

Research Note:

**"From the Many, To the Many:
The Journalistic Promise of Blogs"**

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Abstract

A research note which discusses the recent emergence of the "blog" phenomenon, with particular attention to its historical analogs and its increasing influence and legitimacy as a journalistic form.

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It is quite possible that, when media historians look back from their vantage point in the not-too-distant future, 2004 will be known as "the Year of the Blog." An incautious statement, to be sure, but if it is within the realm of possibility -- and there is ample evidence already in hand to suggest that it is -- there might be a few questions which could profitably be posed today.

The first questions are fairly straightforward: What are we to make of this emerging phenomenon, these Weblogs, or, in contracted idiom, blogs? How important to journalism might blogs become? And as a subset of that, how are we to know whether it is to become important or not? What are the previous historic antecedents which might shed some light on the question?

As is often the case in any new technological development, a number of different constituencies have large stakes in the answers to those questions. The existing media, for example, need to look at the blog phenomenon because they may decide to resist it. Or they may decide to co-opt it. Perhaps the only thing we can be certain of is that they will not continue to ignore it.

Similarly, the subjects of journalism -- newsmakers, as we quaintly used to call them -- will have to come to terms with the blogs' appearance in America's journalistic firmament. It seems as though they are just beginning to appreciate the PR opportunity which blogs might represent, to recognize that new possibilities for spin and manipulation which may come into being that will take their place along side the more traditional forms. And, in addition, the larger public has a stake in what the future of blogs might prove to be, as do journalism educators, for reasons that I hope are obvious.

A useful starting point for our examination might be simply to ponder, in its simplest form, significance. There always is the possibility that we are engaged in a somewhat illusory study. Does anyone remember "video text" of the late 1970s and 1980s? Or to be even more dismissive about it, are we dealing with something akin to CB radio? Will it have its little moment in the sun and then go away?

The first software, called "Blogger," which made Weblogs possible was developed in 1999 by a company called Pyra Labs (since bought out by Google).¹ Five years later, it is estimated that there are now four million blogs in the United States.² Even with the accelerated pace of adoption which new technology can enjoy, anything that can, over the small span of five years, achieve this sort of penetration clearly is something to be reckoned with.

There is, of course, opposition. Critics have claimed that most blogs are "99.9 percent opinion."³ Thomas L. McPhail, an academic at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, was widely credited with labeling blogs "pretend journalism."⁴ Others, some very prominent practitioners, are on record with condemning characterizations such as "opinion-ridden free-for-all" and "information anarchy."⁵ But certainly the success of the blogs of the Democratic and Republican conventions last summer suggests that the form, while still emergent, may be a new journalistic force of some potential.

As an aside from the Democratic convention, it is interesting to note that an estimated 200 bloggers applied for press passes, but there was no precise record of the specific number of bloggers that were actually awarded press credentials. Some reports said 30; others claimed as many as 50. Evidently, blogging had not yet evolved to the point where its practitioners could be reliably so identified.⁶ Similarly, the Blogger count at the Republican convention was "about 15."⁷ At both events, there remained, in effect, an interesting quality of indeterminacy about the numbers -- a condition which, one suspects, we can certainly expect to be reified in the future.

It is also worth noting, again from the Democratic convention, the reported selection criteria for the bloggers who were given press passes. Credentials were reserved for bloggers who had demonstrated "originality, professionalism and popularity."⁸ It sounded, in retrospect, like a reasonable set of criteria, but one can not help but wonder how many members of the more established conventional press would measure up to such a yardstick to get their credentials.

There are a number of special characteristics which both define blog-based journalism and might help shape its future. The first attribute is a crucial one. As Adam Clayton Powell III of the University of Southern California has reported, it is "reader-gatherer participatory journalism."⁹ Or as New York University's Jay Rosen has observed: "One of the key elements is that the readers are becoming writers."¹⁰

The second characteristic, in the words of Nick Denton, proprietor of such popular sites as Gawker.com and Wonkette.com, is that "it is a fundamentally meritocratic medium."¹¹ The essential point is that blogs which can somehow find an audience tend to succeed. As a result, blogs not only provide jobs in the first instance, but also have become a source of new talent which the conventional media peruse to find eager, gifted, hardworking journalists of the future -- a fact which will probably mean a lot to our students very quickly. And, in truth, blogging is not only for the Millennial Generation. "I can't imagine a writer who started reading blogs," says Terry Teachout, drama critic for the *Wall Street Journal*, "not being tempted to try one himself."¹²

Similarly, blogs are a rich and expanding source of new ideas and approaches to journalism itself. Glenn Reynolds, a University of Tennessee law professor and owner of Instapundit.com, has observed that blogs are serving as the established media's "idea farm". Moreover, given the somewhat elite nature of its audience, the world of blogs can claim, as Jeff Jarvis, the head of Newhouse's online efforts has said, to "influence the

influencers."¹³ At the very least, it is already clear that some bloggers such as Jim Romenesko already serve a vital function as "news aggregators."¹⁴

It is also quite apparent that blogs, given their essential referential nature, have certainly played a part in the increasing speed of the news cycle.¹⁵ Similarly, a new accountability is emerging; the recent embarrassment of CBS's Dan Rather and his forged Air National Guard documents would not have come to light without what one observer termed "the baying of the bloggers."¹⁶ As NPR's Jeffrey A. Dvorkin reported, "Established media will no longer be able to ignore the fact-checking power of talented amateurs armed with popular Weblogs."¹⁷

When searching for the long-term possibilities, however, perhaps history has a few lessons. At the risk of seeming over-reliant on technological determinism, a glance backwards suggests both specific analog examples and past technological trends which blogs may, in some sense, be carrying forward.

At least two specific examples suggest themselves. The mid-19th century invention of the telegraph led to a more neutral, less partisan definition of news. Because the telegraph services were sending news dispatches to a wide variety of newspapers, they had to take a more centrist point of view. Similarly, in the mid-20th century, broadcasting, both television and radio, redefined news to reach a new mass audience, with a comparable sort of effect.¹⁸

The four technological developments of the last half of the 20th century clearly have had an influence on journalistic practices. One, the inexpensive offset presses were essential to the rise of the alternative weeklies. Two, targeted marketing, for both editorial and advertising purposes and made possible by the advent of computer databases, was behind the rise of special interest magazines. Three, cable technology clearly re-ordered television journalism. And four, more recently, the arrival of desktop publishing, underpinned the success of newsletters and 'zines.¹⁹

The common conceptual thread between all these four developments is often called "narrow-casting." In essence, all four can be characterized as providing specific information for specific audiences -- which, when all is said and done, may be a factor which plays a critical role in the success of many blogs. It can be argued, in effect, that they are continuing a well-established trend.

And so, to conclude, one might ask again: What are we to make of all this? What we know so far about blogs that is promising includes their growing influence and legitimacy and, perhaps more importantly, their meritocratic promise for our students. Both of these suggest that we should not only look closely, but become engaged ourselves.

Though still a work in progress, it is likely that blogs have a significant place in our journalistic future. As a historical process, the mass-market model of news has

continued to fractionate. And if, by virtue of blogs, it is at least partially supplanted by a medium characterized by both diversity and dialogue, I suspect that will be no bad thing.

ENDNOTES:

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