

# Citizenship Journalism: Impact and Implications of Online Community Weblog on Traditional Media

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## INTRODUCTION

Weblogs are a type of online journal where every Internet user can create one for his or her own application. Websites specifically aimed at Weblogs have been growing very fast since their introduction in 1999. They have had significant impact on journalists, journalism and the news media through their low cost publishing and first hand reporting. To a certain extent, breaking news disseminating through weblogs outperforms traditional media. Interestingly, while weblogs have been informal and personal they have been recently included in the traditional media in order to increase their competitiveness, for example, Blogs Etc. in MSNBC.com; or Public Eye in CBSNews.com. There is a growing trend of using weblogs in universities and colleges. There are also a wide spread use of weblogs in journalism programs, for example, University of California Berkeley's intellectual property blog (<http://www.biplog.com/>); University of Southern California's Online Journalism Review News Blog (<http://www.ojr.org/ojr/blog/>); University of Arizona's "Rimrats" and "Blogglob" blogs (<http://rimrats.blogspot.com/> and <http://spring425.blogspot.com/>), University of Alabama Opinion Writing Blog (<http://carolynsopinionclass.blogspot.com/>), etc. (Beeson, 2005).

While weblogs are increasing in popularity and everyone seems to be able to be a reporter of any kind, not all agree that weblogs are practical form of journalism. Whilst on the one hand, many Internet browsers are scanning weblogs on a daily

basis for information and especially for alternative views, on the other, traditional journalists and media companies doubt that weblogs can really provide reliable and trustworthy news to readers (Romano, 2005).

Therefore, the objectives of this study are to: (1) To provide a basic understanding of weblog technology; (2) To provide explanations as to the motives for maintaining weblogs; (3) To review the applications and coverage of weblogs in the traditional media and online communities; (4) To discuss the implications of weblogs and journalism.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *What is a weblog?*

A weblog, or simply a blog, can be defined as “a webpage where a weblogger, or simply a blogger, ‘logs’ all the other webpages he or she finds interesting” (Barger 1999; Wagner 2004). Some early famous weblogs include CamWorld by Cameron Barrett (<http://www.camworld.com/>) where the term “weblog” became official; Jorn Barger’s Robot Wisdom Weblog (<http://www.robotwisdom.com/>) which provides plenty of opinionated commentary and dozens of common links and Lawrence Lee’s Tomalak’s Realm (<http://tr.pair.com/>) which provides daily links to Internet and technology news. However, since 1999, more and more websites have been providing blogging services, that is, providing an application to create weblogs and supplying a weblog hosting service. Bloggers do not just add links to their weblogs, but also write whatever they like, as they believe that to write is to share, and to read creates the opportunity to meet new friends who have the same interest whether it be reviews on songs, movies, or books. It becomes an active community online formed by a collection of bloggers and weblogs. For example, one of the very popular blogging sites, Xanga (<http://www.xanga.com/>) has more than 2.5 million users (Rubenking, 2003). Members with similar interests can subscribe to one another’s blogs and are instantly put in

touch. Readers can comment on posts to interact with bloggers. Other examples include Blogger (<http://www.blogspot.com>) which was the first web tool that arose to aid bloggers to create weblogs, Yahoo!360o (<http://360.yahoo.com>), AOL Hometown (<http://hometown.aol.com/>), MSN Spaces (<http://spaces.msn.com/>), etc.

*Who would weblog?*

### **Individual Bloggers**

Why would someone take the time and make the effort to write something on the Internet without knowing whether there was anyone there who would want to read it? It is quite interesting to understand the motives behind Internet users' behavior over the web. Graham (1999) suggested four main reasons for Internet users to create their weblogs. Firstly, there is a fundamental need for Internet users to publish what they know. This is similar to the early days when millions of Internet users were extremely eager to create their own webpages and to share their interests. Weblogs can be viewed as a further extension of webpages. Secondly, a weblog provides an effortless way to share to a larger audience, without the need to send email or forward email one by one. Bloggers can simply send just a link to their weblogs, or friends can "blog" a weblog so that acquaintances will be notified through email about any modifications on the weblog. Thirdly, the more a blogger writes, the more applications or skills will be employed in order to make the weblog more attractive to others. This in turn provides sufficient motivation for bloggers to update themselves with newly developed applications or systems. Fourthly, the more a blogger writes, the more they will seek clarification and knowledge on that subject. It becomes a motivation to browse and to continually surf the Internet. A loop is created whereby the blogger will write, will research, will surf and will then share new found knowledge. Lastly, if a weblog attracts positive comment from readers, it will provide the blogger with an additional motive to comment further and in greater detail in order to now meet expectations of other readers.

The internet provides complete strangers with the opportunity to share interests and strike up a virtual relationship. This creates a circle of virtual community that encourages everyone that is part of it to make the effort to keep it complete.

### **Bloggers in an Organization**

Weblogs are mostly initiated by individuals writing in an informal way with irregular, but sometimes frequent, updates. An interesting development is that more and more organizations are now willing to provide the platform to encourage their employees to have their own weblogs. This can be an efficient way to maintain a frequent interaction between organizations and their customers whereby they can collect views, provide feedback and support. Sun Microsystems Inc., Microsoft Corp., and General Motors Corp., have all officially sanctioned corporate blogs for employees to write about products and strategies (Graybow, 2005). For example, at Sun Microsystems, about 2,000 employees' blog, include the President and CEO Johnathan Schwartz. Furthermore, Microsoft requires blogging as a function of an employee's job in order to share their knowledge within/outside their organizations (Microsoft.com, 2005). Recently, avenues of traditional media have introduced blogging sections for columnists and writers, in order to receive instant feedback with no limitation due to the limited printed space (e.g., MSNBC.com; CBSNews.com).

### **Bloggers as Journalists**

While bloggers are usually informally sharing what they browse over the Internet, it is not limited to this scope. Until very recently, because of several occasional accidents / disasters, weblogs even outperform traditional media in providing up-to-date and first hand stories disseminating at the same time the accident occurs. For example, during the 2001 Seattle earthquake, community weblog members posted available information on the MetaFilter blogging site,

keeping each other and the rest of the country informed until news organizations could catch up (Blood, 2002). Other examples include the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and the most recent strong earthquake which hit Pakistan, north India and Afghanistan (October 8, 2005). These news stories all trigger updates on many kinds of weblogs, by those who are present at the scene.

## **A REVIEW ON THE USE OF WEBLOGS IN AN ONLINE MEDIA SITE**

Cases on MSNBC.com (Browsing on 12th October, 2005 at 23:00)

The name of the section for weblogs on MSNBC.com is called “Blogs Etc.” and readers are asked to submit their stories under the column citizen journalist at the site. The Blog Etc. section is divided into a number of categories, the first being Reader Feedback where readers write and share their thoughts. This is in fact the Letters to MSNBC.

### *1. Letters to MSNBC*

**Letters to MSNBC:** This page features a selection of e-mail comments that the site received as a response to stories by MSNBC reporters and writers. The comments may not be published at full length but may have been edited for length. It displays readers’ comments and their names, in reverse-chronological order.

**Live Talk:** The same page displays additional windows requesting Live Talk by columnists or writers contributing to the website. After reading a short analysis of the issues, readers can submit questions and comments.

**White House Beat:** There is also a propaganda feature where readers who have a question, can email this to the White House. They can expect to receive weekly answers by NBC News Chief White House Correspondent, David Gregory or Norah O’Donnell.

**Citizen Journalist:** Another column called, “Citizen Journalist” asks readers to submit their own story. For example, the topic question at the time of browsing was the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina and a blogger wrote the following:

*“CJ: Rebuilding homes and lives after hurricanes - if you’re back in the gulf after the storm and rebuilding send in your story.”*

Many people in New Orleans would have sent in their stories notifying global readership as to what was really going on.

**Send Us Your Questions and Stories:** At the time of browsing, there were three news headlines asking for more stories: “Talking to your child about the birds and bees,” “*Does your child have too many things to do?*” “*Does your marriage need mending?*”

**Most Popular:** There is a statistical box showing most popular topics of the week, including, “most viewed,” “top rated,” and “most e-mailed.” There is also a list of most popular Newsweek articles for reference.

## 2. Audio

There is an audio chat recording of an interview between a book author and the producer of MSNBC.

## 3. On-Air Weblogs

There are six famous columnists holding their weblogs in this section. The first weblog is named Bloggermann by Keith Olbermann. On October 11, 2005 at 8:29 p.m., Monica Novotny (MSNBC Cable; NBC News) wrote this in the weblog,

*“Earthquake overwhelming, all too familiar”*

*The images of devastation this week after Pakistan's 7.6 earthquake are overwhelming, and unfortunately, all too familiar.*

*Six years ago, in August of 1999, I traveled to Istanbul to report on Turkey's 7.4 magnitude quake that left about 20,000 people dead. If you haven't personally witnessed the results of a quake of this magnitude, I can tell you it is everything you might imagine, and worse. What I remember most vividly about that trip, perhaps not surprisingly, is the first day.*

*I recall arriving with my producer and cameraman in Istanbul, the city virtually untouched, and dropping off our things in an air-conditioned, comfortable, western hotel room. It was hard to imagine the devastation we knew was just a drive away. We soon would not have to.....*

This is a typical weblog journal that the blogger is writing in a much more personal way citing his or her first hand experience. It is very different from the main copy articles in a news report.

There is also an archive link where readers can choose to view past journals.

Therefore the weblog columns are:

1. Bloggermann by Keith Olbermann;
2. Connected with Ron Reagan and Monica Crowley;
3. Hardblogger with Chris Matthews;
4. Sidebar by Dan Abrams;
5. Regular Joe (also known as Congressman Joe) by Joe Scarborough, and
6. Cosby Connection with Rita Cosby.

#### 4. MSNBC Weblogs

In MSNBC weblogs (MSNBC>>Blog Etc.>> weblogs>>), there are regular columns:

1. *Altercation* blog by Eric Alterman (Professor of English at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York);
2. *Clicked* blog by Will Femia (chat producer for MSNBC.com);
3. *Glennreynolds.com* blog by Glenn Reynolds (law professor at the University of Tennessee, also known as Instapundit at <http://www.instapundit.com>);

There are also weblogs under other sections of MSNBC

1. (Entertainment) *Test Patterns* blog;
2. (Tech/Science) *Cosmic Log* blog by Alan Boyle (MSNBC.com's science editor);
3. (Sports) *Open Mike* blog by Mike Celizic;
4. (Political Cartoons) *Daryl Cagle's Cartoon Weblog*;
5. (Entertainment) *AccessHollywood* blog by Billy Bush

#### 5. NBC News Weblogs (External Links)

At the time of browsing, there were 3 weblog highlights:

1. "Daily Nightly: Tonight's promoted story — The blog of NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams," which is written on rotation by NBC news anchors, editors, correspondents, news producers, etc.
2. "Inside Dateline: Let's not forget the Hurricane pets - Best Friends Animal Society president guest blogs on the touching reunions, as well as the continuing work to save pets affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita."
3. "First Read — A daily memo prepared by NBC News' political unit, for NBC News, analyzing the morning's political news."

#### 6. *Blogs from CNBC (External Links)*

There are also external blogs' links to CNBC. At the time of browsing, there are 3 blogs under this category:

1. *"The Morning blog – The Official Blog of CNBC's Morning Call"*
2. *"SquawkBlog – On the money"*
3. *"Kudlow's Money Politics – Pro-growth, strong defense, virtuous values, business, and stocks"*

#### 7. *Blog Round Up (External Links)*

This section reports the most-blogged about articles on Newsweek within the past 7 days. There were 4 blogs at the time of browsing:

1. *"CIA Leak: Karl Rove and the Case of the Missing E-mail (78 new links)"*
2. *"The Mormon Odyssey (34 new links)"*
3. *"Record Labels Want Bigger Cut of Digital Profits (29 new links)"*
4. *"Terror Watch: New Domestic Spying for Pentagon (26 new links)"*

#### 8. *Blog Talk (External Links)*

This is another external link section to Newsweek's columnists' blogs where readers can click and read conversations in the blogosphere. The list of columnists' blogs include: Jonathan Alter; Andy Borowitz; Eleanor Clift; Christopher Dickey; Howard Fineman; Charles Gasparino; Rabbi Marc Gellman; Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball; Steven Levy; Anna Quindlen; Jane Bryant Quinn; Robert J. Samuelson; Allan Sloan; Cliff Sloan; Mark Starr; Brad Stone; Holly Bailey and Richard Wolffe; and Fareed Zakaria.

## DISCUSSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

Weblogs were introduced around 1998 and have become increasingly popular especially with the provision of easy to use weblog applications by blogging service websites. Weblogs initially commenced with only links and short comments but due to the fact that there is no restriction, now exist in all fields of interest, covering all disciplines. Any length is possible with any number of frequent updates within any period of time. Weblogs initially appeared in individual updating; however, traditional media are beginning to appreciate their strengths and incorporate weblogs into their online presence. They appear as a spectrum of flexibility: from highly restricted and selective readers' submission to nearly no restriction to readers' submission, especially those in the category called citizenship journalists. However, there are a number of pressing issues concerning weblogs and journalism.

### *Credibility*

Weblogs can belong to any individual. With the introduction of blogging services by community sites, anyone can create his or her own weblog. There is no validation on any of the member's particulars. There are no restrictions on whatever anyone writes. That means for example that a weblog can be written by a highly respectable professional in a certain field providing very detailed analysis on an issue that has never been published by any form of traditional media. However, the other extreme is that a weblog can also be written by a 15 year old teenager who fabricates a story. Therefore, while we cannot say weblogs have no credibility, we must analyze each weblog and each piece of news on an individual basis.

### *Continuity*

It is completely voluntary for bloggers to write and update their online journals. However, there is no obligation to do so. Readers may have expectations from a particular weblog because of the past articles they have read. However, there are

no clues that any one weblog will still exist, or will be updated in the future. The public can be reasonably certain that a newspaper will be published every day and a magazine on a weekly basis. With weblogs, there is absolute no guarantee at all.

### *News: Effectiveness & Efficiency*

However, it does not mean that we need to have all these, including credibility and continuity, before we receive news from a specific source. What we need is the news. There are many cases where insiders will send a story to the media before it is actually followed up by the media. What the public care about is what actually happened with a story and they are generally are not concerned with who reported the new first. Weblogs provide an effective and efficient platform for any individual who feels that they are in possession of the facts to report the facts. Weblogs do not pose any restrictions on content and on space and on time. Recently, the U.S. government posted a daily announcement to the effect that the residents in New Orleans were being taken care of after hurricane Katrina. However, weblogs on MSNBC.com from those residents revealed that there were many more other 'real' stories.

### *Mode of Fusion*

While weblogs have suffered from the fundamental shortcoming of maintaining a general standard or quality, traditional media MSNBC.com has cleverly developed a model of fusion to solve this problem. MSNBC.com has grasped the strength of weblogs technology and has confined this to its correspondents, editors and columnists only. With the web technology, there is no restriction on space. It invites as many as possible credible and respectable persons to become its columnists and then maintain their own weblog. In this way, the company has zero costs and only has to allow columnists to attach to their sites. Columnists can write and update at any time. Readers can at any time comment on each journal update without any

restrictions. In this way, the restricted use of weblogs by columnists maintains a general standard and quality of writing of articles. Media can check the log to see the popularity of each columnist weblog; and media can invite new columnists to replace unpopular ones. Readership interactions can maintain and enhance what was once before highly restricted to official resources (see Figure 1).

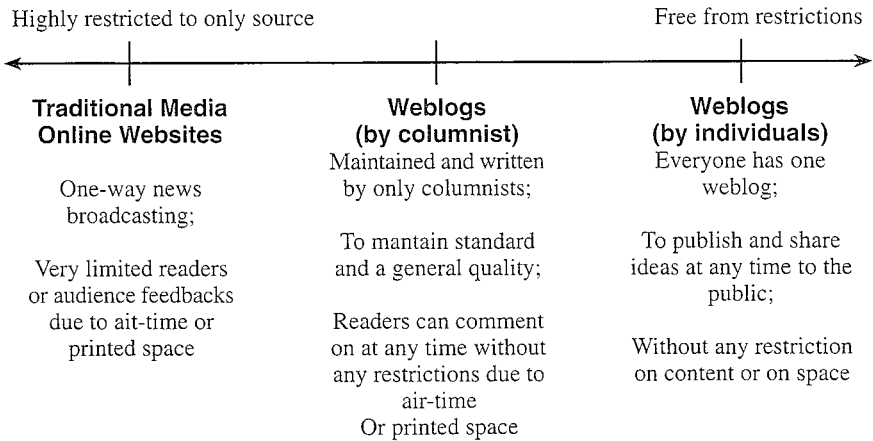


Figure 1. Model of Fusion of Weblogs and Journalism

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are limitations in this study as it only cites one case of weblog applications with respect to the traditional media. There is an opportunity for future research to investigate other frameworks, for example, online weblog communities, in order to generalize the weblog usage patterns. Credibility could not be measured generally in all weblogs because each weblog is owned and written by an individual. However, without a valid and reliable measure to the credibility of weblogs, it is very difficult in evaluating its effectiveness and efficiency, especially in the comparison to traditional media. Therefore, in the future research, this could be an area of concern.

Weblogs have been incorporated into traditional media from the observations and findings in this study. However, what should be the right and appropriate mode of fusion should weblog apply in traditional media? What is the impact of such a fusion of usage? This study reports this only example in MSNBC.com. In future research, the mode of collaboration could be an area for further investigation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study preliminary examines the latest technology weblog, its usage and applications. While we appreciate its fundamental nature of free and easy publishing online, there are a number of issues for concern, especially the nature of weblog and journalism. There are still heated discussions about the credibility and continuity of weblogs, however, in this study; we observe that the traditional media are already finding ways to incorporate weblogs into their online broadcasting sites. There should be more studies in the future to explore how weblogs could effectively become another media of choice in journalism.