

Citizen Journalism and Blogging

Traditionally journalism has been the act of presenting facts and describing events to the public and in recent history “journalists”, or people formally credentialed through education and/or experience, have been the only individuals practicing journalism. Most of this has taken place in the context of big print and television media companies. With the advent of digital photography and the rise of blogging technology which have made publishing available to the masses, the phenomenon of “citizen journalism” by non-credentialed individuals has emerged. With it, has come controversy, much of it pitting the “old media” giants such as television news outlets and newspapers against the “new media” or those emerging from new technologies such as websites and blogs.

A new definition of journalism

The controversy over “citizen journalism” gets to the heart of what, exactly, constitutes journalism. Is journalism analyzing and conversing about the news? Or is journalism going out and talking to people, uncovering stories, and reporting them with some degree of authority? Certainly, the majority of the popular news related blogs fall into the former category. A few examples being:

[Daily Kos](#) -a liberal blog founded by Markos Zúniga.

[Powerline](#) -a conservative blog started by Paul Mirengoff. John H. Hinderaker, and Scott W. Johnson.

[Huffington Post](#) -a liberal/progressive website and blog founded by Arianna Huffington.

[Instapundit](#) -a conservative/libertarian blog belonging to Glenn Reynolds.

Rarely, if ever, do these bloggers provide the raw data of news stories, rather they function more to analyze traditional media stories and, by linking to

these stories, set the agenda as far as what issues their readers should prioritize. Interestingly, according to a [Pew survey](#) only 34% of bloggers actually consider themselves to be practicing journalism.

As for the latter definition of journalism, that of providing the raw date of news stories, examples are harder to come by but perhaps only because the phenomenon is still in its infancy.

In 2002, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott gave a speech at the birthday of Strom Thurmond in which he praised the latter's segregationist presidential platform from 1948. The story was [not picked up in the mainstream media](#) and didn't really take off until bloggers condemned the remarks. The ensuing controversy led to Lott's resignation. Since there were actually over 30 mainstream media reporters present during the speech, some would argue that this again was more of a case of bloggers setting the agenda than actually reporting the news.

Another high profile controversy occurred in 2004 when Dan Rather ran a story on 60 minutes questioning President George W. Bush's Air National Guard record. Bloggers quickly called into question the authenticity of the documents that formed that basis of the allegations. The [ensuing controversy](#) resulted in CBS retracting the story and Dan Rather retiring earlier than planned. Again, this may be more of an example of bloggers fact-checking the mainstream media than actually reporting stories.

Interestingly, some of the best examples of citizen reporting have occurred during large scale tragedies starting with 9/11 where ordinary people with cell phones and cameras captured much of the horror as it transpired. Similarly, most of the images and accounts of what happened in London on 7/7, the Asian tsunami, and New Orleans after hurricane Katrina were not provided by professional journalists but rather by non-credentialed individuals who happened to be at the scene and found themselves playing the role of the journalist.

On the other end of the spectrum, a rapidly growing area of citizen reporting is occurring in the realm of the "hyper-local" – events too small for even the local newspaper such as HS sports or neighborhood crime (see [Yahoo You Witness](#) which is mentioned below).

The question of reliability

Some of the most significant criticism of citizen journalism and blogging regards the question of reliability. In traditional media a great deal of emphasis is placed on the importance of objectivity in reporting. It's thought that in order to maintain credibility, individual journalists as well as the larger organization they work under should strive to avoid personal bias in reporting. This approach has been criticized by some who think that the bias creeps in anyway, and by not openly acknowledging it, traditional journalists do a disservice to the public who are left to speculate on a journalist's particular biases. Another criticism is that in striving to be objective, traditional media often is compelled to present two sides of a story as though they are equal, even when the facts overwhelmingly support one side over the other.

By contrast, the blogosphere emphasizes the concept of transparency instead of objectivity as a method of ensuring reliability. The idea is that a larger group will generally be wiser than a few elite individuals when you give them the power to respond to and in effect edit a story. There will be potentially thousands of fact checkers and editors rather than just a few as is often the case in traditional media. An interesting fact, for those of us who have grown up valuing objectivity in the media, is that it is a relatively recent imperative. In fact, throughout the 19th century, 80% of American newspapers were [openly partisan](#).

A similar criticism is that the blog model is to publish first and to fact check later, while the traditional model has been to fact check first and then publish. Although the blogosphere tends to be self-correcting, some critics of new media believe that any initial misinformation is more damaging than subsequent corrections can balance.

Old vs. New Media

Coinciding with the rise in blogging and citizen journalism has been the relative decline of print newspapers, and this has fueled much of the controversy between old and new media. Newspapers are facing a series of circumstances which have converged to put tremendous pressure on them financially. The first is that a major revenue source, classified ads, has been nearly wiped out by free internet listing services like [craigslist](#). Another factor has been that advertisers don't value online readers as much as print readers so that as a newspaper's audience moves to its online version, newspaper organizations lose as much as 70-80% on revenue for the equivalent online ad. All of this is happening during a prolonged period of readership decline which has been in process since the 1990s.

Not helping matters are the numerous high profile scandals that have plagued some of the major newspapers such as the [Jayson Blair](#) plagiarism scandal at the venerated New York Times. In fact, a [2004 Pew poll](#) found that fully 45% of Americans believe “little” or “nothing” of what they read in their daily newspaper.

However, with all of the predicted doom and seeming pitting of the old media against the new, both forms of media gain benefits from the other. Obviously, since newspapers to date still provide the majority of raw data in the form of reporting news stories, the blogosphere is still highly dependent on them, even as they play a bigger role in setting the agenda of the news cycle. On the other hand, there is evidence that traditional media are gaining benefits from the blogging phenomenon as well. The fact that blogs often link to online newspapers [drives traffic](#) to those sites. Also, journalists for smaller newspapers can promote themselves to bloggers and gain national or even international attention to their stories.

It seems likely that new business models will emerge for news reporting in the future. Of the following examples the South Korean Ohmynews has found the most success.

[Ohmynews](#) -a South Korean online newspaper founded by Oh Yeon Ho. The majority of submissions are contributed by freelance citizen reporters.

[Newassignment.net](#) - a non profit open source journalism project.

[Current TV](#) -a viewer generated cable channel led by Vice President Al Gore and Joel Hyatt.

[Yahoo You Witness news](#) – a joint project between Yahoo and Reuters with user submitted content which will expand into local news and high school sports.

Journalism and Democracy

There are difficult questions that arise if we extend the definition of journalism and consider bloggers and citizen reporters to be journalists. Do we extend the same first amendment privileges to bloggers that we extend to mainstream journalists? This is a timely debate right now in the case of [Josh Wolf](#), a blogger was jailed for refusing to hand over to the authorities video that he recorded of an anti-capitalist rally that may have contained evidence of crimes. Should we extend privileges to citizen journalists beyond that which we extend to average citizens?

Finally, the biggest concern with the decline of newspapers and rise of new media is a loosening of the check that the press exercises on our government. If the newspapers have fewer resources and less power to investigate and report on our elected officials, will democracy suffer? There are reasons to believe that won't be the case. Newspaper circulation has actually been declining since the 1950s with the advent of television and its "less serious" and ratings driven approach to news reporting. The main thing that balances and perhaps exceeds the effect of the traditional media's diminished status is that the internet has dramatically increased the public's access to information. The average citizen is no longer limited to getting their news from local print or television media, but has access to sources around the globe.

Resources

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