

The Impact of the Internet on Journalism:
An Examination of Blogging, Citizen Journalism,
and a Dot.Com Solution for the Online Edition

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A Personal Introduction

I arrived at the University of Texas in August of 2005 to earn a master's degree in journalism. Before moving to Austin I lived in Nashville, TN, where I worked for two years as the associate editor at a community newspaper and freelanced for various magazines around the city. For me, journalism was a craft of ink and paper. The reporting, writing, copy editing, and layout were all enjoyable but laborious tasks that lead to the creation of a physical publication. I sincerely loved that finished product, being able to hold it my hands and see my work in print.

My intention was to earn a graduate degree that would continue to move me down the linear path of print journalism. Though I was in charge of updating our paper's Web site, that duty consisted of simply posting our print stories, or breaking news that would be in print the next day. I never consider the various opportunities available to journalists online.

After three months in Austin, my view of journalism has expanded beyond measure. In addition to this Multimedia Journalism, I intern at Pluck, a technology firm focused on creating Web solution for publishers, and am a contributor and columnist at Austinist, a Gothamist LLC site by and for Austinites. Before, I would have never considered these opportunities as career advancements. Now I see them as vital experiences as I prepare to be a 21st century journalist.

This paper is intended to be a case study of the project I have been engaged with at Pluck and how it may impact and contribute to the growing field of online journalism.

Thesis Statement: Wiring Blogs into the Mainstream

Merriam Webster's Dictionary states the official definition for a journalist as "a person engaged in journalism, especially a writer or editor for a news medium; a writer who aims at a mass audience." Such a simple explanation leaves out the creative nuances, social responsibilities, and cultural symbolism of journalism. Yet when it is applied to the masses of online writers that do contribute to the immense and ever-changing body of news, it does provide an interesting perspective on the situation. Not every blogger is a journalist, and the majority who engage in personal journaling and social networking do not pretend to be. But seriously writing on news, current events,

and culture for public consumption does move certain bloggers into the realm of journalism. In the spirit of mediamorphosis, it seems wise, if not necessary, to embrace this new breed.

As bloggers cross the line into journalism, should they remain in their own outlets or be embraced by the traditional media? It is my contention that a combination of separate online publications along with inclusion in the mainstream media creates the most beneficial outcome for writer, publishers, and readers. Studying BlogBurst, an edited stream of blog content produced by Pluck for distribution on newspaper Web site, demonstrates how the evolution of blogging and citizen journalism exemplifies the adaptive and evolutionary characteristics of mediamorphosis.

The Technical Art of Defining Bloggers

Short for “web log,” blogging grew out of the simplistic homepages set up in the early 1990s. In 1994, Swarthmore College student Justin Hall began chronicling his personal life and adventures on the Web in an online diary. *Justin’s Links from the Underground* is commonly accepted as the first blog. While the birth of the blog is somewhat clear, a common definition is hazy at best.

In his attempt to describe blogs for USC Annenberg’s Online Journalism Review, Michael Conniff concluded that the six basic elements of a blog are: posts that are unfiltered and in reverse chronological order, the inclusion of commentary, external links, and appropriated text, and a largely informal attitude.

Yet the moment Conniff presents this definition, he begins to list the exceptions, such as the formal tone of L.A. Observed and the lack of commentary at AndrewSullivan.com. Similarly, the emergence of commercial, network, and group blogs such as the Gawker and Gothamist sites disprove the concept of strict individuality. These sites often have editors or section heads that read through posts before they are published. While they focus primarily on copy editing and fact checking rather than significant textual changes, they still adjust the content. Accordingly, there is an increased attention to style, even if it remains witty or conversational. The idea of blogs as strictly personal sites is outdated.

Rather than defining blogging on the basis of content, it is more practical to view it as a format. A blog is constructed more by its publishing platform than its aspirations or applications. Its most important components are ease and immediacy of publication along with the possibility of linkage and interaction.

As BuzzMachine's Jeff Jarvis states, "A blog is merely a tool that lets you do anything from change the world to share your shopping list. People will use it however they wish. And it is way too soon in the invention of uses for this tool to limit it with a set definition. That's why I resist even calling it a medium; it is a means of sharing information and also of interacting."

The mainstream media has already accepted blogs as a source of information. "For the mainstream media – which almost by definition suffer a deficit of specialized, detailed knowledge – blogs can also serve as repositories of expertise," Daniel W. Drezner and Henry Farrell point out in their *Foreign Policy* article "Web of Influence." "Blogs can act as a focal point for the mainstream media and exert formidable agenda-setting power."

In considering the impact of bloggers on journalism, it is logical to attempt to determine whether or not blogging can be journalism in their own right.

In 2003, the Media Center at the American Press Institute published *We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information*. Authors Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis studied the phenomena of citizen journalism with specific attention to its foundation on the Internet. Their working definition for citizen (or participatory) journalism, is "the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires."

The term grants increased weight to blogs without declaring them official news outlets. This new territory is being colonized by writers who want to be taken seriously rather than viewed as self-absorbed online diarists. They engage serious topics, comment on areas of specific interest or knowledge, and develop a responsibility to their readers.

More than the actual content they produce, it is their aspirations towards journalism that makes these bloggers influential. The Poynter Institute's Rick Edmonds

credits them with making 2005 “a year in which many newspaper Web sites have faced the music that shovel-ware from the morning paper is not sufficient and have picked up the pace in originating other kinds of content.”

Pluck: Web Innovations for Traditional Publications

While the dot com crash brought down legions of technology firms, Austin-based Pluck rose successfully from its ashes. Founded in 2003 by Dave Panos and Andrew Busey, the company’s mission is “to build great software that makes Web browsing easier, more fun, and more relevant. Our products are designed to help you search, retrieve, organize and share Web information, without ditching your browser or favorite websites.” Their original focus was on RSS and tagging software. RSS, short for Real Simple Syndication, allows users to track the latest changes to Web sites and blogs and gather that information in an aggregate reader. Shadows, Pluck’s solution to tagging, enables Web pages to be bookmarked, commented upon, and shared within their network.

In 2005 Pluck combined their RSS expertise with blogging to address the online needs of paper publishers. The goal for Pluck InSite is to “build vibrant communities of citizen journalists and web content consumers while driving content generation and traffic at the same time.” Their initial partnership with the Austin American-Statesman has been a revolutionary experiment in community blogging.

A free service hosted on www.statesman.com and www.austin360.com, Statesman readers can start a blog and comment on topics varying from local events and sports teams to news and politics. The blogging network that formed around the 2005 Austin City Limits Festival was an incredible success. Hundreds of bloggers posted information ranging from musician previews to what attendees should wear. Numerous discussions revolved around the impending landfall of Hurricane Rita and its possible impact on Austin and ACL Fest. When the three-day music event commenced under a cloudless and broiling sky, bloggers dished out advice on staying hydrating while berating the organizers for allowing the venue to become a sweltering dust bowl. Not only was content created on an essentially nonstop and adaptive basis, the quality and accuracy of the writing was impressive.

The Statesman project continues to verify Pluck's theories on publisher-supported blogging. Site traffic and interactivity both increased with the addition of the blogs. Also, it appears the affiliation with a respected news outlet makes bloggers take themselves and their writing more seriously.

Pluck's latest foray into publisher solutions could have an even greater impact on the larger concept of journalism. Newspapers and magazines continue to look for ways to solidify their online presence. While portals such as Yahoo! and Google move into news distribution, publications are searching for ways to match their continuous content and maintain readership.

Pluck saw the blogosphere as an ideal resource for these traditional publishers. They refer to their bloggers as citizen journalists. Indeed, a serious blogger shares several characteristics with print journalists. They pay attention to writing style and tone. They comment on newsworthy events, as well as areas of great public interest. They feel a responsibility to their audience.

At the same time, blogs surpass print with the elimination of deadlines. The online news cycle is truly 24 hours. Though the absence of an editorial staff is a disconcerting concept, it also allows for an incredibly quick, if not instantaneous, turn around time between writing to publication. These same technologies encourage reader interaction. Commentary and linkage keeps the writers constantly connected to their audience.

Newspapers have long used traditional wire services like the Associated Press and Reuters for content. The wires have the benefit of culling from an enormous geographic and topical range. It is an advantage they share with the blogosphere. Yet the wires are editing, organized, and reliable. The assumption is bloggers are none of those things.

Pluck believes they can be. On December 12, 2005, they presented their new product, BlogBurst, to a select group of editors and advisors. BlogBurst is essentially a wire of blogs. Pluck editors select bloggers based on quality and consistency of output and continuously monitor their posts. This elite cadre of bloggers would be sorted into groups that correlate with traditional newspaper sections, such as sports and technology. Publishers could then sort through the posts, adding content to their sites, or simply allow for a constant feed onto the page that is supervised by BlogBurst editors.

Applying The Elements of Journalism to the Blogosphere

The tag of journalist, whether it is as a citizen or a veteran member of the press corps, is central to Pluck's argument that blogs have a place on publisher's Web sites. There are millions of bloggers in the world, and not every one aspires to create journalism. However, in order for BlogBurst to populate its roster and fulfill its mission, more than a few A-list headline makers need to.

When explored through the lens of Bill Kovach's seminal text, *The Elements of Journalism*, does a certain segment of the blogosphere display the nine essential characteristics of a journalist? The heavily criticized modern media may not be the best practitioners themselves, but for bloggers to be accepted they will have meet standards to which even their intended industry falls short.

The initial element is "journalism's first obligation is to tell the truth," which is closely linked to the third principle that "the essence of journalism is a discipline of verification." The emphasis on factuality is the biggest obstacle blogs face. Without a weighty masthead or palpable finished product, they are categorically dismissed as off-the-cuff commentary. Without editors, fact checkers, or multiple drafts, they can be viewed as unfounded gossip. In this instance validity is linked to formality.

The ideas of truth and verification in journalism that Kovach describes are more organic concepts than their traditional connotations suggest. "It is actually more helpful, and more realistic, to understand journalistic truth as a process – or continuing journey toward understanding – which begins with the first-day stories and builds over time," he states. "The truth here, in other words, is a complicated process and somewhat contradictory phenomenon, but seen as a process over time, journalism can get at it."

Truth as a cumulative understanding is ideally suited for the blogging world. With instantaneous and continuous publication, stories can be built gradually and with complete transparency. Commentary and linkage act as a watchdog, keeping the writer connected and accountable to their audience. Unlike print stories, blogs have no set beginning or end. There are no word counts or printer deadlines. They have the freedom to follow an idea wherever, and however, it takes them.

Kovach establishes a five-pronged approach to verification, and all are concerned with the original composition rather than after-the-fact checking. “Never add anything that was not there; never deceive the audience; be transparent about your methods and motives; rely on your own original reporting; exercise humility.” Being more concrete and demonstrable than the pursuit of truth, verification is a stumbling block. Original reporting is not an intrinsic, or often plausible, part of what bloggers do. Much of their material is drawn from the mainstream media or other blogs. They build posts out of external links and substantial quotations, pulling material from a variety of sources and assimilating it.

Since this contradictory approach is one of the fundamental concepts of what makes a blog, and the other four ideals can be achieved without relying solely on unique sources, it would follow that they could otherwise still attain this spirit of verification. “The willingness of the journalist to be transparent about what he or she has done is at the heart of establishing that the journalist is concerned with the truth,” concludes Kovach. “Too much journalism fails to say anything about methods, motives, and sources.” If anything, the traceability of well-researched blogs through hyperlinked sites and acknowledgements grants them the advantage of increased lucidity.

Bloggers are already viewed as regulators. In “Web of Influence,” Drezner and Farrell describe them as “a ‘fifth estate’ that keeps watch over the mainstream media. The speed of real-time blogger reactions often compels the media to correct errors in their own reporting before they mushroom.” This same attitude is applied even more vociferously to their online peers. It is a process of constant checking and rechecking, commenting and correcting. In his New York Times essay “Bad News,” Richard A. Posner counts this as a distinct advantage of the blogging world, for “corrections in blogs are also disseminated virtually instantaneously, whereas when a member of the mainstream media catches a mistake, it may take weeks to communicate a retraction to the public.”

The second, and especially the fourth and fifth elements, all pertain to independence. If “journalism’s first loyalty is to citizens,” blogs have at least a financial advantage over mainstream media. Though advertising and networks are affecting this,

bloggers do not answer to the same magnitude of commercial and political interests that newspapers do.

Posner's essay proposes that media fear blogs not because they lower standards but rather they are freed from the same financial constraints. He points out that "a serious newspaper, like The [New York] Times, is a large, hierarchical commercial enterprise that interposes layers of review, revision and correction between the reporter and the published report and that to finance its large staff depends on advertising revenues and hence on the good will of advertisers and (because advertising revenues depend to a great extent on circulation) readers."

With blog space cheap or free, printing costs are relatively nonexistent. Considering that even the most popular blogs are unlikely to make any money, writers are usually participating because they want to, not because they have to put food on the table. They are also unlikely to be influential enough to make significant ripples in the business world.

The situation creates a niche of autonomy that allows bloggers to be unfettered in their focus on citizens. It fosters a sense of trust by liberating the writer. "We're writing for free for anybody just because we love it," noted high-profile blogger Andrew Sullivan in *Slate*. "That's a refreshing spur to write stuff that actually matters, because you can, and say things you believe in without too many worries."

These initial concepts of truth, verification, and independence are the foundation for the final four. That "journalism must provide a forum for public criticism and comment" is the Kovach's sixth element. He stresses that it is more important than ever for the media to "decipher the spin and lies of commercialized argument, lobbying, and political propaganda." The blogosphere does this to a nearly infamous degree. From Trent Lott to swift boats to the Iraq War, politics are the ultimate fodder for bloggers and the readers filling their comment sections. It is a highly democratic but easily biased arena for debate. When the original obligation to truth is coupled with the eighth element, "keep the news in proportion of make it comprehensive," the directionless runaway train of bag blogging can be put on the right track. These highly popular online examinations must remain factual as well as succinct and relevant if they are to be considered serious news.

The seventh standard, making the “significant interesting and relevant,” is one of the primary reasons people turn to blogs for information. Kovach says “journalism is storytelling with a purpose.” The informal writing style of blogs helps them meld the news with entertainment. It is akin to *The Daily Show* effect. American twenty-somethings notoriously rely on Jon Stewart and Comedy Central to keep them up to date on current affairs. Though the TV show is focused on being witty, it does an impressive job of addressing the news events that matter. This is very segment of the population that newspapers seem unable to engage, even in their online editions. Even if bloggers pull in readers looking to be entertained, the information they contain will still be passed along.

Kovach’s final point is “journalists have an obligation to personal conscience.” He describes it as a combination of morality and responsibility. It is, in essence, the culmination of all the elements, as well as the final piece that makes them all fit together. Above all else, this personal discipline for the community’s good is what makes a true journalist. It transcends the line between print and digital text. Every blogger, even those writing personal diaries, should keep this principle in mind when they choose to open their writing to the public.

As was noted earlier, when held to scrupulous *The Elements of Journalism*, many practicing journalists would not be suited for their careers, and as the new kids bloggers are far easier targets. But these elements do show that there is nothing about blogging that should necessarily preclude it from the realm of journalism. Like every medium, it has both advantages and obstacles when it comes to meeting these standards. It is the responsibility of the communicators, not the mode of communication, to act as journalists.

Blogs in Mediamorphosis

As publishers realize that pure shovel-ware is not going to keep their online readers engaged, they will have to find a way to create original Web content. The online news cycle needs to be continuous, engaging surfers with stories at 9 a.m. and noon, 9 p.m. and midnight.

This endlessly need for production is essentially impossible for a traditional newspaper staff to meet. They do not have the number of writers and editors or the

online experience to match such demand. Even when there is a separate online team, they are usually small and getting smaller as print media looks for ways to cut costs.

The wired world is certainly aware. Joff Redfern, a director at Yahoo! Search, defended the gradual inclusion of blogs into their search engine by pointing out “traditional media don’t have the time or resources to cover all stories. We want to offer an alternative perspective on news outside of what the mainstream media has to offer.”

Blog hosting offered through InSite was Pluck’s first foray into supplying new outlets with additional content. In certain sections, the Austin American-Statesman began prominently featuring their bloggers’ posts. The ACL Fest blogs were linked straight through the www.austin360.com home page. Blogging on University of Texas sports, football in particular, remains a main feature of the online sports section.

The Statesman was not the first to take content from the blogosphere. Many prominent newspaper sites now feature some form of blogging, including the Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, and the United Kingdom’s Guardian Unlimited. It has been a pioneer in its approach to hosting blogs, but like its peers it only features material that has made been viewed and approved by editors. The attachment to a gatekeeper is firmly entrenched, and unfettered content is the biggest concern from newspapers about blogging.

Pluck’s BlogBurst proves an excellent solution by assimilating these concerns with the new medium, embracing current mediamorphosis reshaping the news. In 1997, Richard Fidler rejected the concept that the Internet would kill of legacy media. By following the evolution of mass media from print through television, he noted that “new media do not arise spontaneously and independently – they emerge gradually from the metamorphosis of old media. And that when newer forms of communication emerge, the older forms usually do not die – they continue to evolve and adapt.”

Serious blogs are based in the principles of print journalism. Whether their text is in ink or digital, they have chosen writing as their primary method of communication. And as an influential disseminator of written information on the Internet, it is logical for them to be brought into the fold of online newspapers. Their mutual influence over one another has already linked the future development of blogs and print media. The next step from coevolution is a move towards convergence.

Newspapers have already embraced a wide assortment of media for their Web sites. Photography, graphics, audio, and video clips are now commonplace. However, it is their similarity to traditional stories that makes blogs so unsettling. The idea that readers might confuse their carefully reported and edited text with amateur rambling is abhorrent to the newsroom.

The BlogBurst editors at Pluck provide the assurance and weighty appearance that newspapers desire. The stream of content will not be edited on the same word-by-word basis that traditional print is. But there is someone keeping an eye on the blog, acting as the gatekeeper, filtering the quality of content.

Whether it is considered citizen journalism or simply space filler, BlogBurst allows both the bloggers and publishers to advance. Blogs are given credence by their inclusion on the papers' sites. The newspapers are delivering diverse, extensive, and current content to their readers. It is the concept of mediamorphosis at work, enabling the two separate entities to advance together.

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