



## **Culture Clash: Journalism and the Communal Ethos of the Blogosphere**

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In taking the costs of publishing to their near vanishing point, blogging represents one of the most democratic media or media formats in history. As such, traditional print journalism's natural response has been to embrace the form, encourage it, proliferate it, and to use blogs to fulfill journalism's mission of informing an electorate and, therefore, bettering democracy. Not quite. Traditional media have in fact been slow to adopt weblogs. In a few celebrated cases big media companies have quashed them (Falcone, 2003; Hammersley, 2002; Palser, 2002; Seipp, 2002).<sup>[1]</sup> Rogers (1995), among others, suggests that the dominant value of those unwilling to accept new ideas even after they have become widely used is tradition. Blogs are perceived by some segments of traditional journalism as a threat in part because the format lacks many of the qualities that have traditionally defined journalism. Only in the last year have papers like the Chicago Tribune, Sacramento Bee, San Jose Mercury News, Christian Science Monitor, Wall Street Journal and Dallas Morning News begun experimenting with the form.<sup>[2]</sup> They should. Newspaper readers are aging and dying off. Their children and grandchildren, Generation Y's 16- to 24-year-olds who spend \$200 billion annually, want to interact with the news, not merely to passively receive it (Pohlig, 2003). Generation Y sees news coverage more as a discussion and less a lecture, an analogy for the tradition in print news.

To better understand old media's resistance and to argue for blogging as a viable new media form on which old media can capitalize, this article uses a framework based on Aristotle's (trans. 1991) rhetorical concept of ethos expanded to encompass collective acts and applied to the blogs as websites conceptualized in spatial terms, as gathering places, rather than as documents merely to be read (Halloran, 1982).<sup>[3]</sup> Print newspapers and websites and blogs communicate an ethos that "conveys the sorts of values [the organizations or individuals] hold in common with the Web navigators they wish to attract to the site," wrote Kevin Hunt (1996, p. 519). Expanding on Hunt's work and providing a historical description of the emergence of computers and the Internet as a large new system of communication, Rogers and Malhotra (2000) focused on the Internet's capacities for fostering dialogue, debate, and the sharing of information, embodying an ethos based on interaction and reciprocity. Traditional print media organizations, even those with significant Web presences, have too often applied on the Web their print-product-based ethos of conveying credibility and establishing trust without acknowledging or, in Rogers' terms, perceiving the unique faculties of Internet communication as Rogers and Malhotra have described them. As media converge online, combining letters, sound, and both still and moving images in a single site, this article argues for a convergence of value sets used to define and create ethos by mainstream news organizations and by websites, specifically blogs. It is suggested here that old media can better adapt and survive, even thrive, by opportunistically and selectively combining the schemas for ethos in and for traditional print media with those embodied by news and information blogs.

A traditional print media organization's ethos typically is based on values such as accuracy, fairness, timeliness, precision, clarity, and comprehensiveness (Russial, 2004, pp. 4-8; Fedler, 2001, pp. 537-562). To establish this ethos, large metropolitan dailies employ shifts of reporters, fact-checkers, copy editors, wire editors, section editors, page editors, page designers, photo editors, and photo technicians. Traditional print journalism relies on graduates from venerable secondary schools such as the University of Missouri Columbia School of Journalism and requires that its journalists swear allegiance to the Society of Professional Journalists (1996) Code of Ethics. Newsrooms filter, edit, fact-check, and re-check. They vet copy to ensure accuracy,

fairness, precision, and balance, or as much of each as deadline pressures and human foibles allow. These newspapers strive for credibility among readers by ensuring that coverage has these values, a goal Jayson Blair at The New York Times, Jack Kelley at USA Today, and Stephen Glass at The New Republic magazine have through their malfeasance and fiction made all the more difficult to fulfill. This news-making superstructure contrasts with the lonely blogger, a single node in a vast heterarchy. One Washington D.C., blogger's description, though not entirely representative, signals a very different ethos embodied in the blogosphere, one that communicates or signifies a different value set that many bloggers share with their readers: "Good blogs are authentic, credible, very human, candid and personal in the sense that it's usually one voice. A blog doesn't have to be clever, but it does have to be useful" (D. Weil, as cited in McCarthy, 2003). The emerging stereotype of bloggers has mostly amateur writers using easy-to-use software and committing "random acts of journalism."<sup>10</sup> Messages for mass audiences are eschewed in favor of microcontent that targets a small, like-minded, dedicated audience. Microcontent producers include bloggers such as Josh Micah Marshall, who focuses on inside-the-beltway politics; Jim Romenesko, who discusses the news media; and Larry Lessig, who posts on intellectual property issues.

The variance in ethos can be explained in part by the impulses in the different media, some of them technologically determined. In traditional print journalism, the imperative is to filter, then to publish. The filtering is possible because of a daily printing cycle and large editorial and production staffs. With large, capital-intensive printing presses and a prohibitively expensive distribution system, newspapers in fact require large staffs. Organized hierarchically, these staffs funnel the information out from a center. For bloggers, the imperative is to publish, then to filter, or to be as concerned with unmaking and testing public opinion as forming it. The ethos for news and information blogs, then, is based more on values such as immediacy, transparency, interconnectivity, and proximity to the events. As a heterarchy, diverse bloggers post, cross-link, blogroll, and trackback to interact in a network, pulling ideas and knowledge from the edges. This networkedness and resulting proximity to news are among the reasons U.S. intelligence and law enforcement officials are tracking blogs and why China is looking for ways to block blogs (Tsuruoka, 2004).

Despite these profound philosophical and logistical differences and in part because of them, the weblog form has the attention of media elites, both those that have explored and co-opted blogs and those that have not. Big media took notice when, for example, bloggers offered important context and individual, personal reactions to the events of September 11, 2001, and to the Iraq war. Big media noted how blogs significantly contributed to the ousters of Trent Lott, former Senate majority leader, and, in the wake of Jayson Blair's admitted falsifications and plagiarisms, The New York Times executive editor Howell Raines.<sup>11</sup> As one media watcher put it in September 2003, "Never before have so many passionate outsiders—hundreds of thousands, at minimum—stormed the ramparts of professional journalism" (Welch, 2003). The pundit's terms—"outsiders", "the ramparts of professional journalism"—and these terms' dichotomous presentation point to divergent bases for credibility of many bloggers on the one hand and professional print journalists on the other.

Blogging's consideration by traditional media will require acceptance of and adaptation to what Hunt called the communal ethos of websites. In fact, the blog is but one digital medium or form in an evolving media ecosystem that increasingly enables and rewards participation by individuals, making traditional news media's cognitive recognition of this communal ethos all the more important. By negotiating reputation and creating and exchanging social capital, individuals who blog, like those who use other forms of personal publishing, encourage and reward participation. The ethos of personal publishing, then, is based on values such as inclusiveness and community, participation and deliberation, free and unfiltered expression. Blogs, thumb tribes, smart mobs, trust matrices, and social networks, among many other digital media and online environments, all are organisms in this emergent, thoroughly networked, Internet-based ecosystem (see Lasica, 2003). Because it is communal and heterarchical, this ecosystem is pitted

in philosophical and strategic opposition to traditional media. That is unfortunate. As a few case studies show, there is room in old media's tent for the ethos communicated and valued by these emergent media.

Mainstream news media's resistance has prevented segments of journalism and journalism education from exploring and, therefore, reaping what could be at least part of the solution to long-term economic problems associated with an aging, dwindling readership, problems that threaten the vitality, if not the survival, of daily newspapers.<sup>[vii]</sup> Chiefly blogging attracts a demographic that is young—really young. Approximately 90 percent of bloggers are between the ages of 13 and 29, and 51% are 13 to 19 years old, according to a Perseus survey (as cited in Nussbaum, 2004). Daily newspapers' aging readership presents them with the classic media industry quandary: too much change and they risk losing their identity; too little and that identity might not be worth saving. One British journalist has already declared, however prematurely, that "the newspaper is being usurped by the blog" (Hammersley 2002).<sup>[viii]</sup>

The perceptions that blogging is a reaction to and an improvement upon newspapers should not surprise since these perceptions are common also in politics, networked computing, and even American church life. Prominent blogger and Stanford law professor Larry Lessig wrote that the 2004 campaign "will include one word that has never appeared in any presidential history: blog"(Lessig, 2003). Deliberative democracy took hold in 2004's Democratic primary race, particularly in the ill-fated campaign of Howard Dean. The Vermont governor's networked, heterarchical campaign and fundraising operations offered a sharp contrast to the top-down, centralized campaign of President George W. Bush. The Dean primary campaign, which could be looked to as an analogy for the challenge facing news media, embraced blogs as a medium through which to build community and to engage voters, transforming them from mere receptors into doers. The campaign did this by ceding control to the network (Wolf, 2004). While the strategy failed politically, the residue of Dean's campaign includes notions of digital democracy that are changing the ways campaigns are run. John Kerry, John Edwards, Wesley Clark, and George Bush all launched blogs in response to the Dean campaign's success at using the form to activate voters and donors, to unseize ideas and money. Technology blogger and co-author of *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, Doc Searls, compared the Dean campaign and its exploitation of blogging and networked activism to the Wright brothers' first airplane—not quite the success its architects had hoped for, but important nonetheless (Menn, 2004; see also McCarthy 2004).

Searls' comment focuses attention on the connection between online communication and real-world action, a linkage newspapers have long sought to make. Few other media forms in history has created so much feedback and interactivity with their audiences. According to the Pew Internet Life Project, 30 percent of blog readers report commenting on or otherwise responding to posts they have read (as cited in Dube, 2004). Imagine one-third of a print newspaper's readers responding to or otherwise acting on articles they have read. Two of Dean's first campaign activists, retirees Bill and Suzanne Travers of Atlanta, told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution that they had never before worked for a political candidate before joining Dean's Iowa army of 3,500 for that state's primary. Travers said he "would never have gotten this involved if not for the Internet" (Williams, 2004). He said he spent hours reading blogs posted by other Dean supporters before determining to attend an organizational meeting in Atlanta facilitated by Meetup.com. Reflecting on his Dean campaign experience, Travers said, "What appeals to us is that this campaign is made up of average people, not corporate types. I've been going to the website every day, and they make you feel a part of it" [author's emphasis]. The Dean campaign embodied at least in terms of communication and communal ethos what contemporary journalism does not, so perhaps it should not surprise that, as Chris Lyndon(2004) argued in Neiman Reports, traditional media seemingly worked to undermine Dean, missed the point, or found some personal excuse not to notice the Dean movement.

In networked computing, the growth of KaZaA and its spawn of file-sharing software is well-chronicled. These peer-to-peer programs and the center-less networks they enable have radically

undermined the centralized, top-down distribution model the Recording Industry Association of American (RIAA) and Hollywood film distributors are desperately fighting to protect. Underlining the challenges the RIAA and movie studios face, which are as much cultural as legal, approximately 72 percent of Americans ages 18 to 29 who traffic online say they do not care if their downloads are copyrighted (Madden & Rainie, 2003).

Even American churches are seeing movement away from centralized, top-down organizational structures. Younger worshipers are expressing preference for more egalitarian, community-based worship experiences. Called "emerging" or "postmodern" churches because they do not claim a formal attachment to a church or denomination, these new, mostly evangelical Christian congregations are linked by Internet sites, blogs, and conferences, translating online communication into face-to-face interaction and real-world action. These emergent churches are seen, according to Leland (2004), as "a reaction to the highly polished services at megachurches." In much the same way it is argued here that many blogs are reactions to highly polished, big media journalism and its excesses.

As in the realms of computing, politics, and religious ritual, the rapid adoption of a new networked, communal ethos has sparked healthy debate. Blogging has renewed questions about how egalitarian journalism is or should be or, in the terms of the discussion here, about how creating ethos in traditional journalism should be re-thought and what concessions perhaps should be made by old media to appeal to the younger demographic trafficking online.<sup>[viii]</sup> This debate typically centers on questions of what happens to journalism when every reader can potentially become a writer or editor or producer and whether bloggers, since they are writing and publishing without editors or filters, can be considered journalists. But to argue whether a blogger is or is not a journalist is to risk missing the point, forcing a binary choice and focusing on labels and titles rather than what readers want, what journalism should be about, and how it should go about accomplishing its mission. Blogging and journalism do not have to be dichotomous; the two divergent schemas for understanding ethos do not have to be mutually exclusive, particularly in a convergent media environment where, ironically, most news websites, including those by broadcast news media, are presented using the rhetoric and metaphor of print newspapers. The Old Gray Lady does not have to leave its century-plus record of credibility with readers just to blog with the Boomers' kids. But the ethos the Times has established in print must be re-conceptualized to allow, even encourage the values of the communal ethos sought after and rewarded online.

Many old guard newspapers recognize that the choice is not dichotomous and are experimenting with blogging. Papers such as the *Virginian-Pilot*, the *Dallas Morning News*, and the *Seattle Pilot-Intelligencer* have added innovative blogs to their repertoires of increasingly convergent media, benefiting from the new form and from the almost entirely new or previously unreached readers the form is attracting. They are doing this without sacrificing their print vehicles and by consciously re-thinking their priorities in communicating online. In each of these cases, the blogs have added human, interactive, and personal dimensions to the newspapers' online presences, bringing to each organization values that have a demonstrated appeal to Generation Y readers, readers who are increasingly unlikely to buy the print version of any of these newspapers. How to translate these new readerships into revenue is another question, one that is beyond the scope of this examination, but it is a safe prediction that advertisers will continue to follow readers. Traditional media have the advantage of bringing with them online the established advertising base they built with their print models.

The *Virginian-Pilot* saw the sniper trial of John Allen Muhammad as an opportunity to use blogging in its hard news coverage. The Norfolk paper's online news coordinator, Kerry Sipe, reported live from the court complex by posting minute-by-minute updates throughout the trial.<sup>[ix]</sup> Since by order of the judge there was no TV or radio coverage from inside the courtroom, Sipe considered near-real-time blog posts as the next best way to meet what was intense reader interest in the trial. The blog's successes are stunning. During the 28-day trial, Sipe said he received approximately 3,500 emails in response to his 610 posts from the court (personal

communication, March 14, 2004). He learned from these emails that many readers felt his blogging was more accurate than newspaper, TV, or radio coverage of the trial since editors had not been given the opportunity to filter, obfuscate, and compromise the copy. This transparency and proximity to the news event are important cues for traditional print media, which sacrifices transparency and proximity to achieve the ethos of the professional, polished print product. Sipe's blog attracted several hundred thousand viewers each day, most of whom did not subscribe to the Pilot. Through email and with his blog, Sipe said he established personal relationships with friends and family of the participants in the trial. Sipe described enjoying and participating in a "strong community for the period of the trials." Interestingly, single-copy sales of the Pilot increased during the trial, suggesting that the paper can have its cake online and eat it, too.<sup>[xi]</sup>

To launch the blog, Sipe, a 50-something, long-time veteran of newspapering, needed to convince the Pilot's "old-timers" that blogging the trial was the right thing for a respectable newspaper to do. The old-timers at first dug in their heels, but, after seeing the immediate and growing reader interest, the resistance "dissolved," Sipe said. The urgency, detail, and immediacy were valued more by the blog's readers than the correct spelling of witnesses' names. In fact, when Sipe spelled names phonetically, which he often did because of the circumstances of the trial, he received emails from relatives of the witnesses providing correct spellings and background. Corrections were posted within minutes, providing another example of information moving to the center from the edges of a large, interconnected, emergent community. This heterarchy inverted the Pilot's center-out, command economy used to put out the daily newspaper and online readers responded.

As collaborative, open source journalism, Sipe's blog allowed readers to connect with the event, to see him as a human being rather than as merely a byline, and to do so in an interactive or two-way context. Newspapers, particularly smaller dailies, like to consider themselves as community newspapers. Online, however, community is difficult to define much less achieve. The term is used by newspapers to describe online classified ads, un-moderated discussion boards, and online bulletin boards, among other mostly automated sections of online news sites. Blogging's cross-linking, referrals, trackbacks, and blogrolls facilitate interaction that at least begins to offer what social-capital-based definitions of community describe. These format-specific features contribute at least to a sense or perception of community and common purpose, or communal ethos, one more concerned with "finding and creating connections to those sharing common interests" (Hunt, 1996, p. 521).

The capacity to foster this communal ethos is what attracted the Seattle Post-Intelligencer and its Microsoft beat reporter Todd Bishop to blogging, which Bishop uses "to enhance and extend the newspaper's regular coverage of Microsoft," according to his blog's introduction.<sup>[xii]</sup> The communal ethos has been created by the people Bishop has "met," people he says he would not have known without the blog. More salient to mainstream news organizations perhaps is the fact that Bishop has been able to more quickly benefit from ideas and opinions bubbling up in this networked community of Microsoft employees and Microsoft watchers, a community that is engaged with the subject.<sup>[xiii]</sup> He says his reporting has improved. Like Sipe, Bishop says with the blog he gets near-instant and abundant feedback that can and does check his interpretations, a benefit that would seem consistent with the ethos of the Post-Intelligencer's print edition.

Blogging does not come without risk, however. As Sipe recognized, because a blogger's writing typically is not filtered or edited, a blogger cannot say as reporters historically have claimed in response to error, "The copy desk must have made a mistake." A news article at The New York Times is touched by an average of 42 people. Blogs are not touched at all. The danger was spotlighted at The New Republic in late 2003. A senior editor at the magazine, Gregg Easterbrook, used his unedited blog to criticize filmmakers, calling Disney chief executive Michael Eisner and Miramax CEO Harvey Weinstein "Jewish executives" who "worship money above all else" (Heyboer & Kelly, 2003/2004). When apologizing for the remarks, Easterbrook wrote in his



blog: "Maybe this is an object lesson in the new blog reality. I worked on this alone and posted the piece . . . Twenty minutes after I pressed 'send,' the entire world had read it. When I re-read my own words and beheld how I'd written things that could be misunderstood, I felt awful" (2003). Easterbrook's faux pas epitomizes what media pundits warn about when it is suggested that mainstream media adopt the blog format. There is, they argue, a danger inherent in the medium. Given this danger, the question becomes whether this most unmediated type of reporting, which Sipe showed can make for the most compelling reading, is worth the risk.<sup>[xiii]</sup>

There is a bet between The New York Times' executive in charge of digital media, Martin Nisenholtz, and prominent blogger David Winer about whether in 2007 blogs will rank higher than Times articles in Google news searches.<sup>[xiv]</sup> It is a classic old media-versus-new media contest and a competition that fails to recognize that perhaps 2007 should see blogs by Times writers as among the most highly ranked news sources by Google. If mainstream media organizations like the Times can cede enough control and seek credibility based on the communal ethos of the blogosphere, this third outcome might be in the best interests of both traditional print journalism and blogging journalists and their readers.

## Notes

[i] Perhaps the best known of the canceled blogs is that of free-lance journalist Kevin Sites, who worked primarily for CNN during the Iraq war. CNN asked Sites to suspend his blog, which he did in March 2003. The blog is available again at <http://www.kevinsites.net>. In 2002, *Houston Chronicle* reporter Steve Olafson was fired for blogging about subjects he reported on, posting on his own time under a pseudonym. *The Hartford Courant* reporter Denis Horgan, a veteran of 22 years with the paper, had his independent blog shut down by *Courant* management in spring 2003.

[ii] In noting that it was one of the first big media companies to start a blog, *The Guardian* in London celebrated its own enlightenment: "While many in traditional media have been either dismissive or - much worse - ignorant of the world of blogs, at Guardian Unlimited and within the pages of the Guardian we have embraced it from an early stage" (Waldman, 2002).

[iii] This framework was articulated by Hunt (1996). In this article, Hunt argues for a schema for thinking about the Web as spatially oriented rather than as document-oriented.

[iv] Blogging pioneer Blood (2003) identified four types of blogs: those written by journalists, those written by professionals about their industry, those written by individuals at the scene of a major event, and those that link primarily to news about current events.

[v] Josh Micah Marshall's blog is widely credited for exposing Lott's unreconstructed views on race and, therefore, for his ultimate dethroning as Senate majority leader. These posts are still available at Talking Points Memo. Many blogs were a part of the post-Jayson Blair discussion of the state of journalism in general and that of *The New York Times* specifically, a discussion and debate that ultimately cost Raines and managing editor, Gerald Boyd, their jobs. Raines condemned "the unsourced ranting of Internet bloggers" for "polluting the journalistic mainstream of the United States" (Smith, 2004) For examples of popular war blogs, see [www.blogsofwar.com](http://www.blogsofwar.com), [www.dailykos.com](http://www.dailykos.com), [http://www.dear\\_raed.blogspot.com](http://www.dear_raed.blogspot.com), [www.sgtstryker.com](http://www.sgtstryker.com), [www.lt-smash.us](http://www.lt-smash.us), <http://rooba.net/will>.

[vi] Newspaper readership has been in decline for three decades. Figures from the American Society of Newspaper Editors show that daily newspaper reading has steadily declined from 78 percent of adults in 1970 to 55 percent in 2003. Among 18- to 24-year-olds, only 41 percent read a daily paper. For more, see Stepp (2004).

[vii] Hammersley fails to recognize that many blogs are almost entirely derivative, depending on print news media for their own commentary.

[viii] How many blogs are there out there? There is no way to tell. Polling firm comScore Media Metrix, however, reported that Google's Blogspot.com received 3.38 million unique visitors in March 2004 (Atkin, 2004)

[ix] See Sipe's blog at <http://home.hamptonroads.com/guestbook/journal.cfm?id=53>.

[x] There is empirical evidence to suggest this, as well (Carroll, 2002).

[xi] See Bishop's blog at <http://blog.seattlepi.nwsource.com/microsoft/>.

[xii] For more on Bishop's reactions to his blogging experiences, see Pitts (n.d.).

[xiii] For another example of unmediated, unverified, but compelling reporting, see Salam Pax's blog on daily life in Baghdad during and following the war, available at [http://dear\\_raed.blogspot.com](http://dear_raed.blogspot.com). His identity has not been confirmed, however, further underlining the danger discussed.

[xiv] For much more on the bet, see <http://www.longbets.org/2>.

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