

Vital Habits: Community Weblogs in Action

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Abstract

Experimentation with community weblogs is testing whether the public can establish a more active role in journalism. These weblogs are based on the hope that a neighborhood of people with no traditional journalistic or technical training could use these online tools to provide news specific to their city or neighborhood. This paper offers four factors for evaluating community weblogs, and applies this model to a case study of a community weblog's coverage of an event.

A More Public Media?

Community weblogs, which invite participation from residents of a particular geographic area, offer a chance to examine the ability of the public to assume responsibility for media production. This form of website permits high levels of feedback and interactivity, a decentralized work process, and low barriers to entry. It is built for mass participation and mass distribution.

Community weblogs offer an excellent chance to test the potential for a conversational model of news. In this model, media provide a space where individuals can generate topics that are then discussed among the group. They invite participation from the public - allowing citizens to contribute content, and encouraging debate on that content. They mean to create the Greek forum, the town meeting, the public sphere where people discuss issues drawn from their common, rather than private, experience. By allowing many different sources to participate, they can redirect news flows from one source broadcasting to an audience to many sources receiving and broadcasting to each other. By emphasizing the local, community weblogs expand the range of potential participants beyond those familiar with national or international topics, and instead invite anyone with knowledge about their surroundings. It is therefore important in evaluating

community weblogs to see how they meet these procedural and structural criteria and to avoid the trap of comparison with existing journalistic norms.

This paper hopes to establish a way to evaluate the efforts of community weblogs to see how well they implement the following ideals - widespread contribution, high interactivity, sources beyond powerful institutions, and decentralized work processes that are mostly self-regulated. It focuses on one case study that used the coverage of an event over several days to test this evaluation tool and examine a community weblog in action.

Spectators vs. Participators

Journalism finds itself facing an argument similar to one staged roughly 80 years ago between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. Because citizens media, participatory journalism, open-source journalism, and any other term used to describe the concept of the public becoming more involved in journalism, and possibly taking responsibility for entire areas of coverage, would have Lippmann and Dewey at each other's throats.

On one side is Lippmann - a pragmatist and an elitist, who questioned the public's ability to comprehend their reality and decide how to react to it. He considered those founders of the U.S. naive who believed that "all men are reasonable all the time, or educated, or informed," without considering "that people are fooled, that they do not always know their own interests, and that all men are not equally fitted to govern" (Lippmann 256).

To agree with Lippmann can feel like a surrender. Admitting that the majority of individuals in a large society are ignorant of the world around them and powerless to affect it leaves those individuals to do nothing more than work, shop, and reproduce.

Meanwhile the course of history moves on out of their reach. But who can disagree with the claim that understanding the issues of the day is typically impossible? Most people don't have the time or energy to follow current events. Following the news is a full-time job.

With democracy forced to deal with the challenges of massive scale, Lippmann saw a solution in an additional layer of expertise between the public and the government that was different than the news media. Since the media could not adequately present reality to the public, Lippmann called for a corps of experts to analyze reality and present their findings to the public's elected decision makers like a societal report card. Only through this process could a democracy manage its affairs - as opposed to massive public participation based on what Lippmann denounced as "the intolerable and unworkable fiction that each of us must acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs" (Lippmann 31).

It feels far more noble to side with Dewey. His hopes for a democracy based on public debate, conversation, and citizen involvement seem drawn from the Constitutional Convention. As Carey observed, Dewey was not looking to perfect the media's ability to convey the realities of the world around us. Lippmann's "spectator theory of knowledge" (Carey 82) was for Dewey the problem all along. To him, dependency on experts and passive observation and reception of their debates was wrong for journalism and wrong for democracy. The media's role should instead be to serve as the home for public conversation, by providing the space where the individual components of a society are gathered together and combined into something greater.

A nice vision, but also one with much faith - possibly naive - in the ability of the public to hold up its end of the bargain. Throw open the doors to the media and welcome citizens in and you never know what you might find - wisdom, humor, decency, innovation, yes - but also ignorance, filth, and dishonesty. Or perhaps nothing at all. Dewey was not oblivious to the fact that the public can be quite good at passivity, apathy, irrationality, and impatience. Changing institutions to encourage involvement, interaction, and debate would be meaningless without changing the habits of the public so that they could seize such opportunities. Those habits had to change, for as Dewey realized, “we lack not only an effective press, but certain vital habits: the ability to follow an argument, grasp the point of view of another, expand the boundaries of understanding, debate the alternative purposes that might be pursued.” (Carey 81)

A Focus on the Ritual

This was in the 1920s. Since then of course journalism has evolved and grown more adept at conveying reality, at making it more likely that the “pictures in our heads” that Lippmann spoke of are based upon images provided 24 hours per day, obtained and broadcast from around the world. Although many have vigorously disputed the worth of even this. Critical theories of media have argued that: biases inherent in the structure of news media work processes lead reporters to rely on society’s power structure (Gans); the corporate profit-driven model which, by catering to advertisers, neglects its public-service function and locks news organizations into a perpetual conflict of interest between their owners and their mission (McChesney, Chomsky & Herman); the doctrine of objectivity and the inverted pyramid were created to serve the interests of power and still do so today (Mindich).

Less research has taken a step back to review the dominant communication process overall. The emphasis here is on the ritual through which the public experiences the media (Carey, Thompson, Innis). The issue is not simply who owns the media or the content of the media, but the way that media operates within society. In his essay on Dewey and Lippmann, Carey writes of “the model of communication, knowledge, and culture one finds in Public Opinion. These models undergird not only news but all our cultural productions, the discussions and arguments about these productions, and the media that carry them” (Carey 83). All of which combines to make the public spectators rather than participants, in the media and in politics.

Fewer still have ventured to consider whether the public would be ready to act if given the chance. An implicit assumption in much of the critical literature is that of a ready and eager public on standby if media reform were to occur, if there were greater investment in public broadcasting, if media control was less centralized, if the media involved the public in more of its reporting. An assumption of the existence of Dewey’s vital habits.

The most recent evocations of Dewey’s message - civic journalism in the 1990s and the current interest in participatory online journalism - also placed and still do place a great deal of faith in the public. Where the former sought to use journalism to encourage participation and debate among the public by involving journalism in this debate (Rosen), the latter is interested in bringing participation and debate into the practice of journalism itself. Inspired by Oh My News, the South Korean online news organization that includes content contributed by non-reporter citizens, Gillmor seeks to build on the belief that a

media's audience will collectively know more than the media's reporter in order to move journalism from a "lecture" to a "conversation" (Gillmor).

The Inclusion of Non-Traditional Media

Often overlooked in these debates over the public's relationship to the media are less traditional forms of media. Dewey's descendants also exist more on the margins, in such "radical media" as comedy, music, graffiti, and radical Internet use (Downing) and the more subdued and less overtly political citizens media (Rodriguez), where the actual involvement of citizens in the process of media creation is as important as the depth and breadth of its content and audience because of the "transformation brought about by these media" (Rodriguez 20). Rather than use the term alternative media, and imply comparison to the dominant media, Rodriguez uses citizens media to categorize those media that "function as environments that facilitate the fermentation of identities and power positions," that "spin transformative processes that alter people's senses of self, their subjective positionings, and therefore their access to power" (Rodriguez 18). Downing also looks beyond politics and policy and finds worth and "democratic conversation" whenever "engaged citizens combining in a variety of roles to review what they may achieve with a given project - and then carrying out the project, often debating and modifying it as they go" (Downing 49).

These radical and citizens media are important to consider in any discussion of community media. For within what seems at first like fringe and irrelevant media are lessons for those who would apply Dewey's ideas to the mainstream media. The ability of radical and citizens media to take risks and experiment with production processes

provides an interesting contrast to examples of participatory journalism which are more adherent from the start to traditional journalism practices. It is important therefore to examine the spectrum of experiments in online/participatory/citizen-based/community journalism - rather than simply those of a more conventional cast - before declaring victory or defeat for Dewey's vision.

Community Weblogs: A Model for Evaluation

Community weblogs are a different animal from the individual weblogs and group weblogs that dominate weblog traffic rankings, influence national elections, split along liberal and conservative lines, and battle with the mainstream media. Community weblogs are distinguished by their relationship to geographic space. They focus on a particular locale, and draw the bulk of their contributors from that place. Although they will occasionally discuss national and international issues, it is through the lens of the local. Since many individual weblogs focus on this sort of coverage, I also define community weblogs as having multiple potential authors.

Within those boundaries lies a wide range of behavior. There are still relatively few well-known community weblogs, although there are undoubtedly several that have not emerged yet on the radar screen of online media observers. Of the weblogs considered "community" weblogs, there are significant variations in their structure. Several are mostly closed off to public participation in favor of a predetermined staff of local bloggers, some are aggregators of local individual weblogs with little interactivity, some compile articles from the community written in traditional journalistic style - like online newspapers that have simply plugged free reader contributions into the news hole,

while a few truly are community weblogs that adhere closely to the mission of providing an open forum for the public, warts and all.

It is useful to establish four factors that help determine whether a weblog is truly a community weblog. The degree to which the community weblog satisfies these four factors will also help evaluate its success at creating a medium where the public can actively participate in journalism. The four factors to monitor are: the distribution of contribution; the level of interactivity among members; the relationship of the weblog to other institutions; and the level of moderation and editorial control. It is not the content produced that matters as much as the way that content is produced. These four factors operate on a spectrum of participation with one extreme being the lecture model and the other extreme the conversational model.

Contributors

If contributions are mainly coming from one or a few sources, the community weblog can drift towards a more individual weblog that grows similar to the broadcast model and its inactive, invisible audience. The same is true if there is a small group of contributors and a large audience of members. The ideal is to have at least more than 50% of registered members contributing - whether in the form of posts or comments. This figure provides a benchmark above which there is more production on the part of the membership than reception. The rate of contributions for the producers would also be best if each of the producers is contributing at roughly equal amounts.

Interactivity

Likewise it is not enough to have every citizen broadcasting at each other unless it sparks discussion or some other form of interactivity. Interactivity is defined here as the opportunity to respond directly to a statement or question in a format that makes that response part of the record. This response does not have to be a contrary statement, it could also be a statement that builds on the preceding statement. Ideally there would be such responses following every post on the weblog.

Relationship to Institutions

It is also important to not allow spokespeople for institutions to dominate the discourse. There could be a high level of interaction and diverse contributions from institutionalized sources on a community weblog, but this would not accomplish the purpose of public participation by individual members of the community. Institutionalized sources are defined here as government, business, or other organizations. This also applies to contributors who are on the staff of the weblog, when such a staff exists (as in the case of community weblogs linked to existing traditional media organizations). Although these contributors would be likely to interact on the weblog, an imbalance in their levels of participation can tilt the weblog from the conversational model to the lecture model, since it becomes more difficult for a small group of members on staff to interact with a growing group of non-staff members.

Moderation and Editorial Control

The overwhelming advantage of a community weblog is the potential number of contributors. But this advantage is neutralized if the production process relies on a

centralized monitor to control the content. A traffic jam would inevitably ensue, and the quick responses and self-organizing adaptability possible when a high number of individuals are allowed to function in a decentralized and networked manner would be lost. However casting aside any form of authority is problematic, because it invites spam (here defined as commercial automated abuse and non-commercial manual abuse) and assumes a level of technical fluency on behalf of the membership that might not exist. Ideally, even with the presence of a central authority for issues involving technology and security, the membership would contribute all content without direction.

These four factors provide a key to evaluating the performance of a community weblog, if we define success as Dewey's conversational model and failure as Lippmann's lecture model:

	Lecture	Conversation
Contributors	Few	Many
Interactivity	Low	High
Institutions	High Presence	Low Presence
Control	High	Low

Research Questions

The four factors discussed above are a challenge for community weblogs on an everyday basis. Comparing the activity on a community weblog to this grid would provide insight into the ability of that weblog to deliver on its promise.

This paper took the exercise a step further, by analyzing a community weblog under conditions highly conducive to the conversational model. This allowed for a demonstration of the evaluation tools and the chance to find additional obstacles to the conversational model. The intent was that in this context it would be easier to filter out some of the noise created when the lecture model emerges on a community weblog. To study whether a group of citizens can use, and how they use, a conversational model to gather and produce news, we needed to find an event happening in a media vacuum. It wouldn't be enough to see if there was interactivity or distributed participation if that behavior was instigated by the activity of traditional media sources. The experiment was looking for independent action rather than dependent reaction.

During the week of March 12-19, 2005, the South By Southwest (SXSW) music, film, and interactive festivals occurred in Austin, Texas. These events receive tremendous amounts of media coverage online, in print, and on television. Meanwhile an unofficial and far less publicized counter-festival of sorts has developed alongside the official SXSW, offering free music for five days, from March 15 to March 19, at shows and events that are open to the public.

The community weblog UnknownCity.com, which the author founded in March 2004, is a cultural and lifestyle guide for people with limited resources, primarily focused on Austin but with entries for roughly two-dozen other cities. By the middle of March 2005 it had 120 members, with the majority of them based in Austin (63 at the time of

this study). Each member has the ability to post and comment directly to the website without any editorial guidance or approval. All members have the same permissions with the exception of one “super-user” who can edit and delete all posts, change the features and look of the site, and sign up members, and one member who can also sign up members. For SXSW 2005, UnknownCity’s citizen staff attempted to cover the unofficial events.

Unofficial SXSW presented what seemed to be optimal conditions to enable participation from the members of a community weblog:

Contributors

-Since many of the members would be attending SXSW or the unofficial SXSW events, there was a higher potential for contributions from the membership. It would be a common topic and a good candidate for diverse and numerous participation.

-The unofficial events did not have elaborate organizations behind them. Many were organized by small groups of people. Therefore there was little chance that large institutions would be able to dominate contributions or by posting information about their events.

Interactivity

-The informal nature of the unofficial events was ripe for a weblog’s ability to cover last-minute factual changes through member interaction. As opposed to more strict and rigorous schedules for official events that were more or less predictable and unchanging,

there are frequent schedule changes for unofficial events, which leads to a need for interaction.

-Weblog users were more likely to ask questions and provide answers since there were few alternatives to find information about the unofficial events. There would be a greater reliance on information from other members.

Relationship to Institutions

-Since these events were actually outside the SXSW institutional power structure, members would need to rely on non-traditional sources for information, whether that meant other citizens, club or store employees, or just themselves.

Moderation and Editorial Control

-With unofficial events occurring simultaneously across the city, this presented a test of decentralized and non-directive news coverage. Coordinating coverage over several chaotic and unorganized days would be difficult if not impossible for a central authority. Members would therefore be free to post and comment as they saw fit.

The research questions would see if this theoretical advantage for the conversational model became a reality, and if not, why not, considering the fact that conditions appeared to be optimal? The questions correspond to the four factors:

Research Questions

#1: How distributed was the work?

#2: What was the level of interactivity?

#3: What was the relation of the weblog's content to institutions?

#4: How much direction was needed vs. self-organization?

Results and Discussion

During UnknownCity's coverage, several incidents occurred that reveal the capabilities of this medium and the challenges facing it. Several trends emerged that offer insight into how the typical community weblog might eventually function.

The numbers and examples that follow, when considered in the context of the event, are promising. Community weblog members, in general and in the case of UnknownCity (all members are volunteers including the founder) are not paid for their contributions. They have jobs of their own in addition to other everyday commitments. The time required to generate first-hand reporting without the headstart provided by mainstream media coverage is understandably prohibitive for many would-be contributors. The contribution gap this creates can lead a community weblog to fall back on institution-based sources, who generate the copy as part of their job or other commitments (i.e. city government agendas, public library functions, club meetings, band performances), rely on the contributions of staff members or in-house reporters, and centralize coverage through requests to institutional sources for information (if those sources haven't contributed it themselves).

With that in mind, a review of each of the research questions follows. Examples pulled from UnknownCity's coverage are included to illustrate some of the points discussed.

#1: How distributed was the work?

Over the course of its existence, UnknownCity has had 44% of its posts and 33% of its comments produced by a single member, and these figures were roughly the same during its SXSW coverage (47% and 30% respectively). These figures, however, include all the posts from when the site started to discuss SXSW and seek information from members about the unofficial events, a process that actually began on March 3. If we look at the five days when the actual unofficial events occurred (March 15-19), that reliance on a single member reduced (38% of the posts and 38% of the comments - an increase reflecting increased responses to other member's posts). Of the 63 Austin members UnknownCity had at the time of its coverage, 19% of them posted and 14% commented on posts.

The relative success of UnknownCity at distributing its work has much to do with the unusual news cycle at play during the unofficial SXSW. This is an issue that is important for the managers of community weblogs to consider when determining what they hope citizens will cover. For mainstream media organizations and other societal institutions, the day unfolds in a similar and intertwined way. Their clocks adhere more or less to a nine-to-five schedule. Trying to force a community weblog into this structure makes it difficult to impossible for the members to obtain first-hand information and places the weblog back into the lecture model.

One way to bypass this obstacle is by encouraging members in the field to communicate offline before communicating online. This moves part of the model of the traditional newsroom, where reporters might call stories into editors, or sources might call tips into reporters, and transfers it onto the community weblog model. It allows members in the field to contribute content without any other hardware beyond a cellphone (and even a payphone would work) and allows members at work or otherwise by a computer terminal away from the action to participate:

Example 1:

During an event at about 5 p.m., a member hears from another person about a previously unannounced event which would occur within an hour. The member calls another member who is at home with Internet access, and asks them to post an announcement on the site. The second member obtains the address for the venue of the unannounced event, the time, and additional information, and posts a notice to the weblog at 5:18.

Example 2:

A member attends an event at 11:30 a.m. at a venue held in the parking lot behind several local businesses. The parking lot had hosted a concert the day before, but 24 hours later an iron fence has been built between the parking lot and another business, and the work of construction crews is interfering with the second day's music. The member, who is about to leave the scene for another event, calls another member who knows several businesspeople in the area and tells them what is going on. At 1:53 p.m. they post about the issue.

Example 3:

Two members attend an event at night and find a taco stand parked outside. They try the food, note the prices, the menu, and the hours of operation, and contact a third member who has Internet access at work. The third member posts an update to the weblog that links to a map of the event's location and includes the prices and details provided by the first two members.

#2: What was the level of interactivity?

The five days studied were the most active and most interactive in the site's history. UnknownCity typically averages between one and two posts per day and two comments per day, but from March 15-19 it averaged six posts per day and seven comments per day. Of the 32 posts involved in this sample, 47% had a comment or comments from members other than the original post contributor. Some comments corrected or clarified the original post, some supported the post, some built on the post with an additional tip or insight.

Example 1:

A member lists several artists playing at free events. Another member comments and asks for a clarification and elaboration about the artists that the original member recommends. The original member responds with some suggested artists.

Example 2:

A member posts seeking information about certain bands, including what they sound like. Another member comments and links to the main SXSW website, where there are mp3 audio samples of all the artists playing official showcases (most of whom play unofficial showcases as well).

Offline interactivity occurred as well, and led to online activity during the most frenzied point in UnknownCity's coverage:

Example 3:

A member calls another member from the scene of an event on March 19 to provide an update on the price of drinks, the schedule of performers, and other details. The second member posts the information and goes with two other members to the event. Additional information becomes available when the three additional members arrive at the event. In order to update they call several other members to see if they are near a computer and can post. On the fourth attempt they reach a member in San Antonio who adds the information - to an earlier post. A member leaves the event for work shortly thereafter, and adds a comment update in a more recent post on the event.

This overlap between offline and online is important to nurture and enable. It is a result of the existence of the divide between the capabilities offered by new technologies and the ability of people to use them. Consider moblogging - the ability to send images from a cellphone to a weblog. It is already possible to do this, but there is a gap of technical literacy that would make it difficult to implement in reality. It is important amid

such technological advances to not overlook the use of non-sophisticated tools that often make the weblog work. In the case of Example 3, that was as simple as having a member's phone number.

#3: What was the relation of the weblog's content to institutions?

Throughout the course of UnknownCity's SXSW coverage, every post originated from a member's own research and/or own experiences. There were no links to information in the mainstream media, there were no press releases generated by any organizations, and the agenda of coverage was entirely dictated by the members (there was only one post that linked to another website's band reviews). Coverage followed events that were occurring throughout the city, so therefore the groups that arranged those events did occasionally play a role in establishing the agenda of coverage on the weblog. But otherwise the posts were the result of the member's own initiative and information gathering.

Example 1:

A member investigates an apparent conflict between two local businesses possibly spurred on by an unofficial SXSW event. While a show occurs in the parking lot of one business, another business begins construction on a fence and building, disturbing the event. The member compiles a post on the situation, complete with quote from one of the business owners, which company owns one of the businesses involved, and eyewitness accounts, all within less than two hours.

#4: How much direction was needed vs. self-organization?

Direction and self-organization are much more difficult to quantify. Even if we were to count all contributions by a weblog administrator as directive (since they originate from a central source), these contributions can be a direct or indirect response to the weblog's members and therefore part of a greater pattern of self-organization. Nevertheless the experiment provided some worthwhile lessons on this topic.

Implicit in the hopes for citizen reporters are that when left to their own devices, a decentralized network of individuals - with the ability to monitor and communicate with each

other - will correct errors and eventually steer a mass of collected information to the truth. This would occur through the actions and collective intelligence of the group rather than a central force noticing problems and mobilizing resources to deal with them.

Through a combination of transparency, interactivity, and mass empowerment the end product would contain a higher quantity of information and higher quality of information.

There is an issue of scale involved here - the more individuals involved, the better such a system would work. Greater participation decreases the odds that false information will escape.

Yet even on a small scale there was evidence of the community policing itself to obtain an answer:

Example 1:

Free day passes were available to the interactive portion of SXSW. The initial post said they were only good for one day of the three-day conference, and added it was unclear if they could get people into panel discussions. A comment on the post pointed out that using a different e-mail each time, a person could get a pass for each day. Another comment said people were able to get into the panels as well as the conference trade show. After several people attempted to do so and were denied, a later comment from another member clarified that admission was arbitrary and warned people of this fact before taking their free pass to the conference. This activity all occurred without any direction from a central authority.

More often the self-organization unfolds over a series of posts. After several posts mention little-known artists, a member posts a link to an indie music website with more information on such artists.

Despite such examples there remained a reliance on a central coordinator, what has been called a “citizen editor”. The weblog administrator was often needed to fill this role, by signing up new members, answering member questions, and monitoring the site for spam or otherwise problematic content. A technical issue that occurred during the first two days of UnknownCity’s coverage would not have been solved without the administrator’s involvement:

Example 3:

Several new members emailed the weblog to complain that their posts were not showing up on the site. Further investigation revealed that there were a number of posts in a state