



Death by Blog?

An examination of the relevance of mainstream media in the era of citizen journalism

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The article examines the impact blogs are having on mainstream media when it comes to the delivery of news and political affairs. Focusing primarily on the Canadian situation, the article explores the growth and composition of the blogosphere, the state of mainstream media, the positive impact blogs are having on mainstream media, and the weaknesses of blogs as a vehicle for the delivery of news and political affairs. Ultimately, it is concluded that the mainstream media has been adapting to the blogosphere and is far from relinquishing its role to the citizen journalist. Moreover, there is early evidence that citizen driven blogs may be increasing the relevance of mainstream media and forcing journalists to be more accurate and accountable.



In 2002, the outspoken Republican Trent Lott resigned from the U.S. Senate after racist remarks he made at a colleague's birthday party caught the attention of the media and were widely publicized. *Meet the Press* was the first of literally hundreds of mainstream news outlets to discuss the comments (Kline & Burstein, 2005:11); however, the story originated on the Internet and had been circulating for quite some time before the mainstream media picked it up. This was perhaps the first real, and very public, instance of weblogs or 'blogs' breaking a political story. Blogs are websites that resemble personal diaries where the author posts thoughts, opinion and comment usually focused on a specific topic. Many blogs are arranged in reverse chronological order and contain numerous hyperlinks to other web sites (Frost, 2004; Blood, 2002). The blogging public, on the other hand, are often known as bloggers and the most popular *bloggers* as the *bloggerati*. They, along with other technophiles were sent into frenzy over the Lott affair. Heaps of praise were given for this new citizen-driven communication tool and its promise for enhancing democracy. Indeed, it was one of the crowning achievements of blogs and marked the introduction of the *blogosphere* – the world of blogs in their entirety - as a new arena for political debate and citizen engagement.

The Lott incident gave rise to what has become a seemingly endless debate over the actual impact and utility of blogs and the blogosphere. Some have gone so far as to argue that blogs are replacing, or decentering, the mainstream media when it comes to delivering news and political affairs and informing policymaking. In a new book dedicated to the issue, technological guru and cultural icon Adam Curry, who is widely credited as the founder of podcasting, told Kline and Burstein that blogging represents 'the liberation of the news and information we read, watch or hear from the constraints of Big Media Control' (Kline & Burstein, 2005: 271). Many academics have agreed. According to Jay Rosen at New York University, 'professional journalism has entered a period of declining sovereignty in news, politics and the provision of facts to public debate' (Kline & Burstein, 2005: 319). One can't help but feel that the communication landscape is changing, perhaps irrevocably, with reports that 40,000 new blogs are created every day, or one new blog each second. However, a closer look at the state of the blogosphere and an examination of its relationship to mainstream media like television and the press suggests that this initial optimism about the place and impact of the citizen-blogger or citizen-journalist may have been somewhat inflated. Rather, the growth and development of the

blogosphere seems to be having the opposite effect, by reinforcing the dominance and continued health of mainstream media at a time when pundits are lamenting a decline in its relevance.

This article highlights the importance of mainstream media as a vehicle for news and political affairs. Being a Canadian researcher, and recognizing the state of mainstream media varies from country to country, the article focuses primarily on the Canadian context. Ultimately, it is concluded that mainstream media is adapting to new technologies, such as those that support the blogosphere and is far from relinquishing its role to the citizen-blogger. This is demonstrated through an initial examination of the growth and composition of the blogosphere as well as an examination of the current state of mainstream media. Interviews this researcher conducted with members of the mainstream media in Canada highlight the positive impact that blogs are having on traditional media. Finally, some of the fundamental problems with blogs that purport to deliver news and political affairs are illustrated pointing to advantages mainstream media have in the delivery of such information.

Growth and Composition of the Blogosphere

To start let's look at what we know about blogs. Thanks to sites such as Technorati.com, we know that the blogosphere is growing by leaps and bounds. While it is impossible to say with certainty how many blogs are out there, it is estimated that there are over 50 million (Technorati.com, 2006). Growth has been happening very quickly and it is argued that the blogosphere doubles in size approximately every six months. Today, it is estimated that the blogosphere is 100 times bigger than it was just three years ago (Technorati.com, 2006).

There are blogs on any topic you can imagine. For example, 'Bloggers Blog' is a blog for bloggers with news and trends related to blogging (Bloggersblog.com). 'Cute Overload' is a blog that collects and posts 'cute' images - primarily of animals (Cuteoverload.com). This site was a 2006 Winner of the 'Webby Awards' in the People's Voice category. There is 'Crazy-ass family' – a blog created and updated by a mother blogging about her family. As she says 'you just can't make this stuff up' (Crazyassfamily.blogspot.com). For a list of some award winning blogs from around the world, one can visit the weblog awards site (Weblogawards.org). This is just a glimpse into the diverse content found in the blogosphere. News and political affairs only constitute one small category of blog in the expansive



blogosphere; but this doesn't mean people will turn to blogs instead of television, newspapers or even online alternative news sites for the information they need to participate meaningfully in society. Many blogs are often not kept up-to-date. According to technorati.com only 55% of new blogs remain active after their first three months of existence. This means that almost half of new blogs become virtually useless as a means of gathering news and information within a very short time. Of those more diligent bloggers, 11% are updated on a weekly basis and only a select few of well-known blogs such as *Instapundit.com* or *DailyKos.com* are updated regularly and, it should be noted, in some cases more regularly than some mainstream news sites (Technorati.com, 2006). Yet again, a weekly update is problematic for news and political junkies who have become used to and demand the instantaneous stream of information provided by 24-hours cable networks like *CBC Newsworld* or *CNN*.

If the ability for the blogosphere to deliver news didn't seem problematic enough, it is even further complicated by the rise of a newer beast - the 'splog'. Essentially splogs are blogs set up for the purpose of delivering spam or advertising. Some studies, such as that conducted by Umbria Communications, have shown that as many as one out of every five blogs is a splog (Umbria Communications, 2006). A recent article in *Wired* reported that the 'splogosphere' is growing even faster than the blogosphere and over half of the blogs are spam (Mann, 2006: 106).

The State of Mainstream Media

In addition to the early evidence that blogs might not be an ideal place to find reliable news and information, there are signs that individuals are well aware of this and not yet ready to abandon their more trusted news sources. The number of visits made to even the most popular blogs still tends to fall far short of the number of viewers that tune-in to the evening television news (Kline & Burstein, 2005:5). In fact, more traditional media such as television and newspapers have been doing fairly well. Statistics Canada tells us newspaper and advertising revenue has been on the rise (Statistics Canada, 2005). More significantly, the industry witnessed an increase in circulation revenue between 2003 and 2004, a time when blogs were supposed to be rapidly growing in popularity. Other evidence indicates that over half of all adults read a newspaper every day and the amount of time spent doing this has remained stable in spite of the competition of blogs (Canadian Newspaper Association, 2006). Perhaps this is because newspapers remain accessible, and

are more tactile, portable, easily shared, and are often available in coffee shops and other places where citizens tend to congregate and gossip about and discuss the news of the day.

Canadian and foreign news and public affairs programs, on both conventional and specialty pay television, have also enjoyed increased popularity during the time that blogs are supposed to have been stealing significant portions of the audience share. People are just not turning away from the familiar and they aren't as comfortable with using blogs as some of the most ardent advocates might have us believe. In March 2005, the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that 62% of Americans who are regularly online weren't really sure what a blog was (Beeson, 2005:18). The situation hasn't improved with time. In February of 2006, a Gallup Poll showed reading blogs at the bottom of a list of 13 popular online activities, with 60% of respondents stating that they never read blogs (Bowman, 2006: 88).

The Positive Impact of Blogs on Mainstream Media

Despite this rather bleak picture of the blogosphere, blogs have had a very important role and significant impact on how mainstream media conducts its business. Interviews with editors, reporters and producers with some of Canada's most recognized mainstream media outlets, such as *The Globe and Mail*, *The National Post*, *The Toronto Star*, *CBC* and *CTV* reveal some interesting results. Counter to criticism that blogs may be allowing for laziness among journalists by enabling them to gather information via blogs, many journalists have indicated that blogs make them more accountable to the public and are forcing them to work harder. As Raj Ahluwalia, producer at the *CBC*, explained: 'For everything you do someone is watching. People are able to critique and have an outlet to critique. It makes you more conscious of what you say...you double or even triple check your facts' (interview with author). Members of the mainstream media may be right to feel concerned, as bloggers are aware of their power. As some early bloggers discussing their relationship with mainstream media have stated: 'It's 2001 and we can Fact Check your ass' (Matheson, 2004: 452) - slightly crude, but nonetheless true.

Blogs are not only pressuring the mainstream media to do its job better, but they are also bolstering its relevance. Blogs don't exist in a vacuum. The mainstream media feeds the blogging public by keeping people informed and providing them material on which to offer their



opinions or comments. And almost all blogs – particularly those focused on news and political affairs – link to existing mainstream media sites. The number of bloggers (excepting mainstream journalists who blog) who actually gather and report their own news is negligible. For the most part, they tend to comment on the work done by the mainstream media (Kline & Burstein, 2005: 241).

Many of the bloggers who argue that blogs are decentring mainstream media have neglected to note that the mainstream media has been embracing the blogosphere. Blogs provide journalists with access to a wealth of ideas and viewpoints of people from all walks of life and communities. Effectively, this helps them to ensure that more voices are heard in the mainstream media (Kline & Burstein, 2005: xv). By surfing community or issue specific blogs, journalists can get an idea of what members of the public are saying on any number of issues. However, while awareness of public sentiment is important, journalists have shown a reluctance to rely on information gathered solely from blogs, pointing to their increased need to fact check as noted above.

Mainstream media has also embraced the blogosphere by becoming active participants as journalists establish their own websites and blogs. Websites constructed by the mainstream media are doing exceptionally well. *CNN's* site attracts over 22 million users a month and *The New York Times* more than 10 million a month (Kline & Burstein, 2005:241). This is far beyond what most popular political news blogs receive. Many journalists, such as *ABC News* foreign correspondent Jim Scuitto, have established 'war-blogs' allowing them to communicate from the front lines. A quick search of sites such as *Cyberjournalist.net* show just how quickly journalists and mainstream media institutions have been to set up their own blogs. In October of 2003, *Cyberjournalist.net* linked to 77 institutional blogs (Matheson, 2004:450). Today, three years later, it shows 180 institutional blogs, a further 82 blogs set up by mainstream media for a limited period (usually during a specific event) and a further 94 blogs written by journalists, but not hosted on their affiliated news sites (*Cyberjournalist.net*, 2006). Taken together, this represents a growth of close to 400% over a 3-year period. And it's not just the American media going online. Maclean's popular columnist Paul Wells writes one of the most widely read Canadian political blogs and there are at least eleven blogs by various columnists at the *Toronto Star*. The *National Post* is home to seven blogs while the *Globe and Mail* hosts eight. Television is not getting left behind. The *CTV* website has a blog for Kris Abel called

'Tech Life.' Kevin Newman, Global Television's National Anchor, has been hosting a blog with posts going back to May 2005. The CBC has an official blog appropriately titled 'Inside the CBC'. Its Radio 3 website is also home to a blog.

Institutional and professional blogs differ from the main news organization's website. Typically, information and opinion are intertwined with existing biases presented in an up-front manner. Blogs show utility here as they solicit feedback and allow for interactivity in a way that is difficult for the news organization itself. Many blogs offer a 'comments' feature where anyone can go to submit a comment or to provide further information (MacKinnon, 2004). The tendency to provide hyper-links to a plethora of other sources, including other media outlets and blogs, also lends to uniqueness. In general the main news organization's websites tend to shy away from linking to competing media for fear of losing its audience.

Institutionalization of the Media and the Weakness of Blogs

It is important to remember that mainstream media has the advantages of institutional establishment and resources for delivering news and political affairs. Members of the Press Gallery are given a pass that gives them access to the Parliamentary precinct without needing to constantly clear security; this pass provides access to the 'scrums' where media have the unique opportunity to question politicians on a regular basis. It is a time and place that is really reserved for accredited journalists. The average citizen and even many Hill staffers – those working for individual MPs and Senators or for Parliament - are not allowed access to the scrum area at that time. Election campaigns are another prime example. In Canada, various members of the mainstream media are usually assigned to follow a particular party during the campaign. This means going on tours with them – a rather costly venture that isn't open to everyone. Journalists have the privilege of access; bloggers, for the most part, don't.

The institutionalization of mainstream media also means that it is supposed to be an unbiased, objective source of information. Bloggers, by contrast, are not subject to the same professional standards or obligations. This typically leads one to question the veracity of information they might read on a blog. As Tyler Hamilton, an Internet Reporter and Blogger with the *Toronto Star* argues:



It's the fact journalists working for media outlets are paid that keeps us unbiased, because we are in the business of providing quality journalism to readers. But how do I know, reading a blog, that the person behind it isn't being paid behind the scenes by an organization to say certain things? We don't. But if I get caught in the same situation at work, I get in trouble. I can't take junkets. Bloggers can (interview with author).

It's not just the inability to accept 'junkets'. Blogs by their very nature are opinion-oriented. Susan Delacourt, Bureau Chief at the *Toronto Star* explains the nature of journalism well: 'It's only real journalism when it aspires to fairness, balance and dispassionate observation' (interview with author). According to Gloria Galloway at the *Globe and Mail*, this contributes to questions regarding the credibility of blogs: 'Many operate under assumed names and most are heavily slanted – as is their right. So I would never just quote from a blog' (interview with author). Others, such as Norris McDonald at the *Toronto Star*, express similar sentiments: 'Blogging to me is done (in the main) by a bunch of egotistical know-it-alls with (mostly) axes to grind. Much of what is presented as fact is rumour or twisted. There is next-to-no credibility' (interview with author).

Technophiles like to point out that in spite of their lack of access to institutionalized newsgathering resources bloggers have managed to 'break' stories such as the unfortunate comments made by Lott that forced him to resign. In the United States bloggers are credited for exposing Dan Rather and questioning the documents he used on the CBS Nightly News to discredit President Bush's military record. Blogactive.com broke a major story when it published audio of Republican Congressman Edward Schrock, a well-known opponent to gay rights in the U.S., soliciting men for sex (Kline & Burstein, 2005: 12). Most recently in business news, a blogger was credited with leaking information and photos of Research in Motion Ltd.'s new version of the Blackberry – the 'Pearl' (Avery, 2006). But perhaps the best known, or most memorable, example of a blog breaking a story was seen in 1998 when Matt Drudge, author of 'The Drudge Report' wrote about former President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky (BBC, 1998).

However, these kinds of blogging effects are less evident in Canada. In a 2005 story, 'Are Canadian Bloggers Pussies?' Siri Agreil found that 'in a year when American bloggers led major stories on both sides of the border and Canadian politics reached new levels of intrigue and animosity, political blogs in this country made little

– if any – impact' (Agreil, 2005). Agreil attributes this to the 'polite, self-deprecating modus operandi' and a fear of being accused of libel that is typical of Canadians. Bloggers themselves blame the public and lack of interest in the political process. 'It's not that we're pussies or afraid' Catherine McMillan, author of *Small Dead Animals*, one of Canada's political blogs, told Agreil. 'The key difference, I think, is that our traffic levels need to build and the network itself needs to build' (Agreil, 2005). However, as *National Post* editor Mick Higgins remarked, even in those few cases in the U.S. where bloggers have managed to break stories 'it does seem that it took the mainstream media to highlight the work of the bloggers to get it to a wider audience' (interview with author). This is well illustrated by the *Meet the Press* coverage of the Lott scandal.

In speaking to Agreil, Catherine McMillan laments that lack of credibility is contributing to the low flow of traffic on blog sites. Again, the question of credibility surfaces in relation to the blogosphere where rumor and innuendo have tended to be favoured over facts. Remembering the words of its longest serving former editor C.P. Scott, who once stated 'comment is free, but facts are sacred', *The Guardian* in the United Kingdom launched a new blog titled 'Comment is Free' or CiF (Comment is Free). It exhibits the problem of the blog as a means of news delivery and issues related to credibility well. CiF was meant to be a forum where anyone could comment and columnists could engage directly with readers. Georgina Henry of *The Guardian* describes the result of this experiment as a 'rude shock.' There are days, she says:

When I have spent hours removing the anti-Semitism and Islamophobia that dances round any piece about Israel/Palestine, and the incoherent abuse, swearing, the false statements, the ill-disguised misogyny, the intimidation and the downright nastiness that fuels so many comments, I wonder whether Guardian values – free comment, but fair comment too – are in danger of being drowned out in an anarchic, unmoderated medium (Henry, 2006).

Such statements are very common on blogs and are evidence that many are simply electronic diaries of a sort that are used as an outlet for rants and extremism as opposed to the more balanced work that the mainstream media is supposed to provide.

The long and short of it is that while blogs are in no part going to decentre or displace traditional media, they do serve a very useful function and purpose. They are helping mainstream media do its job better by providing access to people who might not otherwise be able



to reach a large audience, and also by serving as a system of checks and balances to ensure facts really do remain sacred. However, the mainstream media is not under any great threat when it comes to their command over the production of news and political affairs. Its institutionalization and resources provide access to political players in a way that the average citizen-blogger (as opposed to the journalist *qua* blogger) could never hope to obtain. Mainstream media outlets have also demonstrated an ability to adapt to new media such as blogs and are still well received by audiences. Television, and to a lesser extent newspapers, continue to be the dominant sources of information for citizens on the pressing news and information of the day. Given the proclivity of bloggers to substitute gossip and innuendo for facts and figures, it is questionable whether they will ever receive the same level of credibility as more conventional and trusted news formats.

While this article has demonstrated the growth of the blogosphere, it has argued that mainstream media retains its dominance when it comes to the delivery of news and political affairs. A look at the state of mainstream media shows its continued health. Issues such as 'slogs', timeliness and the prevalence of rumor are contributing to a general reluctance on the part of society to abandon traditional media. And, as was noted, the audience tuning in to the evening news on television continues to surpass the traffic to the most popular blogs. An examination of the benefits enjoyed by mainstream

media organizations and their willingness, and ability, to adapt to new media have also pointed toward an inflated sense of euphoria on the part of those arguing their displacement in favour of the citizen-blogger. Rather, mainstream media's embracement and awareness of new media, such as the blogosphere, is allowing it to better serve democratic society. It can better understand public sentiment. It has an increased capacity for interactivity. And, it provides material for the blogging public while at the same time becoming increasingly accountable for its work and actions.

Before worrying that more traditional media will become obsolete we should also remember that similar claims have been made in the past. The emergence of television sent many people into a tizzy about the future of books and radio (Keith, 2000: 11). Likewise, the emergence of the Internet led many others to doubt the survival of television (Tapscott, 1998), and it was rumored that shopping malls might disappear with the growth of e-commerce. New technologies don't always mean the death of old technologies; rather we should question how they are changing and even as we've seen here strengthening more established forms of media. Citizen-driven media is not a new phenomenon. During the Renaissance individuals created self-published 'commonplace books'. Underground newspapers and various counter-cultural publications have existed worldwide. Such media has existed alongside a thriving mainstream media and so will blogs.



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