Up Close and Personal with Blogs: A Comparison of Reader Connections with Online Newspapers and Blogs

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Introduction

Weblogs (pronounced web-logs, usually shortened to blogs) have taken the online journalism world by storm. From a start of about 23 blogs in 1998, the number of active blogs today has grown to more than 4.5 million. The Media Center at the American Press Institute lists more than 400 journalists who are blogging. By writing daily journal entries and listing numerous links, these blogs are providing a sense of immediacy and connection to others that could tremendously augment a newspaper’s appeal.

The purpose of this study is to examine reader connections with two forms of online journalism – the conventional online newspaper and the not-so-conventional blog. The underlying assumption of this study is that, in an age of growing reader apathy and distrust, new forms of journalism could be successfully used to keep readers informed and engaged.

The study first presents a short history of blogs and then moves on to delineate the dynamics of blogging as a form of journalism. The second part of this study describes the methodology and presents the findings. The third part offers a discussion of the findings as well as some practical suggestions on how newspapers can enhance their community coverage through blogging and reconnect with their readers.

History

Blogs are online sites that provide a chronological listing of events, thoughts, opinions, reflections, and discussions. Each day’s entry is added to the top of the page. Previous entries move to the bottom of the page and are eventually archived. Many blogs
have a calendar in one of the side columns that allows readers to go back to any date to check the entries. Most entries are short and provide a number of links to other Web locations with relevant information. They may comment on the news, people in the news, or the day’s events or anything else they find interesting (McCarthy, 2003; O’Dwyer, 2004; Roberts, 2003). Some consider them similar to an online diary (Kornblum, 2003; Trammell, 2004). Blogs are relatively simple to produce and require little programming or Web site design knowledge (Richardson, 2004). They are a relatively new phenomenon, having started about 1998 (O’Brien, 2004). At first there were about five blogs that provided links to places on the Web that were difficult to locate. Some included short comments or personal opinions. Most of these were written by people with technical expertise in computers as they required writing computer code (Fichter, 2001, O’Brien, 2004). The advent of software that allowed blogs to be created without computer coding helped expand the number of blogs. By 2001 there were close to 80,000 blogs and by 2003 there were more than one million blogs (O’Brien, 2004). The number of blogs increased tremendously after 2001 because of the search for information about the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (Gillmor, 2003). People were turning to any medium to hear the latest information and to connect with others (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Siepp, 2002) and several blogs were providing information and updates from New York and Washington. Those people who were hungry for news turned to the blogs. This increased the exposure of the blogs and launched thousands of blogs into the blogosphere, what bloggers call the Internet world of blogs (Mooney, 2003). A number of blog variations have also appeared, including vlogs (video blogs) and blawgs (blogs dealing with law issues). All these blogs provide a wide array of
information, some silly, some serious. Barbie has a blog, but so do Microsoft, MSNBC, and *The Wall Street Journal*. The writing style in blogs tends to be more informal than that in corporate Web sites (Trammell, 2004), and an added comment feature allows readers to add their own thoughts or discuss ideas. “Blogs restore a degree of individuality lost in corporate-owned media” (O’Brien, 2004). The informality and the ability to engage readers in the discussion is what may help blogs bring readers back over and over again. Thus, by fostering relationships, blogs provide a powerful community-enhancing service. As Jay Rosen, a blogger and journalism professor, said, “People have subscriptions to newspapers. People have relationships with the blogs they follow” (2004, p. 23).

**Blogging as a Form of Journalism**

For some blogging journalists, blogging brought back a love of writing. Some of these journalists, who have been writing stories for mainstream publications, have found they had to please the editors, the publishers, and sometimes even advertisers (Sullivan, 2002). One writer said she considers herself a fan of blogging because, “what I once loved about journalism went missing some time ago and seems to have resurfaced as the driving force of the blogosphere: a high-spirited, irreverent, swashbuckling, lances-to-the-ready assault on the status quo” (Parker, 2003, p. A4). The blogging journalists take advantage of the freedom of blogs to write what they want and to comment on what they think about the news of the day (Fichter, 2001).

Journalists gravitate to the blogs for the freedom and challenge they offer. Readers gravitate to them as a way of helping them make sense of the day’s happenings. The usefulness and power in the blogs is when a blogger links to a news story and
provides a critique of it. Other blogs link to both the original site and the blog and then provide their own critique or a scathing criticism of the critiquers. In this way, links become an integral part of the way the information is presented. Some authors see this as an opportunity to create a better form of journalism, which is able to put events in a richer context (Matheson, 2004; Pavlik, 2001).

Traditional media have presented information to readers in a take-it-or-leave-it fashion, offering readers enhanced multimedia versions of their press or broadcast news. Yet blogs are not required to present information in any particular hierarchy of importance or style. As Matheson (2004) pointed out, “[r]eaders of the news weblog are set along paths of exploration rather than given nuggets of information, and the status of that information therefore changes” (p. 458). The writing is sharp and often humorous. Popular blogs, such as Andrew Sullivan’s, attract more than 125,000 people per month. “Who needs Slate or Salon when bloggers offer equally fine writing and more diverse viewpoints?” (Siepp, 2002, p. 42).

Besides providing an alternative to mainstream journalism, blogs are also forcing mainstream media to pay attention to other voices (Gillmor, 2003). Many bloggers are willing to confront the big media corporations and Kurtz (2002) sees this as providing sorely needed feedback to these traditional media. A blogger who sees bias or error in the news report can immediately question the news article. “[Bloggers] don’t bluster, they deal in specifics and they work quickly, while the stories they target are fresh. They link to sources, to one another’s sites and to the articles under attack, so readers can judge for themselves” (Kurtz, 2002, p. 11-12). This may cause the traditional journalists to report more accurately and check the sources more carefully (Mooney, 2003). Gillmor sees this
as an opportunity for traditional media. He notes that sometimes readers know more than the journalists and inviting readers to be part of the process may encourage good journalism.

Readers want content, but they also want that content to be readable. Readers seem to prefer that the content be written in a conversational style (Kent, 1998). This may be difficult for online newspapers, as they must speak in more global terms or use third person or passive voice (Matheson, 2004). But the conversational style is easy for a blogger, who can speak with an individual voice. Blogs have a “casual, this-great-idea-just-occurred-to-me tone” (Manjoo, 2002). This spontaneity is lacking on many online newspapers, which fail to be interesting or exciting (Kent & Taylor, 1998) because they tend to automatically transfer content from their print edition (called shovelware). Indeed, an online newspaper usually provides an opportunity for a feedback by including the reporter’s e-mail address or a link to a discussion forum, but a blog is usually associated with one person. The blogger becomes a known entity, a living presence, who can be held accountable by invested readers (Blatt & Ellison, 2003; Karpinski, 2003; Scoble, 2004). “Your readers will keep you honest. If you decide to try to lie on your blog you’ll soon have tons of people talking about how you lied on your blog” (Scoble, p. 22). Blogs can live or die by the reputation of the blogger, so maintaining honesty and accountability are vital (Blatt & Ellsion, 2003).

Significance of Blogs

A study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Rainie, 2005) reported that the number of people who read blogs rose by 58 percent in 2004. This means 32 million people read blogs; 27 percent of people who use the Internet read blogs. Seven percent, 8
million people, say they have created a blog. This is the good news. The bad news is that 62 percent of Americans do not know what a blog is. However, the number of people who are becoming aware of blogs keeps growing. In 2003 when the Pew Center first researched blogs, only 11% of Internet users were familiar with them. In February 2004, that figure jumped to 17% and six months later, in November 2004, the figure was 27% (Rainie, 2004). At this rate, more than half of Internet users will have heard of blogs by the end of 2005. In the first two months of 2005, mainstream media have written 123 stories on blogs. As blogs receive more notice from the traditional news outlets, the feasibility of using blogs to link organizations to readers will grow.

Dan Gillmor, a nationally known columnist for the San Jose Mercury News, has written a book about blogging and participative journalism, called “We the Media.” Gillmor says we have traditionally treated the news “as a lecture. We told you what the news was” (Gilmor, 2004, p. xiii). But Gillmor says tomorrow’s news will be more of a seminar or a conversation, because readers sometimes know more than the reporters. Journalists can learn from and gain valuable insights from sources and readers who contribute to a deeper conversation. Slate, an online magazine owned by Microsoft, has a reader forum. Periodically, Slate editors get through the forum and reprint the most interesting comments from readers. This provides both the journalists and the readers information about what people are thinking—what is important to them and what their reactions are to the news of the day.

One blogger, also at the San Jose Mercury News, urged editors to start blogs for late-breaking local news. Local people learn the blog is the place to go to for breaking local news. Rob Curley, general manager of the Lawrence Journal-World online, runs a
number of blogs and encourages readers to blog also. He said, “Our blogs make Lawrence.com feel and taste like Lawrence . . . . And that’s exactly what we were after” (Gillmor, 2004, p. 118).

Gillmor (2004) suggests that newspapers cannot cover all local events, but could possibly invite readers to cover some local events. A reporter might not be available for every school board meeting, but there are citizens who are. Perhaps their input could be collected on a blog and provided as a service to those who want information.

Methodology
Due to the exploratory nature of this study, we used a convenience sample of 17 students enrolled in a Basic Media Writing class at Washburn University for the fall semester of 2004. Students enrolled in this class are usually freshmen or sophomores and their age varies between 18 and 24. In this class, eight of the students were male and nine were female. Participation was a part of class requirements and involved weekly current events quizzes and a final portfolio. For the first five weeks, students were assigned to read an online newspaper of their choice. The majority of students in the class opted for the Kansas City Star, but a few decided to read the Chicago Tribune, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the New York Times or the Seattle Times. On Monday of each week, students were given a five-point, five-question quiz testing their knowledge of important local, national and international events. The same procedure was repeated for another five weeks, but this time students were required to read three blogs: Matt Sinovic (www.politicsks.net), Columbia Journalism Review Daily Update (www.cjrdaily.org) and the Christian Science Monitor’s blog (blogs.csmonitor.com).

Because we did not expect the students to be experts in the news field, we selected blogs with more general, yet informational, appeal. The selection of these blogs
was accomplished after a careful examination of more than 12 news blogs prior to conducting the study. Out of the 12 test blogs, the final three appeared to be not only more active, but also less specialized in their coverage of news events. Matt Sinovic’s blog is, just like the title suggests, about Kansas politics. Matt Sinovic was the vice president of the Washburn Student Government Association (WSGA) for the year 2004-2005. He is a student at Washburn University majoring in political science. The Columbia Journalism Review blog is self-described as “real-time media analysis” offering vivid, in-depth posts on international and national topics in a clean (uncluttered) format. The blog also publishes AP pictures from around the world on a daily basis. The Christian Science Monitor’s blog changed its format shortly after the end of the study to offer 11 specialized blogs discussing everything from Capitol politics to science and technology and sports. During the course of this study, however, the Monitor offered a link to a more general blog written by its staff discussing national and international politics, which the students could access at the following link: www.csmonitor.com/specials/sept11/dailyUpdate.html.

Each time students are examined as part of a scholarly research, they become sensitive to the topics under consideration. For that reason, the students were unaware of the purpose of this study up until the point where they were asked to provide the written answers. The assumption was that students would be much more likely to share their sincere observations after the fact. At the end of the ten-week period, students were required to provide answers to a list of 12 questions examining their media use habits (see the Appendix for a full list of questions). In fact, the 12 questions were accompanied by a short introduction and a plea for honest answers with the guarantee of anonymity.
Students’ narratives were collected and independently reviewed by the researchers to identify underlying themes and emerging patterns.

The key themes indexed during the review of written answers were:

- Overall media use habits
- Use of online newspapers: exposure, informational role, engaging side
- Use of blogs: exposure, informational role, engaging side
- Comparison of online newspapers and blogs in terms of:
  - Information provided
  - Engagement and appeal
  - Likelihood to be revisited

Indexing or code mapping refer to “making data manageable for interpretation” by reading and re-reading the text and assigning index codes, which pertain to the analytical/theoretical framework of the study (Bloor et al., 2001, p. 63; Morgan, 1993). Code mapping is not a mechanical process. As Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggested, it “encourages hearing the meaning of the data” (p. 240). The process involves creating categories and subcategories or codes for relevant issues by rereading the written data (Morgan, 1993; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The amount of material coded on any category depends on the importance of that category. If coding categories were modified in the process, the researchers went back and recoded the rest of the responses for that category (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The next step in this process was to group all codes in themes, which in this study was done with a computer. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) pointed out that the depth and sophistication of this technique depends on the researcher, but at the end the researcher selects representative statements for the underlying themes and develops and interpretation.
Findings

General observations

Although the entire class showed willingness to complete the assignments, the degree of enthusiasm varied from student to student. These attitudes were evident in the written responses that the students provided. Some of the students chose to provide succinct, yes-no answers, while others wrote 3-4 page narratives in response to the questions. There was no doubt whatsoever, though, about the sincerity of all the answers.

The findings from the analysis of written responses were collapsed into four themes:

- Overall media use habits
- Use of online newspapers
- Use of blogs
- Comparison of online newspapers and blogs

The discussion of each theme is accompanied by comments reflecting the central ideas of the participants.

Overall media use habits

The responses of the students unequivocally indicated interest in television as a source of information. In particular, local affiliate evening broadcasts were favored over national network news. By the same token, students seemed interested in the online editions of local newspapers. The majority of the class pointed out that they would frequent the *Kansas City Star*, the *Topeka Capital-Journal* or the *Lawrence Journal-World* Web sites mainly because they are relevant and easily accessible. Some would read the print editions if they are readily available, i.e. someone orders them, or they are in the library.

An interesting, yet not surprising, finding was the popularity of personalized news services of Web portals like Yahoo! Some students preferred them because they could get
a smattering of information about topics of interest. CNN.com was another popular Web portal.

The surprising finding, however, came from students’ nontraditional sources of news. One was students’ penchant for satirical news. At least three students in the class explicitly mentioned “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” on Comedy Central as a source of information. As one student put it: “I truly enjoy the satirical side of the news, as most college students do, and would prefer to hear the news delivered by Jon Stewart as opposed to Dan Rather.” Another nontraditional source of news for the students participating in this study was friends. One student mentioned that he only uses word of mouth as a way to stay informed. “If people do not talk about it, I don’t need to hear it,” he wrote.

*Use of online newspapers*

The most notable finding with regard to online newspapers was their sporadic use. Unlike the traditional use habits of older generations, online newspaper reading for young college students appears to be an activity spurred by convenience, availability and speed. If they needed information or were stranded in front of a computer during a long shift at work, they would do some online reading. As one student said, “if it is around, I’ll read it.” Online newspapers were perceived as more convenient than “flipping through huge pages looking for stories.” Otherwise, intentional searching for news was viewed as an abhorrent task. This attitude could explain students’ self-reported time spent with an online newspaper per week – 30 minutes to an hour. Students would read the stories that they found interesting and skim through the rest.
Another, rather surprising, explanation for the short time spent with online newspapers was students’ unwillingness to read off a computer screen for a long time. Five out the 17 students who participated in this study explicitly mentioned that they either have sensitive eyes or get headaches when reading from a computer screen for a long time. One possible explanation could be found in students’ usage of outdated technology. Old monitors do influence greatly the readability of text on the screen.

Most students thought that the national newspapers were more boring to read than the local ones, mainly because they did not include information that was relevant to them. As one student pointed out “When something happens locally, I want to know about it because to me, location is the most important aspect of newsworthiness.” Reading information on a topic of no pertinence in a combination with a long text was a sure turn off for students. What seemed to matter the most therefore was relevant information and easy navigation.

Use of blogs

Students expressed mixed opinions about the task of reading the three blogs. Some seemed to enjoy it, while others admitted that they did not like being forced to read news for credit. As one student admitted “I didn’t [enjoy] being forced to read something that I usually wouldn’t read.” In addition, it seems that subject matter rather than blogs themselves influenced students’ perceptions. “I can only take so many political topics before my interest wears off;” as one of them said.

It was not surprising, then, to discover that some of the students were already regular blog readers. Yet some of the blogs they enjoyed were more of a personal diary type as opposed to the informative type that were used in this study. The students
mentioned Xenga.com as one popular do-it-yourself blog site featuring online diaries and journals. One of the students had her own Xenga site, which she formatted like a magazine. Four other students shared that they liked to go to Xenga or similar sites and look up their friends’ blogs. In addition, two students shared that they would frequent progressive political blogs.

What students thought made blogs more appealing than online newspapers was their personality and voice. Whether written by a single writer or a group of writers, blogs display more character and authors’ involvement with the story than the objective news reporting of online newspapers. In fact, this is the feature students enjoyed the most. All students were able to identify the bias that was present in the blogs. “I like blogs because they are informational, but still are able to display opinions. Opinion-based articles catch my attention more because I can take my own view on that subject and agree or disagree with what the author is saying. It is much more intriguing than just reading an article that you have no viewpoint to argue for,” pointed out one student.

Another appealing feature of blogs was the use of humor. In their general media use habits discussion, students already mentioned that they appreciated satirical news. That is why blogs that used humor and sarcasm were particularly attractive to them. One such blog was the CJR’s Campaign Desk, which delivered a sarcastic viewpoint on mainstream media coverage of daily events. One student compared the CJR’s coverage to Jon Stewarts’s show saying that “the CJR was very informative (The Daily Show can be somewhat informative, too), but it also was written in a somewhat sarcastic and humorous tone.” Another student liked that the CJR writers offered their opinions and even made “little jokes in some of them.”
Students also managed to recognize the special function of blogs as presenting a different angle on news. As one student said, “The angles that bloggers take are often different from that of a typical journalist. Angles make the story much more interesting for the readers.”

Another student said he “found them to be much more applicable as an appendix to, say, an online piece than a prime source for staying informed.” The CJR, in particular, was identified as a good watchdog-type of blog, which often critiqued the reporting practices of mainstream media.

Comparison of online newspapers and blogs
Students seemed honest about what they liked and disliked about the two forms of online journalism. When asked to compare online newspapers and blogs in terms of informational value, appeal and likelihood to revisit, students pointed out that, in general, online newspapers were more informative while blogs were more interesting to read. Because blogs represent the author’s opinions and personality, students thought they could be seen as “an appendix to an online news piece.” The tabulated answers to these questions are summarized in Table 1. Some students (see Other sources category) indicated that they found a Web portal or television to be more informative or more engaging than an online newspaper or a blog. Other students gave “none” answers, thus indicating that they did not like being informed or did not find any of the provided online sources engaging or interesting enough to be revisited (see the None category).
Table 1
Number of students who expressed opinions about the informational value, appeal and likelihood to revisit online newspapers and blogs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Online newspapers</th>
<th>Blogs</th>
<th>Other sources</th>
<th>None</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More informational</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More interesting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely to be revisited</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
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Discussion

While this was a small sample, fully a third of the class did not like to read online, whether it was blogs or newspapers. This is good news for those who produce a hard copy of a newspaper—these young people aren’t likely to abandon the actual paper for a virtual paper. However, there is still the problem of connecting with these students, as many students did not choose to read either version of the newspaper. Many students found news boring: “If I am not interested, I do not bother.” Or, “I try to keep up, but I’m usually too busy caught up in my own life to care. I know it sounds bad but I’m a busy girl.” Another student said, “I just don’t like reading large sums of text online, especially about stuff that bored me to death!” In addition to being bored, one student noted, “the information was just not relevant to me.” Many students are not interested in news delivered in a traditional way.

We pointed this out earlier in the discussion of students who indicated they liked Jon Stewart. This fits with national research that says young people are going to more non-traditional sources for news, such as Jay Leno or the Daily Show (Harrmann, 2005). They find these sources more interesting. They appreciate the humor, the lighthearted
approach and the satire. One student illustrated this with the comment, “I think news is important, but if all you read is tragedies then you become afraid of everything and aren’t willing to live, and that is why I don’t read the news.” The students in this study expressed appreciation for the blogs that also delivered news non-traditionally, with humor and personality. They do look for honesty and “someone whose opinion I respect.” And they wouldn’t spend time on someone who was “wrong on things or a bad writer.” The idea that the blogs were opinionated was not a problem for the students; in fact, it was one of the things they mentioned they enjoyed the most. “Opinion-based articles catch my attention more . . . It is much more intriguing than just reading an article that you have no viewpoint to argue for,” said one student. Another student said, “In order for me to be interested in what people have to say I must be enticed by new news, good features, and an honest voice to back it up.”

As a final note, we offer some Do’s and Don’ts on how newspapers can enhance community coverage through blogging.

Do:

1. have a good writer with a sense of humor
2. keep it local
3. pick a locally-known reporter, if possible
4. encourage citizens to report on community activities such as zoning board or school board meetings
5. keep your blog active by frequently updating it if you want people to come back
6. make sure you announce your schedule — vacations; holidays, etc.
7. keep the entries short because people do not like to read big chunks of text
8. disclose possible conflicts of interest
9. provide crediting where you found a link
10. warn about link content (whether this link requires registration, for example)
11. correct misinformation
12. stay small, smart and simple
Don’t:
   1. engage in personal attacks
   2. ask another blogger to link to your site
   3. complain that not many people visit the site
Appendix:

Even if you do not have all your quizzes, please answer the following questions. I am interested in your honest answers. Your answers will be included in a study of online newspapers and blogs. Your name will not be used in any way in the study.

1. **Media use habits**: What sources do you usually use to stay informed about current events (this might include local, national or international topics)? Try to list all of them.
2. Follow-up question: If you do not follow current events, why do you not bother? Be honest and provide details or specific examples.
3. **Online newspapers**: Are there any online newspapers or Web portals that you read outside of this class on a regular basis? If so, what?
4. As part of this class, you were required to read an online newspaper.
   a. What did you like about it? (be specific)
   b. What did you NOT like about it? (be specific)
5. On average, how much time did you spend reading the online newspapers? (be honest)
6. **Blogs**: Are there any blogs that you read outside of this class on a regular basis? If so, what?
7. As part of this class, you were required to read blogs.
   a. What did you like about it? (be specific)
   b. What did you NOT like about it? (be specific)
8. Can you tell anything about the personality of the blogger by reading:
   c. The Campaign Desk (CJR) [http://campaigndesk.org/](http://campaigndesk.org/)
9. On average, how much time did you spend reading the blogs? (be honest)
10. Whether you enjoy blogs or not, tell me what it would take to make you become a regular blog reader? (Please provide an answer that contains more than a "nothing" response)
11. **Comparison**: Can you tell me which source:
   a. Better informed you
   b. Was more interesting to read
   c. Would be a source you might visit in the future
12. Was there a time when you found a topic you were particularly interested in and were you willing to explore it in-depth by following links and additional resources?
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