existing media landscape, providing for a diversification of outlets and journalistic practices (Winston, 1998). Proof positive: Printed words on paper, as a broadsheet, tabloid, magazine, newsletter, or pamphlet, remain a vital component of our robust press. While it is undeniable that new communication technologies have had profound and often disruptive effects upon entrenched journalistic practices, they have primarily enhanced the speed, accuracy, and geographic scope of reporting, or they have augmented the dissemination and reception of news and opinion. It is reasonable to predict that Weblogs will follow the pattern of prior communication technologies and initially disrupt entrenched journalistic practices yet, over time, become integrated components of the mainstream media landscape.

One "blog effect" that may permanently alter the field of journalism is the creation of a real-time virtual feedback loop that breaks down traditional barriers between journalists and the public, and provides for a greater measure of press accountability. Weblogs have the potential to tangibly affect established, mainstream media organizations by challenging the primacy and validity of articles and opinions almost instantly. Weblogs have been described as do-it-yourself journalism, Web sites through which an amateur pundit with an Internet connection and a little technical know-how can enter the wider public of voices on the Internet. Blog authors can respond in real time to news events, articles, and opinions, acting at once as sites to contest the meaning of texts, as well as challenge the veracity and integrity of news and opinion writing. The Internet, as a many-to-many media model, allows for any article, link, and commentary to be published on a Weblog to an infinite public of interconnected users who may examine the text in question and instantly respond with collaborative evidence and links or, conversely, refute the claims made therein by posting conflicting data and criticism. The temporality of the existing "Letter to the Editor" mechanism for public response to media texts is superseded by the creation of a real-time virtual feedback loop, and the nondiscriminatory nature of most (there are private and friends-only sites) Weblogs allows respondents to forgo the intermediary step of

editorial-staff review before publication of criticism. The reflexivity of Weblogs also opens the respondent to the feedback and criticism of other users, allowing every claim to be examined and vetted, leading in turn to increased openness and transparency of dialogue.

The broad claim that Weblogs will “democratize” journalism stems in large part from the notion that the media is not democratic or, at least, not democratic enough. This criticism applies not only to countries that officially control or suppress their media but also to nations with an ostensibly “free” press. The centrality of a free press to democracy has been discussed at great length by Jürgen Habermas (1989) in his analysis of the public sphere. According to Habermas, the public sphere is “a specifically political space distinct from the state and the economy, an institutionally bounded discursive arena that is home to citizen debate, deliberation, agreement, and action.” In other words, it is a venue for individuals to express their interests and opinions, generate discourse about them, and potentially develop a course of collective action to further those expressed interests. In this model, mass media acts as the mechanism that informs the citizen’s worldview as a venue for sustained debate, deliberation, and criticism, and serves as a channel through which citizens express their interests to their leaders (see Dahlgren, 1991). While Habermas has been criticized for the limitations of a model based upon the exclusionary bourgeois publics of Western Europe, those who have sought to update his model (Fraser, 1992; Benhabib, 1992) have continued to focus on the democratic/revolutionary potential of a diversity of voices articulating interest in the public sphere. Any medium that possibly enhances access to the wider public carries with it democratic potential.

Nevertheless, there is the perception that mass media is in crisis and needs an invigorating shot of democracy to remedy what ails it (see Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991; McNair, 2000). There are several avenues of thought on this topic. The first is that increasing vertical and horizontal integration of media markets in the West, and particularly the United States, is detrimental to the diversity of opinions reported to and presented to the public, as multiple channels fall under the control and ownership of an individual, a family or a single corporate entity (Habermas, 1989; McChesney, 2000). A second line of criticism central to the discussion of Weblogs stems from the lack of transparency of media organizations and from the unidirectional flow of information from reporter to recipient. The perceived lack of transparency, coupled with the criticism of media integration, leads to the charge that news and opinions are shaped or even manufactured as **infotainment** before being disseminated to the wider public.

Can Weblogs address the perception that news and opinions are products of the media industry rather than objective statements of fact or independent opinion? The answer is yes. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, in *The Consciousness Industry* (1974, p. 104), writes that:

“There is no such thing as unmanipulated writing, filming, or broadcasting. The question is not whether the media are manipulated, but who manipulates them. A revolutionary plan should not require manipulators to disappear; on the contrary, it must make everyone a manipulator.”

The revolutionary plan that Enzensberger traces above does not advocate a direct overthrow of existing media practices; rather, it promotes infiltration of the media hierarchy by the broadest public possible to remedy the manipulation of the media. Blogs allow each user to act as a manipulator of information, enabling the user to construct an individual interpretation of information, and channel that interpretation back into the discursive space of cyberspace, where it can circulate indefinitely without further maintenance from its creator. Weblog publishing allows authors to engage the wider public of cyberspace through the circulation of texts and by providing a platform for sustainable discourse outside of the control functions of traditional media. The circumvention of journalism’s traditional control mechanisms allows for greater control over content and for direct and immediate contact with other users.

This has led to the inevitable characterization of Weblogs as the “next big thing” on the Internet, following personal Web pages and online communities as the standard-bearer for the utopian aim that cyberspace will lead to a democratization of information. While the hype that surrounds a new mode of communication can quickly outstrip the potential of a medium and lead to disappointment, Weblogs do present an interesting model for reevaluating the role of the individual in relationship to the media industry. Potential, however, does not a revolution make. Statistics compiled by David Wehlan for the Jul./Aug. 2003 edition of *American Demographics* indicate that only 17 percent of U.S. adults are aware of blogs, 5 percent have created or read a Weblog, and only 1 percent describe themselves as dedicated blog readers. These statistics indicate that any effect that Weblogs have at the moment are the product of the true early adopters (see Rogers 1995), rather than of a broad democratic movement. Nevertheless, the possibilities for democratization are evident.

The potential of the Weblog is situated in its very construction as an interactive medium, and the intertextuality of the discourse that it supports. The fact that Weblogs are maintained by individuals that can exist outside of the hierarchical structures of traditional media organizations allows, at the very least, the potential for a diversification of the voices engaged in public discourse. Weblogs can serve to fill the gaps in public discourse that are not addressed or are underrepresented by traditional journalism. An August 2002 *Irish Times* article on the connection between blogging and journalism explains this phenomenon:

Bloggers are often specialists and deeply knowledgeable about their areas of interest. They can delve more deeply into the detail; they have the endless room of a webpage in which to do this. They can link to other sites of relevance. In many cases they top up a reader's half-filled glass by supplying what a reader didn't get from a mainstream journalist's story.

Weblogs have the potential for opening discursive space to the collective breadth of a text's public. The value added is that Weblogs alter the *life-world* of texts by at making them immediately accessible to an indefinite public. They provide a virtual space for interactive discourse to flow around a text and, by exposing a text to the breadth of knowledge and opinions of the public, they create new meaning through the intertextuality of that discourse (for a longer discussion of the relationship between texts and publics, see Warner, 2002).

Blogs enhance the meaning of previously written texts, allowing for their reevaluation and contextualization in real time, through the application of independent scrutiny. In a *New York Times* article titled “At Large in the Blogsphere,” Judith Shulevitz writes, “Blogs provide a counterweight to the increasing unreality of mass journalistic culture—its quality of having been processed beyond the realm of the recognizable, its frequent tone of unearned authority.” This is echoed later in the article by David Weinberger, author of the Internet-culture tome *Small Pieces Loosely Joined*, who notes that, through blogging, “We get to kick in the teeth of the idealized—and constricted—set of behaviors known as professionalism.” While the merits of a metaphorical tearing down of the walls of institutional journalism may seem apparent for individual authors, especially those outside the professional media, the effect that Weblogs have on institutional journalism is not instantly ascertainable.

However, the potential exists. Andrew Sullivan, a senior editor of *The New Republic* magazine and well-known blogger (www.AndrewSullivan.com), sees an enormous transformative potential in Weblogs. In a dialogue published in Microsoft's online magazine, *Slate.com* (<http://slate.msn.com/id/2070360/entry/2070363/>), with Kurt Andersen, author of *Turn of the Century* and host of the public radio program *Studio 360*, Sullivan writes, “In an age of PR and marketing and media conglomerates, the blog stands apart, unvarnished, raw, unmediated.” He goes on to state, “It's democratic in the best sense of the word. It helps expose the wizard behind the media curtain.” For Sullivan, the transformative quality of Weblog communication lies in the transparency of discourse supported online. Beyond merely demystifying the role of the

journalist in the eyes of the average cybercitizen, Sullivan feels that Weblogs have the potential for revolutionary effects on the field of journalism. As more lesser-known (and, potentially, anonymous) individuals begin to utilize Weblogs as mechanisms for self-publishing to an increasingly wider audience, the exclusionary rituals journalism will fade from importance. Sullivan writes:

The real power will be unleashed by unknown writers finding a way to get their work in front of readers more easily than ever before. The whole process of interning, or begging for work at local papers, sucking up to agents and editors, and so on can now be supplemented by real self-publishing.

Sullivan's optimistic outlook mirrors the infiltration of media organizations advocated by Enzensberger. While this sounds promising coming from someone straddling both the traditional and non-traditional media world, it is also reminiscent of the profuse utopian claims made in the early 1990s about Internet technology that have yet to play out as expected. There is little doubt that blogs have democratic potential; however, they have yet to reach the critical mass necessary in order to be truly revolutionary. They hardly pose an immediate threat to institutional journalism. More realistic is a convergence between the blogosphere and mainstream media, which is already beginning to take place as bloggers sign contracts with media outfits, as media outlets publish blogs on their official Web sites, and as employed journalists privately publish Weblogs on their own time. A number of journalists maintain Weblogs, and several prominent bloggers have moved on to run Weblogs for mainstream organizations (e.g., Mickey Kaus, who operates a Weblog for the Microsoft-run *Slate.com*). Andersen sees a great deal of potential in this crossover and believes that the synergies created between the transparent and participatory world of Weblogs and the capital and resources of the media giants could be the missing ingredient in the revolutionary recipe. He writes in *Slate*:

If more bloggers start being paid by rich institutions ... then maybe we can start getting some real reportorial fiber into the very, very starchy blog diet. Which could be the beginning of a glorious Third Generation of journalistic blogs with impact and influence that would no longer be in question.

The potential upside to Andersen's convergence model is a cozy marriage between the clout and cash of the mainstream media with the democratizing power of Weblog journalism. However, Andersen's proposition focuses solely on the positive effects of well-funded journalistic blogs but fails to recognize the obvious potential for conflicts of interest, as Web-based discourse steers away from the editorial control of the parent organization. In his exchange with Andersen, Sullivan notes that bloggers have been successful in:

Forc[ing] the [*New York Times*] to correct itself many times over now, which can only help improve journalism. But will bloggers actually deeply undermine editorial and corporate power in the media? So far I think the answer is no. Blogs aren't replacing mainstream media; they're infiltrating, supplementing, and buttressing it.

This quote captures the inherent tension, and mutual benefits, of any mainstream media/Weblog relationship. Weblogs thrive off of a steady diet of journalistic texts and are able to function as a virtual real-time feedback loop and fact-checking service; however, the ability to perform these functions is rooted in the autonomous nature of individual Weblogs.

Convergence could set up a scenario in which cross-postings to a media-run Weblog could compel the Weblog to engage in a debate about the merits of texts generated elsewhere inside the same media organization. By being forced to confront the work of a colleague, the Weblog

author would run the risk of running afoul of the same editorial board that monitors his/her work or, perhaps, would feel undue pressure to defend the text out of professional loyalty. In effect, an increased coupling of Weblogs with media organizations could potentially undermine the objectivity and autonomy of the Weblog author. The dangers of convergence are exemplified by the case of Steve Olafson, a seven-year *Houston Chronicle* veteran, fired from his position because his editors felt that his personal Weblog, run under a pseudonym, compromised his ability to do his job as a reporter by poking fun of some of the politicians that he covered (see Olafson, 2003). Additionally, the example of two U.S. journalists, CNN correspondent Kevin Sites and Time freelancer Joshua Kucera, reporting from Iraq during the Second Gulf War being pressured by their parent organizations to shut down their weblogs underscores the tensions that exist between intuitional journalism and independent blogging (Cyberjournalism.net 03/22 and 04/17/2003). On his Weblog *The Other Side* Kucera writes, "My editors have demanded that I stop posting to this site until the war ends. And they pay the bills, so what can I do?" If convergence between media organs and prominent bloggers becomes institutionalized, then Weblogs will increasingly be subject to the same institutional policies and controls under which traditional journalists operate, diminishing the democratic potential and transparency of weblog journalism.

The potential for a media organization to encounter legal trouble also increases, as their editorial boards take on the responsibility of content posted to any blog associated with the publication. According to University of Minnesota professor of media ethics and law Jane E. Kirtley, quoted in a September 23, 2002, *New York Times* article about Weblogs, "You start getting into the question of, is this part of the paper or not? If I'm a lawyer advising a news organization, the idea of a Web log like this would just make me break out in hives." Convergence brings with it the very serious risk of comprising the autonomy of the Weblog, as well as tremendous legal risks for the host organization.

In all likelihood, Weblogs will be incorporated into most major media organizations in some capacity if their popularity remains sufficiently high and user figures increase. However, a true blog revolution remains a future phenomenon at best. For the foreseeable future, Weblogs seem well positioned to continue to do what they do best: to allow a forum for open and autonomous debate about media texts in the discursive space that they provide and to function as a real-time virtual feedback loop fostering an interactive debate about the veracity of media texts. An additional benefit of the increasing presence of journalism blogs is the creation of online resources for the support and maintenance of a vibrant Weblog journalism community. CyberJournalist.net, run by the Media Center at the American Press Institute, and Poynter.Org, which claims to represent "Everything you need to be a better journalist," are excellent examples of Websites that enhance the health and vitality of independent and transparent Weblog journalism. Yet the positive potential of Weblogs is coupled with troubling potential side-effects. The current state of Weblog journalism is paradoxical at best, a relationship eloquently summarized in an *Information Advisor* report titled "Are Weblogs a Legitimate Business Research Source?" It states:

The rapidity in which a new story or report can be transmitted also increases the chances that misinterpretations, errors, and outright hoaxes can be spread. One check on this problem of misinformation is that there is also an equally quick self-correcting mechanism on the Internet, whereby those who detect the error send out a correction or raise a red flag just as quickly.

The democratic Weblog revolution in its infancy is fraught with contradictions, yet it shows signs that steady infiltration and integration will produce lasting changes to the norms of journalistic practice.

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