

Is Blogging Innovating Journalism?

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Is Blogging Innovating Journalism?

Journalism plays a vital part in a democratic society. Concepts like blogging and podcasting are presenting new ways of distributing journalism instantly and letting readers interact with the journalistic product. How can journalism benefit from these concepts?

Innovations are important to society as well. As disruptive as they sometimes may be, innovations provide stability and economic growth in societies. Publishers of traditional media are trying to survive in a new business reality brought about by low-cost distribution through network technologies.

But the traditional publishing business model, with journalism as a value proposition to its readers, is under attack. Will journalism survive? And is blogging a possible remedy?

1 Introduction

Last fall, at a meeting discussing innovation journalism, the editor-in-chief of Sweden's monthly publication Axxess tried to describe innovation journalism. He suggested that it is a matter of quality—good vs. bad journalism, not a genre with its own methodology and characteristics. He asserted that innovation journalism is a professional pursuit using known approaches, techniques and skills.

David Nordfors, founder of the Innovation Journalism program, said that traditional media has structural problems. He argued that innovations cover different beats, and that traditional newsrooms cannot handle the style of 'broadband' coverage that supposedly is required by innovation journalism¹.

If Innovation Journalism is good journalism, not only in style² and expression, but also in its effort to dig deeper and broaden its scope and perspectives, how is quality conceived and achieved in an environment of abundant, transitional and complex information? What qualities, skills and tools are required to assimilate, digest and then distribute relevance and meaning where attention is more valued than most physical goods? How does new media technology fit into all this? How do RSS-feeds and easy web-publishing tools (which have contributed to the growth of the blog) and podcasts contribute to interesting stories, good journalism and the future of publishing?

These are relevant questions in these times of change and transition, when new publishing technologies are challenging the very nature of journalism.

¹ Nordfors, David, The Concept of Innovation Journalism and a Programme For Developing It, 2004 <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/INJO-1-1.pdf>

² Höij Magnus, Components of innovation journalism, Innovation Journalism Vol 1. No. 5 – Sep 17 2004, p. 9. <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/INJO-1-5.pdf>

By studying and interviewing Innovation Journalism practitioners who use blogs, I have drawn conclusions and made recommendations within this paper for newsrooms, editors and writers about to embark on a journey into the blogosphere to produce new stories, whether or not it is called 'innovation journalism.'

I hope you find this report as intriguing to read as it was for me to write.

2 Background

Journalism is vital in a democratic society. Most of us say that without journalism, we would not have democracy. But democracy is a broad, abstract concept. From a Swedish journalist's (cynical) point of view democracy is the legitimate struggle between powerful ideas to establish political, social and economic leadership in our societies.

Innovations, our field of interest as Fellows, whether social, political or economic, are powerful ideas themselves. These ideas enable different interests to gain leadership in society and thus are of special interest in the democratic discourse, or at least they should be.

Spanish rifles changed the power structures in the Indians' America, just as Silicon Valley's latest innovation could overthrow regimes and change the power structures in their corresponding societies.

Another example is innovation music television (MTV). MTV's impact was substantial on youth in Eastern Europe in the 80's. It gave young people a vision of what life could be without the Berlin wall, drafting people into resisting the established leadership and the Communist power structures.

A more recent example is an SMS-service to be used in Iraq for civic reporting. It is a powerful idea if the letters in a text message are unlimited. Eric Sundlöf, a Reuters fellowship scholar at Stanford University, and his teammates have accomplished this.

If the Indians in North America had had a stringer in Europe in the 15th century who could have communicated with his tribe (Indian culture was advanced but unfortunately its NASA equivalent was still in its infancy) he and the Indians would have had advanced knowledge of the invaders' arrival and could have played their game differently.

Most everyday innovations are less revolutionary, yet not unimportant. What, for example, will inexpensive telephony via the Internet (VoIP) provided by companies like Skype mean in financial movements and power transitions in a country like Sweden? Many Swedes hold stock in Swedish-Finnish telecom giant Telia Sonera due to a governmental campaign and push. Will Swedish citizens and stockholders adapt Skype in their homes and in businesses, thus lowering the value of their own stock? The fact that Skype's founders became wealthy, overnight

celebrities also added new power players in the telecom cast. How does that affect an industry?

Journalism, and free press committed to honoring journalism, enables different interests to participate and have an active voice in such power plays. Journalism prospers via reader and democratic advocacy. Hopefully, publishing houses also prosper.

But development of network-communications technologies, governed by Moore's law, challenges traditional media and newsrooms with new formats and new players. What has been valid for 400 years, since Gutenberg's invention and introduction of the mass reproduction of ideas, is now up for grabs via innovation—low-cost reproduction and instant distribution. Time-consuming print and audio journalism must compete in this environment.

"My worst competitor is not another magazine. It is readers attention and time," said Josh Quittner, editor-in-chief of *Business 2.0*.

My assertion is that papers and magazines must create new value to maintain readerships if they are to continue to play a pivotal role in society.

One way is to approach and empower readers and create deeper relationships with them. Blogging is a promising concept and a new channel of special interest to publishers, as is podcasting. The latter will not be dealt with in detail in this paper, but the same reasoning applies.

"Just because you're a media publisher doesn't mean that you should be in all media," said Quittner. Innovation Journalism trying to get acceptance in newsrooms can benefit from the emergence of blogs and contribute to a needed paradigm in publishing and journalism.

Ongoing debate questions whether blogging is journalism. Though an interesting topic—sometimes blogs are journalism, sometimes not³—I will not contribute to that debate here.

The ubiquitous question in this paper is this:

How can concepts such as blogging and podcasting be assets for reporters and writers in a journalistic endeavor (covering different beats)?

To answer this question, I've interviewed journalist who are blogging and their editors-in-chief, and searched the net for interesting perspectives on the subject.

³ Bloggers vs. Journalists is Over, Jay Rosen, Pressthink.com, March, 15, 2006

3 What is blogging?

3.1 Emerging technologies converging into new ones

The blog is a publishing innovation, a digital newswire that, due to the proliferation of the Internet, low production and distribution costs, ease of use and really simple syndication (RSS), creates a new and powerful push-pull publishing concept. As such, it changes the power structures in journalism, giving yesterday's readers the option of being today's journalists and tomorrow's preferred news aggregators.

3.2 The roaming of ideas

Blogging is a concept whereas publishing text on the web is combined with its syndication. Users or other bloggers subscribe to these syndication feeds (RSS-feeds), which automatically appear on the subscriber's website, blog or in a newsreader.

"The central virtue of blogging, I've decided, is that in the proverbial agora, or online marketplace of ideas, bloggers are like Socrates on speed,"⁴ wrote Chris Mooney, the 2005 winner of the Scientific American's Science and Technology Web award.

Though Mooney calls the blogosphere a marketplace, blogging is also the roaming—as in cellular network—of ideas in marketplaces or networks. These roaming networks are growing and gaining importance. Blogs number 30 million worldwide, promoted by the often-free blogging service providers like Blogger and Wordpress.

3.3 Technology with at mission

"Trying to engage audiences in conversation should be a primary goal for news organizations. It's what a democracy needs and what news organizations are meant to support,"⁵ wrote the authors of Hypergene, a blog committed to furthering the concept of citizen journalism.

Lawrence Lessig, a law professor at Stanford and an Internet visionary, argues that as people become immune to traditional streamlined and broadcasted messages, blogging presents an opportunity for communities to arise, assuming that individuals must congregate around issues important to them if they are to act with power.

⁴ Post-Gazette.com, How blogging changed journalism – almost, February 2, 2003

⁵ Hypergene.net Not allowing conversations is immoral, March 9, 2006

Lessig states "...the blog may be the first innovation from the Internet to make a real difference in election politics." Blogs engage people to act, he concluded.

The marketplace for technological ideas is not dissimilar⁶ from the marketplace for political ones. Lessig's reasoning applies, maybe even more so, to the technology arena where blogging is more common than in any other space, except maybe in politics.

But for Josh Quittner, who runs *Business 2.0* magazine, blogs and bloggers are positive elements in media that keep journalism honest.

"I don't think blogs are something that big media should get into. It doesn't make business sense, attracting a few thousand readers, compared to the print version, we print 630,000 copies a month and blogs should be independent voices. It is a question of credibility," he said. Yet Quittner promotes blogging among staff members. "It makes them better reporters. It widens their network and creates the basis for good analysis," he said.

4 The Significance of Blogs to Journalists

Blogs are goldmines for journalists doing professional and crafted work. The blogosphere is a huge source to tap, using services like Tecnorati.com (a blog search engine) and Googlenews, for new ideas, arguments and leads to new stories and for follow-ups on stories on other sites.

I had my first experience using blogs as a resource when I wrote a story on Pay-Pal for *CNNMoney.com* about how the company was about to enter the mobile-payment scene. Postings on jobsites revealed that Pay-Pal was hiring senior staff to lead this development within the company. After researching the company, talking to analysts and researching competition, it was clear that Pay-Pal was serious about it. The published story roamed the blogosphere and, within a week, received more than 500 posts. The sites that published the story were blogs, networks of communities with an interest in different aspects of the story—whether mobile payments, stockholders of Paypal or Ebay, who owns the company, news about the technology that evidently would be used and so on. One story became relevant to a variety of beats covering blogs.

5 Issues in Blogging

But there are snakes in this new media 'Garden of Eden.' Rumors seem to have a natural habitat in the blog world, as well as ranting and personal opinions. The

⁶ David Nordfors, 2006

issues of trust and reliability are difficult. In a blogpost⁷ in *The Spokesman Review*, blog reporter Ken Paulman pinpoints the issue publishers must address:

“We hold all news to the same standards, regardless of whether it's online or in print. But that raises a question: do readers hold information they read on the Internet to a different standard? Do you trust a story more because it's in black-and-white on a sheet of newsprint, or does it make a difference? What about typos and grammatical errors?”

Siliconbeat.com, a blog issued by the *San Jose Mercury News* covering the startup scene in Silicon Valley, is attracting around 10,000 readers daily. The increased readership they've experienced is based on the information being relevant, not necessarily trustworthy in a way accepted in traditional print publishing.

“We pass information to our readers that wouldn't have made the sheet” said Michael Bazeley, one of two blogging editors on Siliconbeat. “We've gained readership and interest, but we don't process the information [the same way] we do for the paper, so it's less of an effort,” he said. Readers apparently feel confident that they can decipher hard news and information from opinion, but it is up to those readers.

Much of the success is also due to the blog's more free tone of voice. “Journalists who blog the way they write in the paper is not interesting” Michael Bazeley says.

“Blog responsibly, and you'll build a reputation for being a trusted news source. Don't, and you won't have a reputation to worry about,”⁸ writes John Hiler.

6 Why Should Newspapers Blog?

Magazines and papers should consider blogging to build their legitimacy in targeted communities and societies. The transitional nature of business and media consumption must be considered if publishing houses want to prevail in their chosen markets.

By entering the blog world, papers connect to new readers via sites like Technorati. This is a way of building a new audience. *PC World*, for instance, being a big media player, is proud of being accepted in the blogosphere and referred to by other bloggers. This way, the magazine reaches readers it would not have otherwise.

Blogs can build communities, whether communities of interest or of best practice. Magazines and staff can aggregate not news, but also interests, establishing forums for dialogue among participants and strengthening the bonds to its readers.

⁷ Spokesmanreview.com, Do you trust blogs?, March 9, 2006

⁸ <http://www.microcontentnews.com/articles/blogosphere.htm>, 2002

Through blogs papers have a channel for niche content that otherwise wouldn't have found its way to readers.

Communities breed on relevant and reliable information. A newspaper or blog can grow if it provides relevant and reliable information to leaders in its targeted communities. The differences between traditional papers and blogs are that the latter can be more 'open' to their audiences, letting readers participate in making stories, and, in extreme cases, letting readers publish their own stories.

Traditional printing is an expensive process, especially in metropolitan areas. And as sites like Craigslist.org, free after text ads, demolish the traditional revenue model for papers, the cost of printing will be harder to justify. Papers are slow and money-sucking operations, or as Shel Israel, author of the book *Naked Conversations*, put it "In the Information Age, the newspaper has become a cumbersome and inefficient distribution mechanism. If you want fast delivery of news, paper is a stage coach competing with jet planes."⁹ By blogging some beats or sections that normally run in print, publications would expand their audience as well attract new readers through blogging using fewer resources. '

Blogs are also a way of using journalists more effectively. All information, given that it is relevant, that actually does not fit into the paper can be channeled through blogs, allowing the readers to choose what to read or not. This enables a dialogue, a sense of ownership and participation that is essential in creating communities.

Traditional big media will not become obsolete. "Blogs add a new dimension to traditional publishing," said Harry McCracken, editor-in-chief at *PC World* and the man behind *PC World's* award-winning *Techlog*. McCracken means that blogs are a low-investment and low-risk enterprise, as opposed to traditional media projects.

According to Josh Quittner, big media is still ahead. Quittner's vision is grand: "There is mass media today, and there will be class media tomorrow. The five dollars we charge today for a subscription does not even cover the distribution costs of the magazine. Ten to fifteen years ahead, when our paper is a luxury item and wanted by fewer, those that can will pay the \$50 per copy price. Those that will be able to buy the magazine will be very attractive to advertisers"

7 Conclusion

Media as a shared experience and even a co-op between producers and consumers is a novel idea and presents new opportunities, as well as new challenges. Blogs can connect new readers to a publication and keep old readers loyal. By democratizing media in this way, readers have an opportunity to "vote" instantly on issues that are relevant to them. In that regard, blogs are better off serving their democratic legacy.

⁹ Merging Newspapers & Blogs March, 9, 2006 <http://redcouch.typepad.com>

For innovation journalism, blogs present a tool for analyzing trends and current events faster by having fruitful, synchronous conversations with the market. In other words, to be in the loop and, in many cases, reclaim a pivotal point in communities.

8 Recommendations

- Magazines and papers should consider adding blogs to their offerings and doing it before media-rich content such as podcasting and Vlogs (videoblogs) become part of the mix. “Highschool kids (the iPod generation) do assignments in video these days,” said Josh Quittner.
- Journalists: Start blogging if you have something to say and you want to say it.
- Managers: Encourage staff to blog, or recruit bloggers that seem to be doing it right. “The best blogs I read are not made by journalists,” said McCracken. Do not force anyone to blog unless they are willing to engage and commit themselves to keeping the conversation going.
- Try a new beat as a blog. If it fails, try a different one.

Patrick Baltatzis is writer at Entreprenör magazine in Stockholm. He’s a former entrepreneur himself, running Ant Colony, a freelance manager service in Sweden, for 4 years . Now he’s back in the corporate loop and have been working for the Swedish managers union Ledarna and now at The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise and their magazine Entreprenör. Patrick attended the Kaospilot university as an undergraduate student, and as part of that program had a tenure in San Francisco in 1996-97 working with Howard Rheingold and his webplay Electric Minds.

Appendix

Business 2.0 Gigaom.com | B2Day.com

Monthly *Business 2.0* magazine, positioning itself as the playbook for the entrepreneurial-minded, has two blogs: Gigaom.com and B2Day. For a monthly like *Business 2.0*, blogging provides an opportunity to share daily conversation, deepening the relationship with readers. But mostly, blogging is a way for the magazine to develop its position in the fields it covers.

Gigaom, run by award-winning tech journalist Om Malik, targets the broadband industry and readers interested in developments in that industry. Malik presents information in a personal way—you can actually hear his voice, news, analysis and predictions of the developments in the broadband marketplace.

B2Day is a blog about new business and a forum for Editor-At-Large Eric Schonfeld.

Siliconbeat.com (<http://www.siliconbeat.com>)

Daily *San Jose Mercury News* has a technology-oriented blog called Siliconbeat. The blog, started in 2004, is an endeavor that was endorsed by the paper at a time when the paper did not have a blog strategy. Therefore, they separated the blog from paper and created a different brand for it.

“Our readers do not read papers, so we figured we’d reach them with a blog,” said Michael Bazeley, who, together with Matt Marshall, runs Siliconbeat. The blog attracts 10 000 regular readers, and the two contributing editors write up to ten posts a day.

PCworld Techlog ([http:// blogs.pcworld.com/techlog](http://blogs.pcworld.com/techlog))

The Techlog is run buy *PC World* Editor-In-Chief Harry McCracken. He posts once a day about news in the technology sector. With more than 200 000 page views a month, his blog is the most visited feature on *PCWorld.com*. “When we started with blogs in 2004. We were afraid of putting unedited content on the Web. It has shown that this is what actually makes them work,” said McCracken. He added that many stories that have reached the paper edition of *PC World* started as unedited information on the blog.