Blogging journalists: the writing on the wall

How blogging has changed how journalists see news processes

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While much has been written about the potential of blogs to transform journalism, little research exists on if and how that potential has been realized as mainstream media have adopted the format. Based on a survey of 200 professional journalists with blogs in 29 countries, this paper seeks to identify what effect, if any, blogging has had on professional journalism practice. The findings suggest that, in generating ideas and leads, in gathering information, in news production, and most of all in the relationship with the audience, the networked, iterative and conversational nature of the blog format is changing how many journalists work in a number of ways.

Blogs have become part of new organisations' editorial furniture. As of 2008, 70% of US newspapers ([PEJ, 2008](#)), 85% of UK news organisations, and 44% of European news organisations ([Oriella PR Network, 2008](#)) were offering journalist-authored blogs, and all the signals from editors and management suggested these figures would continue to rise.

Previous studies have focused on how newsroom cultures have reacted to the rise of the online newsroom (Boczkowski 2004, Friend & Singer 2007, Paterson & Domingo, 2008), and how news organisation blogs themselves have adopted the format (Singer, 2005; Robinson, 2006); and much has been written of the potential of blogs for journalism as a whole (Gillmor 2004, Wall 2005, Beckett 2008), but few have looked at the perceptions of journalists themselves of how blogging has affected their processes.

Based on a survey of 200 professional journalists with blogs in 30 countries, this paper seeks to explore those perceptions and identify areas for further research. In this paper 'blogging' refers specifically to blogs produced by professional journalists who either work for a news organisation or as a freelance journalist. In their short history the format has undergone a number of generic developments: beginning as lists of links to similar sites, then becoming more personal (Blood, 2000), more professional, and more corporatised as they have been adopted by a range of organisations. Media organisations have started blogs by their own journalists, [employed bloggers on their staff](#), teamed up with blogging and citizen journalism operations (Gant, 2007), and targeted them for takeovers ([The Outlook 2007](#), MacManus 2008). More recently there have been suggestions that blogging as a whole has lost its relational focus in the jostle for attention (MacManus, 2008), or that successful bloggers curb their creativity in the consciousness of a wider audience (Lowrey & Latta, in Paterson & Domingo, 2008) while much of the personal material that was previously published on blogs is now being published on 'lifestreaming' and 'microblogging' platforms like Twitter (Perez, 2008).

Of particular interest to this research is what has happened to journalistic processes in this meeting of cultures, particularly as journalism undergoes a process of adapting in the face of technological, social and economic changes (Lowrey, 2006; Wall 2005; Robinson 2006).

Lowrey (2006) sees blogging as an occupation, noting that bloggers see themselves as part of a community that shares values, rituals and language, organising conferences, and exploring codes of ethics. As Singer notes (2005), professional journalists who blog have had to negotiate this occupational culture alongside their own, and these cultures differ in important ways. Blogs, for example, are typically opinionated, while US journalism at least
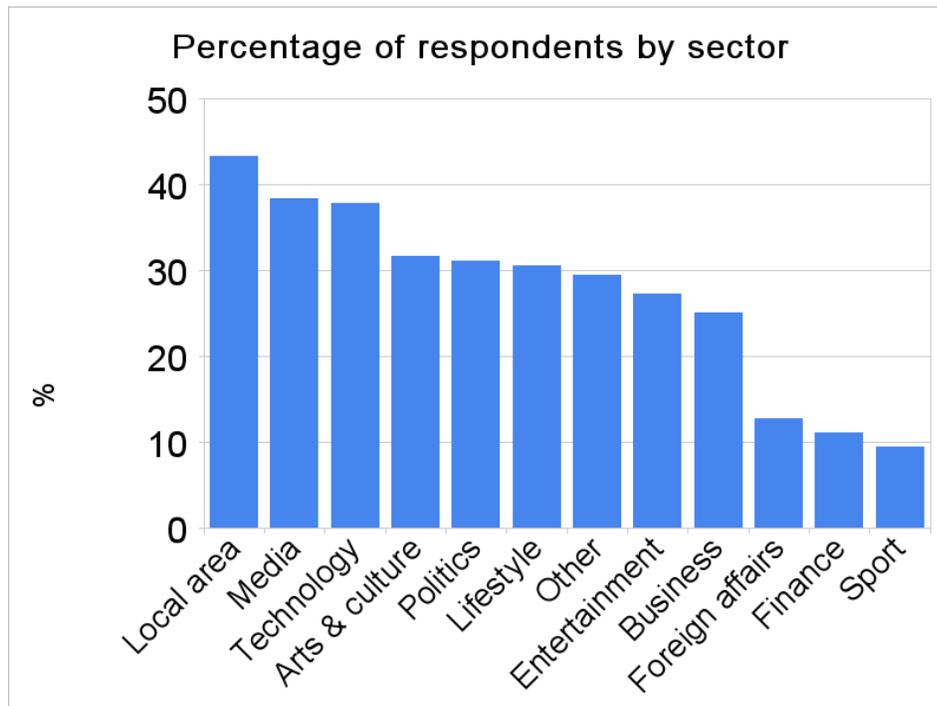
aspires to objectivity (this is not the case in the UK - see Hampton, 2008); blogs treat the audience as a co-creator, while traditional journalism treats them as a passive recipient; and whereas blog journalism is incomplete and fragmented, traditional journalism is structured and closed (Lowrey 2006; Wall, 2005: 162). Ultimately, Lowrey argues, it is "the organisation of production [that] is the most fundamental distinction between journalism and blogging" (2006: 480), and this is what this research is primarily concerned with.

Methodology

To consider whether journalists feel blogging has affected their working processes an online survey was distributed in June and July 2008. A self-completing survey method was chosen due to its efficiency, scalability and global reach (Robson, 2002). A diverse range of distribution channels, both public and internal, were used in an attempt to attract a diversity of respondents, and both open and closed questions were used to draw a large response and allow respondents to answer in their own terms (Bryman, 2001).

Respondents came from all sectors of the news industry. Almost half of respondents worked in the newspaper industry, and a third were online-only or freelance. Television, radio and magazine journalists accounted for the lowest proportions respectively. Half of respondents worked in North America, and a further fifth in the UK, with the remainder coming from mainland Europe, South America, Australia, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

The respondents reported on a wide range of sectors, and most covered more than one. Local journalism made up the largest proportion (43%), but media and technology correspondents also contributed heavily. Along with a number of well-represented areas such as business, politics, lifestyle and culture, there was a 'long tail' of small numbers of respondents covering 'Other' areas ranging from education and health to travel and the environment.

Percentage of respondents by sector

Sector	%
Local area	43.5
Media	38.5
Technology	38
Arts & culture	31.5
Politics	31
Lifestyle	30.5
Other	29.5
Entertainment	27.5
Business	25
Foreign affairs	13
Finance	11
Sport	9.5

It is important to note that generalising from this study should be done with caution, given the diversity of nationality, industry, sector and blogging experience of respondents. The study is intended to highlight a number of areas that warrant further research.

Blogs and news ideas: "The canary in the mine"

For blogging journalists, blogs have disrupted the traditional processes of journalism in a number of ways. Respondents spoke of a clearer perception of audience needs and interests as a result of comments and visitor statistics, which in turn fed into the selection of topics and angles to cover. In some cases ideas themselves were posted by journalists on their blogs and the development of the story guided by reader feedback, often changing in the process. This disintermediation of the editor role was reinforced by those who saw the agenda-setting role of the editor as being reduced - understandably, as the editorial role of determining who the reader is, and what that reader wants, is undermined when writers, through their blogs, have a closer and more immediate access to that information. In some cases reader feedback resulted in stories being covered which would have otherwise fallen through Tuchman's (1978) 'news net'.

At the same time there is a framing of blogging and the blogosphere in old media terms. For many respondents, the most important change brought by blogs was an increased need for speed. Spotting trends early, or following the "chatter", were also mentioned, suggesting that the 'herd instinct' of mainstream media remains. Blogs are sometimes "the canaries in the coal mine" (Respondent 69, US, Online).

The often highlighted (McNair, 1998; Allan, 2004; Deuze 2008) reliance of journalists on public relations firms, pressure groups and diary events is also being affected: respondents spoke of a broadening of the range of contacts and of the sources of ideas for potential stories. Some spoke of thinking in terms of multimedia or interactivity, in turn opening new approaches to some ideas and leads.

Many mentioned getting story leads from comments on the blog or through private communication initiated via the blog. Others noted the ease of accessing contacts through other blogs, representing an important challenge to traditional theories of news processes which rely on routinisation, predictability, and an "understanding that society is bureaucratically structured [which] furnishes the reporter with a 'map of relevant knowers' for newsworthy topics." (Allan, 2004, p62). For some reporters, that map is being redrawn along networked lines.

Blogs and story research: "We swapped info"

As journalists move onto gathering information for a story, the scope of easily accessible sources is made broader by journalists' involvement in blogs. It may be that in some cases the process of 'having an idea in public', as highlighted above, means that story research is increasingly done by readers before, or alongside, that done by the journalist. Once they begin pursuing a story some journalists are using the blog format as a way to 'put the call out' for information and sources while they work.

Although journalists asking members of the public for information on a story is nothing new, the nature of the relationship appears to be different, in that it is a two-way, ongoing process:

> "On hot-button stories where our readers are asking a lot of questions, we post updates every time we make a phone call. For example, [a company] declared bankruptcy and the new owner wouldn't take the previous owner's gift cards. Our readers were peeved and hounding us to do something. The corporate folks weren't saying anything so we didn't have any new information to report. Because we didn't have any new info, we didn't write anything in the paper. But on our blog, we would post updates at least daily to tell people when we left a message and if we had heard back yet. We eventually scored an interview with the new CEO and posted it in its entirety on our site. Another reporter saw it and called us. We swapped info. Our readers also post links to other stories on the topic from other news orgs."
> (Respondent 63, US, newspapers)

In some examples, this collaboration becomes a form of crowdsourcing, with readers asked to help undertake story research. Many journalists post links to original material and ongoing updates. But for some the pressure to publish meant more reliance on rumours, and less rigorous research, with the onus placed on blog readers to clarify and fact-check.

On a practical level the actual process of newsgathering is also changing as a result of the demands of the blog. Journalists report being more likely to gather multimedia material such as images, video and audio to post on the blog - or, in the case of broadcast journalists, to gather more material than they used to, as there is now a platform for material that wouldn't otherwise make it to broadcast. "It ensures avoiding that trap of TV reporting," noted one: "one sequence, two interviews and we have a story without digging

deeper." (Respondent 156, Belgium, TV).

Blogs and news production: "I think in hyperlinks, even when working in print"

The area where respondents most often identified a change was in the rise of a looser, more personal, and less formal writing style, echoing the findings of Wall (2005). For some this fed back into work on other platforms, particularly for broadcast journalists whose work previously involved less writing. Immediacy was significant, respondents noting that they worked more quickly, breaking stories on their blogs before following up both online and in print or broadcast, and journalists also reported writing shorter, more tightly edited pieces not just for blogs but also for print and broadcast.

Conversely, the web provided a space and technology for expanding in ways that print and broadcast did not allow. "Stories that otherwise would have been footnotes in print can be explored more fully on the blog," noted one (Respondent 33, US, newspapers). Perhaps the most significant change was how blogs provided a platform for stories or detail that would otherwise not make the print or broadcast version at all. Respondents talked of augmenting coverage that "would otherwise fall in the cracks", of pieces that were interesting, but wouldn't merit space in the paper, or that use elements that "don't necessarily fit into the rigid lengths of radio pieces." It also meant journalists could link elsewhere when time or space constraints meant they were unable to report in full - to some extent fulfilling Jeff Jarvis's maxim ([2007](#)) of "Cover what you do best and link to the rest"

Post-publication: "You've got to be ready for that conversation"

In the post-publication or post-broadcast phase of journalism, blogging has introduced a more iterative and ongoing format. For some this means a weakening of the 'publish-then-move-on' habit; for others items simply have "more legs".

The ability to enter into correspondence with users, to fix errors and post updates were frequently identified as changing journalistic work, turning on its head Lowrey's sugestion that bloggers "often emphasise immediacy and opinion at the expense of accuracy" (2006) and that journalism would protect itself by focusing on editing. Responses suggest that, conversely, journalists are relying on commenters to contribute to the editing process.

The lack of print or broadcast deadlines meant journalists could, and did, add or correct information that wasn't available or was incorrect when going to press or air, while the permanence of the web meant stories were always 'live':

> "The audience remains able to comment on the content, and regularly provides information which updates it. The reporter then has the opportunity to revisit the subject, creating a great 'off diary' print story (loved by news editors everywhere)." (Respondent 126, UK, newspapers)

> "Well, you never finish, do you? You write something that may or may not spark a conversation and you've got to be ready for that conversation even if it happens months later. Besides, I find that more and more of what we do online is writing parts

of the picture, not the whole and unvarnished truth." (Respondent 147, Norway, freelance)

This importance of distribution is an emerging but important change. While the print and broadcast news industries have long-established distribution infrastructures and conventions, online news does not: it might be argued that "Everyone is a paperboy/girl now" ([Bradshaw, 2008](#)). Supporting this, journalists spoke of forwarding links to bloggers, posting updates on microblogging/texting service Twitter, and syndication through RSS, while for others the blog itself was seen primarily as a distribution tool for stories that appeared in the main news website, print or broadcast edition.

But this is a two-way process, and the most common theme mentioned by respondents with regard to post-publication was the rise of "Feedback, quick, straight, unforgiving. Miss a story or its real meanings and you're screwed." (Respondent 14, Romania, TV). Unlike 'letters to the editor', the real-time and more intimate feedback of blog comments has a real effect on the ongoing story. Respondents spoke of changing lines, articles and sometimes trashing complete stories due to comments. For some they represented unnecessary extra work, with the quality and relevance of comments varying enormously. But for many sifting through comments has led to new stories, angles and, particularly, follow ups.

Blogging and the audience relationship: "The best stories are a result of incredible conversations"

Of all areas covered by the survey the relationship with the audience was by far the most affected, with over half of respondents saying it had been "enormously" or "completely" changed. In particular, blogging journalists felt they had developed a more personal relationship with the reader, who was no longer an anonymous figure. As a consequence, journalists felt more pressure to be accountable to their readers, and less "arrogant". There was a need to make themselves understood; to explain their decisions in the face of increased and more personal feedback from a community they feel part of.

Interactivity and "conversation" were frequently mentioned:

> "I cover more than thirty countries: the reaction of people who live in a place I visit tells me a lot about the issues I am writing about. My blog seems to generate arguments which at least help me understand a story more." (Respondent 156, Belgium, TV)

For some that has led to a newfound sense of respect for readers; for others, a realisation that readers were "total idiots" (Respondent 54, US, newspapers) or had poorer comprehension than they had assumed. Journalists also identified a change in how they saw other bloggers, subscribing to more blogs and commenting or participating in discussion more often.

Commercial and bureaucratic advantages were also identified: being able to answer comments in public rather than via emails in private saved time for some, while others mentioned the ability to maintain the audience relationship between publication dates, or to attract work from employers.

Discussion and conclusion: "The writing on the wall"

Blogging has grown and developed considerably in the years since the studies of journalism blogs by Robinson (2006) and Singer (2005) - indeed, three-quarters of respondents had only started blogging since that research was published. Respondents frequently spoke of a rapid top-down culture change from resistance to wholesale adoption of blogs, in which commercial considerations have played an important role. These ranged from search engine optimisation (improving the rankings of news websites on search engines), to "bringing readers back more often"; "a cheap way of getting lots of content online and ... resulting ad impressions" (Respondent 113, UK, freelance), to a perceived opportunity to make money, and a way of protecting against the threat from citizen media and the declining state of the news industry itself.

There is evidence of 'news repair' (Robinson 2006) or normalisation (Lowrey 2006, Singer 2005, Wall 2005, Hermida 2008), as journalists seek to reassert and redefine their own work against those of amateur operators, but there is also a widespread acknowledgement of the role of the former audience in identifying, researching, verifying, and correcting the news. The evidence also supports Robinson's contention that "The notion of who is a source - and what they can say - has evolved online" (2006: 74) - which sometimes means that the blog is used as a place to publish rumours and unverified information with the aim of readers contributing to its verification.

Friend & Singer list a number of advantages that journalist-bloggers identify in the blog format, including "the ability to share information that does not fit in the limited news hole of the traditional media format, to incorporate more voices in their reporting, to get potentially valuable feedback from the public, and even to counteract media corporatization" (2007: 136). Matheson (2004) adds speed, depth and informality. To these can be added new ways of pursuing stories, access to a broader field of knowledge and therefore ideas, a multimedia-interactive mindset, and ongoing, fragmented "postmodern" (Wall, 2005) reporting.

How much journalists felt blogging had changed their work was clearly related to the work that they did. Journalists who worked outside of the institutional constraints, legacies and cultures of print or broadcast media - i.e. freelance journalists or those who worked for online-only organisations - were more likely to say that their work had been transformed "enormously" or "completely". In contrast, no one permanently employed by the television or radio industries felt that blogging had "completely" changed any aspect of their work.

Just as responses differed by industry, journalists covering certain sectors differed in how much they felt their work processes had changed. Sport journalists consistently reported less change in their processes than journalists covering other sectors. In contrast, media and technology journalists, finance and arts and culture journalists were more likely to say that blogging had changed their processes "enormously" or "completely", while journalists covering foreign affairs reported a particularly strong effect on generation of ideas and the relationship with the audience.

Lowrey's prediction that the journalism community "may try to redefine blogging as a journalistic tool, and bloggers as amateur journalists ... (rather than as a unique occupation)" (2006: 493) certainly appears to be supported, as does his contention that vulnerabilities in journalism may be repaired by increasing use of non-elite sources. The research also supports his prediction that "news organisations will try to repair these vulnerabilities on the cheap by encouraging journalists to monitor blogs, tap the specialized expertise of the blogosphere, and track stories that have staying power with audiences."

(2006: 494).

Although many respondents mentioned how blogging affected their routines in print and broadcast production, further research is needed into how much 'crossover' there is, and how much of the transformatory potential of blogging is restricted to the blog itself. Related to this are questions around which journalists blog in the first place, and how much power they have to effect wider change in the organisation. It is also important to make a distinction between journalists' perceptions of how their processes have changed, and the content they actually produce. As Matheson points out: while many journalists "are enthusiastic about the potential to rearticulate practice in the new forms that are available online, the texts that these same journalists produce do not show strong evidence of this" (2004: 444).

Finally, these are still early stages in the adoption and evolution of the blog format, with a third of respondents having only started blogging in the past year. In the same way as many non-professional bloggers have developed and changed their approach to blogging over the past few years (MacManus, 2008; Perez, 2008), journalists can be expected to change and develop as they gain similar experience and the cultures surrounding blogs change. Continual research is needed to track this change as the industry faces one of the biggest transformations in its history.

Note

Further quotes and tables available on the Online Journalism Blog at ADDRESS TBC

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