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Journalists and Bloggers: Complements, Contradictions and Challenges

Jane B. Singer

Let's jump right to the subject of considerable debate: Are bloggers journalists?

Journalists' immediate answer is: No way. Bloggers' immediate answer is: No thanks. But the question demands more than a two-word response. Just what, if anything, is it that journalists do that is different from what bloggers do? Are bloggers acting as journalists some of the time but as something else (like what?) the rest of the time? And why should the rest of us care either way?

Of course, the majority of the millions of blogs out there today are not journalistic because they provide no public service. The purpose of journalism, at least in a democracy, is to serve the public by providing citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Most bloggers are folks for whom the format is a fun, easy way to create a personal journal for their own enjoyment or that of their family and friends. Enhancing democracy is not high on the agenda.

But some bloggers clearly have something grander in mind. These are the people who post, ardently and often, about politics, government, war, the media, social issues, and a host of other topics that also fill news holes in traditional media around the world. And they have a

following that extends well beyond their circle of personal acquaintances. People turn to them for information, commentary, and insights -- the same sorts of things journalists provide.

My own sense, and that of some other observers whom we'll get to soon, is that the bloggers and journalists fill sometimes-overlapping but essentially different niches in the information environment. Their relationship is both symbiotic and complementary: Bloggers and journalists often irk one another, but ultimately offer mutual benefits, and a 21st century public is better served by both together than by either alone.

This chapter starts with one fundamental way that journalists differ from bloggers: their nearly opposite approaches to truth. A look at the synergies between bloggers and journalists follows. With most of the chapter exploring the two as distinct, if complementary, types of communicators, "j-bloggers" – journalists who blog -- merit some attention at the end.

Seeking and Reporting Truth

Early in 2005 -- barely two months after a U.S. presidential campaign in which bloggers propelled themselves into the national consciousness through nonstop flogging of both candidates and the media, and just weeks after bloggers provided more vivid coverage of the South Asian tsunami disaster than any but the very largest media outlets could begin to approach -- media scholar Jay Rosen declared that "journalists vs. bloggers is over." Actually, he mostly said that journalism itself is over, at least as it has been traditionally constructed. What many in the media affectionately (or not) call "Big-J Journalism" has lost great people, who have deserted "when they ran out of room for their ideas." It has lost credibility, with the notion of objectivity under fire and large numbers of people hooting in derision at the idea of a neutral, non-partisan

press. And in a world in which anyone can publish anything, and there no longer are any gates for information gatekeepers to guard, it has lost its franchise (Rosen, 2005).

The points are well-taken, but rather than signaling an imminent obituary, they encourage a closer look at what journalism really is or does. A great many definitions have been offered. Journalists see journalism as, among other things, a mirror, a container for the day's events, and a story about those events; scholars refer to a profession, an institution, a text, a practice (Zelizer, 2005). To me, journalism is a particular approach to obtaining and communicating civically important truth. It is not the only approach by any means, and in our open and exponentially extended information environment, it may even seem like an outmoded one – not unreasonably, since it dates to the 18th century.

Journalists' route to truth stems from a set of Enlightenment ideas, including that people are inherently rational, and that reality is both observable and verifiable. Journalists understand truth as something that can be seen or heard, by themselves or by someone else who is a reliable source, and that can be verified and corroborated. A great many factors play into the news selection process, but at a basic level, what journalists do is collect and vet information as best they can before deciding whether to pass it along to the public (Singer, 2005). They then offer as truth information that survives what ideally is rigorous scrutiny by both reporter and editor, scrutiny in which personal beliefs are set aside in favor of nonpartisan fairness. The essence of journalism is this process of verification (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001).

The fact that other information also is available does not change this basic definition of journalism. Other information has always been available; it's just that there is now much, much more of it, and it is much, much easier for anyone to generate and disseminate. Arguably, this makes journalism more valuable, not less so. Journalistic gatekeeping is no longer a matter of

determining which items are to be allowed to circulate; is a matter of certifying that among the millions of freely circulating items, some subset has been independently verified as trustworthy.

This is not to say that the process works flawlessly or that even the journalists who diligently follow it (let alone the ones who don't) necessarily generate truth. Obviously, neither is the case. Nor is it to say that this is the only route to truth. But as a way to define the role and process of journalism in a democracy, it seems to serve pretty well.

Bloggers also value truth, but they have quite a different view of how to get there. Theirs is a more post-modern approach acknowledging that everyone holds his or her own version of the truth; brought together, those views form a subjective, multi-faceted but cohesive whole. Bloggers place a premium on the power of the collective, of shared knowledge and the connections among those who possess and are willing to exchange it.

The blogosphere is an electronically enabled marketplace of ideas. In it, the vetting process is social and public, not individual and relatively private as it is for journalists – and the vetting takes place after publication, not before. The blog is an open forum in which information is offered, revised, extended, or refuted; the more who participate in the process of generating truth, the merrier. It's John Milton with moxie and a modem: Get all the ideas on the table, kick them around, and individual falsehood gives way to collectively derived truth. The whole knows more, and better, than any of its component parts.

This process doesn't work flawlessly, either, of course. The collective is not necessarily wiser than the individual, nor the majority more cogent than the minority. Even if truth eventually does emerge from the conversation, a whole lot of potentially harmful untruth can be published, globally, during the kicking-around phase. But the priority given to interactive

conversation, rather than the one-way lecture delivered through the newspaper or TV newscast (Gillmor, 2004), highlights this view of truth and how to attain it.

Symbiotic and Complementary

Which way is better? That's a question destined to lead to little except name-calling; both journalists and bloggers can, and do, adamantly claim superiority by pointing out the strengths of their approach and the faults of the other. Journalists who spend their evenings complaining to one another over beers about how their editor butchered their story line up to defend the editing process itself as the guardian of information integrity. Bloggers who spend their evenings -- as well as their mornings, afternoons, and nights – talking incessantly amongst themselves appear on talk shows to laud the value of a place where everyone's voice is heard.

In fact, both journalists and bloggers are and will remain valuable, to one another and to the public. They offer, as I suggested at the start, symbiotic and complementary approaches to information.

That bloggers need journalists is obvious – where else would they find new things to talk about if not in the "MSM," their often-derogatory term for the mainstream media? Although there are a growing number of exceptions, relatively few bloggers actively gather original information themselves. The good ones monitor a range of media outlets; compare their versions of events, and compare present versions with previous ones; root around online for alternative perspectives; then post what they have learned, link to what they have found, and offer their opinions about it all. The less-good ones jump right to the part where they offer their opinions.

Bloggers also need journalists to give them publicity. Who besides other bloggers, and perhaps a stung politician or two, would even know what the fuss was about if not for

widespread media coverage? By the end of 2004, about 32 million Americans claimed to be blog readers, and about 8 million said they had created their own blog – but almost two-thirds of Internet users did not know what a blog was (Rainie, 2005). That number has surely shrunk dramatically over the past year and more, as journalists have written about blogs, quoted from them, competed with them, followed their leads -- and created their own blogs, as well. (More on that last one in a bit.)

And bloggers need journalists, frankly, as a foil. Public displeasure with the "MSM" is no secret. Surveys indicate that majorities of Americans believe the news media are biased, make up stories (Smolkin, 2005), and cannot be trusted to tell the truth (Taylor, 2002); more than a third see them as outright immoral (Project of Excellence, 2005). Bloggers – many of whom seem to passionately share these attitudes – point to their own practices as an alternative or even an antidote; indeed, they are quite articulate about expressing their belief that their approach to truth, as outlined above, is superior.

That said, bloggers have much to learn from journalists – including some of their much-maligned practices and much-derided ethical guidelines. The checks and balances that (yes) an editor provides, the enhanced credibility that comes from doing your own reportorial legwork, the development of a cogent writing style, a working knowledge of valuable tools such as the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, a commitment to accuracy and an avoidance of potential conflicts of interest – all are journalistic lessons that bloggers can profitably take to heart. "Journalists, as members of the `Fourth Estate,' have long held power. Now bloggers are positioned to share some of that. Take care, please," urges longtime print and online journalist Steve Outing (2004), who also is a senior editor for the Poynter Institute.

Actually, a number of folks have taken a cut at drafting guidelines for bloggers – and they sound a whole lot like guidelines for journalists. For instance, those offered by Jonathan Dube while he ran the Cyberjournalist site for the American Press Institute draw heavily on the Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics; he urges bloggers to minimize harm, to be accountable, and to be honest and fair (Dube, 2003). Blogging pioneer Rebecca Blood, in her *Weblog Handbook*, proposes a set of "weblog ethics" that emphasize transparency, including disclosure of any conflict of interest and of any "questionable and biased sources," and exhort bloggers to "publish as fact only that which you believe to be true" (Blood, 2002). *Online Journalism Review* suggests telling readers how information was obtained; clarifying commercial relationships; staying away from plagiarism and conflicts of interest; and checking out information before publishing it (*Online Journalism Review*, 2005). And so on.

Besides, it's only a matter of time – which may already have arrived as you are reading this – before a blogger is rudely awakened by judge or jury to some facts of life that journalists have drilled into them from the first day of j-school, facts such as what constitutes libel or plagiarism or invasion of privacy. One more thing bloggers can learn from journalists is the name of a good libel lawyer.

The ways in which journalists need bloggers may be subtler; after all, journalists have managed without this particular swarm of gadflies for hundreds of years. But viewing bloggers as pests misses the real values they provide.

For starters, bloggers' emphasis on what they call transparency, somewhat akin to the journalistic notion of accountability, is worth paying attention to. Journalists have become far too willing to use anonymous sources, particularly in their coverage of politics, policy, and government. Many appear trapped by professional norms of objectivity that too easily devolve

into “he said, she said” reporting (Cunningham, 2003), leaving them vulnerable to manipulation by those sources and abandoning the public a long way from the truth that the norms are supposed to protect. And they seem to have found no better way to convince people of their commitment to fairness and nonpartisanship than to earnestly plead, “Trust us, we really do set aside our personal feelings when we do our jobs.”

Most probably do, but as we’ve seen, a precipitously plummeting number of people believe it. The full disclosure philosophy of bloggers is not perfectly suited to journalists, but a little more openness would go a long way. Bloggers are transparent not only in their motive but also in their process, extensively using links to documents, sources, news articles, and other sorts of evidence to buttress their points and establish their authority (Lasica, 2004). Journalists would do well to take the cue, especially in the online presentations of news but also in the types of support they offer for stories in other media. In doing so, they would greatly expand the number and diversity of their sources, another bonus of blogging.

Journalists also can benefit from the fact that bloggers offer thousands of extra pairs of ears to the ground. Bloggers notice, and write about, things that journalists may miss, and some of those things are bound to be important. One of the most famous examples is bloggers’ role in the political demise of U.S. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, who a few years ago told a public gathering that the country would have been better off had voters had the wisdom to elect segregationist Strom Thurmond as president back in 1948. Bloggers weren’t there – but they were watching the C-Span cable network, which was. Several A-list bloggers kept Lott’s comments front and center on their blogs until mainstream journalists noticed; within weeks, Lott was the former Senate majority leader (Regan, 2003). In the years since, there have been numerous other examples of bloggers’ flogging a story until it makes the MSM agenda.

In fact, a fair number of those stories are about the media, a favorite subject of bloggers everywhere -- which brings me to one of the biggest benefits of all that bloggers offer journalists, though it may sometimes seem more a curse than a blessing. Bloggers have gleefully taken on the role of watchdog on the watchdog. Some very big dogs have felt the bloggers' bite, from (former) CBS News anchor Dan Rather, who took the fall for mishandling of a story about President George W. Bush's disputed Air National Guard service as a young man, to (former) *New York Times* Executive Editor Howell Raines, turned to toast in the blogosphere for his role in the Jayson Blair scandal.

Bloggers individually may not have the power of a Rather or a Raines, but they do have influence – the ability, as InstaPundit blogger Glenn Reynolds puts it, to "get ideas noticed that would otherwise be ignored and to shame people into doing their jobs better" (Smolkin, 2004). People such as journalists. Blogs can serve as a corrective mechanism for sloppy or erroneous reporting (Andrews, 2003). "For lazy columnists and defensive gatekeepers, it can seem as if the hounds from a mediocre hell have been unleashed," *Columbia Journalism Review* contributor Matt Welch (2003) writes; journalists can now expect that someone out there is going to fact-check just about anything they write. Such ardently attentive scrutiny can seem brutal, but it has the wonderful benefit of making an editorial stance of arrogance or aloofness hard to sustain (Mitchell & Steele, 2005). Call the blogosphere "Estate 4.5," neither part of government nor of the media but keeping a wary and watchful eye on both, providing a valuable check against inadequacy and abuse of power by either (Glover, 2005).

So blogging and journalism are symbiotic forms, each needing and potentially benefiting from the other's presence and practice. They also are complementary. There is, in fact, no single route to truth; there may or may not be one truth, but it doesn't require a metaphysical leap to

recognize that there are many ways to attain it (or them). Bloggers and journalists fill different niches in the information space. Bloggers can focus narrowly on stories that may fly under the radar screen of Big-J Journalism and can doggedly pursue an agenda that they find personally important – and that, like the story of Lott, sometimes turns out to be socially important, as well. Journalists can bring the power of their institution, reputations, and professional standards to bear on stories of broad public interest. Together, they can do a more thorough job of serving the public, with the strengths of each correcting the shortcomings of the other.

Journalism vs. blogging is, indeed, over -- not with victory but with, ideally, peaceful coexistence. In his book *Mediamorphosis*, Roger Fidler (1997) points out that rarely do media forms supplant one another. Older forms typically do not die out, but they do evolve. Challenged by a successful newcomer, the people who love them and are adept at working within them do a little soul-searching to figure out what it is that they really do best. Then they decide how to go about doing it in the changed media environment that the new form has brought into being.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of all those that bloggers bring to journalists is the impetus to conduct this soul-searching, to reaffirm their commitment to the public good, to recognize the strengths of their approach to meeting that commitment – and to go out and do it better.

Postscript: Journalists Are Bloggers, Too

The picture of two distinct groups of people, the bloggers and the journalists, is actually a little fuzzier than the previous discussion might suggest. So I'll end with a few words about journalists who blog.

Actually, even many folks who consider themselves full-fledged bloggers are being treated, in practical terms, as journalists. For instance, they are getting press credentials to cover

major events, perhaps most prominently the 2004 U.S. political conventions. Some bloggers are attracting advertisers – and struggling with commercial pressures to keep those advertisers happy. As of this writing, there are moves in the U.S. Congress to establish a national shield law safeguarding a journalist's ability to protect the identity of confidential sources. Some versions of the proposed law extend the definition of a news medium to "any printed, photographic, mechanical, or electronic means of disseminating news or information to the public," a construction that covers blogs and other Web-only news sites (Reporters Committee, 2005).

In the meantime, a great number of journalists already are operating blogs – hundreds, according to the Cyberjournalist.net site. Some are blogging on their own, with or without the sanction of their employers. But most are "j-bloggers," typically columnists or top-level reporters whose byline gives them sufficient buzz to start their own blogs under the auspices of their media organization.

Blogs enable journalists to cover big stories in novel ways. Many journalists covering the 2004 U.S. campaigns and conventions for major media outlets did so as both reporters and bloggers. *Newsweek* magazine blogged its coverage of Martha Stewart; *The New York Times* took on climate shifts in the Arctic. Pick a topic that a news organization is willing to devote resources to telling well online, and the odds are rapidly increasing that part of its coverage will include a blog. Editorial boards also are getting in on the act, using blogs as a way of showing readers how they make their decisions (Glaser, 2004).

The sailing has not been uniformly smooth. A number of reporters have found themselves in hot water for expressing opinions on their blog, thus blurring their profession's beleaguered but still entrenched premise of objectivity. CNN editors told a correspondent to stop blogging about his experiences covering the war in Iraq (Palser, 2003). A *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reporter

resigned after coming under fire for writing a blog in which he lambasted the paper (Kesmodel, 2005). A *Houston Chronicle* bureau chief was fired after using his blog to criticize politicians he covered for the paper; what he saw as a harmless creative outlet struck his editors as an appalling conflict of interest (Olafson, 2003).

Despite the bumps, media organizations seem to be finding that blogs are an intriguing way to engage readers and to cover their communities creatively. They allow journalists to share information that doesn't fit in the traditional format's limited news hole, to squeeze more voices into their reporting, and to get potentially valuable feedback from the public.

Just what the bloggers have been saying all along.

Are journalists bloggers? Growing number are, at least some of the time. Are bloggers journalists? Not yet – and ideally, things will stay that way. We need the two sets of independent – in the best senses of the word – voices offering us alternative, complementary paths to truth.

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