

Blogging, Journalism and Credibility: The Future of Global Participatory Media

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Introduction

What do you do if you are an American living in Idaho, or a Japanese living in Gifu, and you want to learn about the life of a Congolese park ranger, and how he struggles to protect endangered wildlife in the Democratic Republic of Congo?

Until recently, you would have to wait for a journalist to interview such a person, and for that journalist's news organization to deem the interview newsworthy enough for broadcast or publication.

Or you could hope that some journalist, or academic researcher, or member of an environmental activist organization may have at some point interviewed Congolese park rangers. That material would also need to be accessible to you through your library or – in the past decade - through a web search.

All of these options depend on a professional intermediary who decides whether the Congolese park ranger is worth speaking to at any given time, and whether that conversation is worth disseminating to a broader public – and ultimately to you. This is weighed against all kinds of factors such as time, travel costs, interests of the professional who might do the interview, and priorities of the organization that is in a position to fund and disseminate the interview.

Now that has changed, thanks to the Internet and the World Wide Web, plus the advent of easy-to-use software that enables anybody with an Internet connection to publish a "weblog," or "blog." You no longer have to depend on a professional intermediary to hear the voice of that Congolese park ranger. Instead, you can visit his blog.¹

More specifically, you can read the blogs of park rangers Elie Mundima who works to protect mountain gorillas in Virunga National Park, and "Atamato," whose job is to

¹ "Congo Rangers blog from the front line," *Extra Extra* blog, March 1st, 2007, at: <http://www.thiswayplease.com/extra-extra/?p=470> (accessed March 16, 2007)

protect Virunga's last remaining hippos.² These men write regularly about their work, the people they work with, and the issues they face. They upload pictures and video. They are speaking directly, in English, to anybody in the world who might be interested. They have taken media creation into their own hands and are no longer dependent on any media professional for them to speak to a global audience.

What has happened here? With park rangers publishing personal accounts directly from Africa's wildlife preserves, has professional journalism on African wildlife issues been made unnecessary? On the other hand, is this kind of unfiltered, unedited and "unprofessional" online writing doing the public a disservice by creating disinformation and increased confusion about what is actually "true" in the world?

The answer to both questions is "no." It is true that professionals have lost control over media, and lost control over how the public gets its "news." At the same time, professional journalists continue to have a vital role to play in informing the public about world events.

What has changed is that professionals must now share this job with amateurs. And, as a result of interactive Internet technologies, professionals will be expected to engage in dialogue with the public about the events they are covering. This may be frightening to many journalists who are used to doing their jobs a certain way. But if the purpose of journalism is to inform the public, then professional journalists should welcome the fact that global information flows – and thus the global conversation – are being democratized. Today's journalists have a unique opportunity: to shape the future of a more democratized, participatory kind of journalism.

The purpose of journalism

The role of journalism – and the journalist – is viewed somewhat differently in different societies. At the same time, since the 1960's and 70's there has been growing global consensus that true journalism is not same thing as propaganda or public relations. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."³ Article 19 is invoked around the world by professional

² See *Elie Mundima Nkuba: Working to Protect the Mountain Gorillas of Congo*, at: <http://www.wildlifedirect.org/elie/> (accessed March 16, 2007) and *Atamato: My Life with the Hippos of Ishango*, at: <http://www.wildlifedirect.org/atamato/> (accessed March 16, 2007)

³ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Adopted and proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948, as published on the United Nations website, at: <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html> (accessed March 17, 2007).

journalists, bloggers, and other online writers in countries where people face censorship, government pressure, or arrest as a result of their work.⁴

The idea that journalism should serve a higher social purpose, different from entertainment-oriented commercial media products, is also globally accepted. The Declaration of Rights and Obligations of Journalists (known as the “Munich Charter”), drawn up in 1971 and later adopted by the International Federation of Journalists and by most of Europe’s journalists’ unions, states:

All rights and duties of a journalist originate from this right of the public to be informed on events and opinions. The journalists’ responsibility towards the public excels any other responsibility, particularly towards employers and public authorities.⁵

The Committee for Concerned Journalists spent five years conducting research from 1997 to 2002 in an effort to define common journalistic principles. The result was the following Citizens' Bill of Journalism Rights:

1. Truthfulness
2. Proof that the journalists' first loyalty is to citizens
3. That journalists maintain independence from those they cover
4. That journalists will monitor power and give voice to the voiceless
5. A forum for public criticism and problem solving
6. News that is proportional and relevant⁶

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel argue in their classic book, *The Elements of Journalism*, that “the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing.”⁷ In the American context where there is consensus about what “free” and “self-governing” mean, this statement makes sense. In a more global context, however, terms like “freedom” and “self-governance” are often used in the context of struggles for sovereignty and power between different ethnic and religious groups, and in

⁴ For one example see *Mahmood’s Den*, a blog written by a Bahraini businessman, who has posted the text of Article 19th on the front page of his blog (see lower right-hand corner) as justification for his writing in the face of government pressure and censorship. See <http://mahmood.tv> (accessed March 17, 2007).

⁵ Reprinted in Reporters Without Borders, *Practical Guide for Journalists*, (published jointly with UNESCO in 2002), pp. 14-16. Downloadable at: http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=5558&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (accessed March 17, 2007).

⁶ “What Citizens Should Expect from the Press,” Committee of Concerned Journalists, February 26, 2007, at: <http://www.concernedjournalists.org/node/65> (accessed March 17, 2007)

⁷ Bill Kovach & Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), p. 12.

separatist struggles. Such struggles may or may not relate to (or result in) greater freedom for the individual. Thus the Kovach and Rosenstiel definition is slightly more problematic when applied globally.

A more internationally applicable statement of journalism's purpose in the Internet age would be as follows:

The purpose of journalism is to inform and facilitate public discourse about issues and events that impact people's ability to make informed decisions about their lives, their work, and their relationship with their leaders.

Based on this definition, one can argue that blogs and other forms of online "citizen media" have the potential to contribute significantly to journalism's purpose – and in many places are already doing so.

From lecture to conversation

Journalism can be more "participatory" because the World Wide Web has evolved from "read-only" to "read-write." In other words, in the past only a small proportion of people had the means (in terms of time, money, and skills) to create content that could reach large audiences. Now the gap between the resources and skills needed to consume online content versus the means necessary to produce it have narrowed significantly to the point that nearly anyone with a web-connected device can create media.

As Dan Gillmor, founder of the Center for Citizen Media declared in his 2004 book *We the Media*, journalism is evolving from a lecture into a conversation.⁸ He also points out that new interactive forms of media have blurred the distinction between producers of news and their audience. In fact, some view the term "audience" to be obsolete in the new world of interactive participatory media. New York University professor and blogger Jay Rosen refers to them as "the people formerly known as the audience."⁹ In "We Media," a treatise on participatory journalism, Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis suggest that the "audience" should be re-named "participants."¹⁰

⁸ Dan Gillmor, *We the Media*, (O'Reilly; First Ed 2004), "Introduction."

⁹ Jay Rosen, "Top Ten Ideas of '04: News Turns from a Lecture to a Conversation," *Pressthink*, December 29, 2004, at:

http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2004/12/29/tp04_lctr.html

(accessed March 17, 2007); See also Rosen, "The People Formerly Known as the Audience," *Pressthink*, June 27, 2006, at:

http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html

(accessed March 17, 2007)

¹⁰ Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis, "We Media: How audiences are shaping the future of news and information," published 2003 online at:

http://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/download/we_media.pdf by The Media Center at the American Press Institute. (accessed March 17, 2007)

Blogs, or “weblogs,” are a widely used and growing form of participatory media because they are so easy to set up and use. They are published with user-friendly authoring software that can be used by a person with minimal technical skills to publish text, pictures, and even audio or video onto the web. The name “weblog” comes from “web log” due to the fact that entries on blogs are posted in reverse-chronological order, with the most recent entries appearing on top. Each entry posted to a blog has its own unique web address or URL, thus making it easy for other websites or blogs to link to that particular piece of content. Most major blogging platforms also generate an automatic “feed” of the posts, so that readers can subscribe to the blog’s content through news-reader programs. Many blogs (though not all) also allow readers to post comments in reaction to each entry being written or posted.

One of the world’s first bloggers, California-based Dave Winer, has now been blogging for over ten years.¹¹ Blogging did not become truly widespread, however, until the advent of user-friendly, often free blogging platforms such as blogger.com (now owned by Google).¹² In April 2007, the San Francisco-based global blog-tracking company, Technorati, counted the global “blogosphere” as containing over 70 million blogs. Japanese bloggers were found to be the world’s most active, taking up 37% of the world’s blog posts, with English language blog posts coming second at 36%.¹³ According to Japan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, by April 2006 there were 8.68 million Japanese blogs.¹⁴ Some suspect that while Technorati does a good job at counting blogs in North America, Western Europe and a certain other developed countries such as Japan, the blog search company likely undercounts the number of blogs in Chinese, Arabic and many other languages.¹⁵ In September 2006 the China Internet Network Information Center reported that the mainland Chinese blogosphere alone contains as many as 30 million blogs, with about 17 million currently active.¹⁶ Thus it is

¹¹ Dave Winer, “A Decade of Scripting News,” *Scripting News*, April 1, 2007 at: <http://www.scripting.com/stories/2007/04/01/aDecadeOfScriptingNews.html> (accessed April 7, 2007).

¹² See “The Story of Blogger,” at <http://www.blogger.com/about> (accessed April 7, 2007).

¹³ David Sifry, “State of the Live Web, April 2007,” Technorati blog, April 5, 2007, at: <http://technorati.com/weblog/2007/04/328.html> (accessed April 7, 2007).

¹⁴ Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications press release, “Number of Registered Users of Blogs and SNSs,” April 13, 2006, at: http://www.soumu.go.jp/joho_tsusin/eng/Releases/Telecommunications/news060413_1.html (accessed April 7, 2007).

¹⁵ Ethan Zuckerman, “Meet the Bridgebloggers: Who’s speaking and who’s listening in the International Blogosphere,” paper presented at “The Power and Political Science of Blogs” University of Chicago, September 16 – 17, 2005, Publication pending in Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell, eds., *The Political Promise of Blogging* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).

¹⁶ China Internet Network Information Center, “CNNIC Releases 2006 Survey Report on China Weblog Market,” September 24, 2006, at: <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/html/Dir/2006/11/06/4217.htm> (accessed April 7, 2007).

possible that the number of blogs in the world could be closer to 100 million, though nobody knows for sure.¹⁷

Most bloggers do not set out to challenge news organizations for mass audiences, contrary to what some news editors may fear. Most write (or post photos, video or audio) to share their lives and interests with friends and family. Many others use their personal blogs to share ideas and brainstorm with their extended circle of professional colleagues and peers who are interested in the same subjects or issues that they are – subjects that tend not to be a focus of mainstream media stories, but which are nonetheless of interest to hundreds and sometimes even thousands of people. A “niche” blog is considered quite successful if it has a daily readership in the low thousands. From time to time, however, personal or “niche” bloggers with normally small readerships find themselves in the middle of a major event that happens to be of interest to mass audiences and the mass media – a tsunami, hurricane, coup or war. Or they happen to be expert in something that suddenly becomes important to large numbers of people – like constitutional law, or computer typeface, or seismology, or Bird Flu. Suddenly complete strangers are e-mailing around the web address of their blog and journalists are quoting them in news stories.

Lisa Williams, founder of PlaceBlogger, a website which aggregates blogs that focus “sustained attention to a particular place over time,” explains that most people use their blogs to publish whatever they want, without considering the question of whether or not their work could be classified as journalism. Yet at the same time, many bloggers do commit “random acts of journalism” – sometimes intentionally, sometimes not.¹⁸ There are many examples of bloggers whose primary reasons for blogging are not journalistic, but who find themselves eyewitnessing a major news event or contributing their expertise or perspective to the public discourse a major issue.

One such person is a Thai college student who in the Fall of 2006 was writing a blog titled “Gnarlykitty.” (<http://gnarlykitty.blogspot.com/>) Describing herself as “shopaholic, mobile phone dependent,” her audience usually consists of people who know her. Gnarlykitty’s usual subjects include gadgets she covets, videos of bands she likes, accounts of nights out clubbing in Bangkok, complaining about school, et cetera. But on September 19th, 2006, when the Thai military staged a coup against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Gnarlykitty became one of several English-language blogs providing first-hand accounts - in nearly real time – telling the world what it feels like to live through a military coup. Bloggers around the world discovered Gnarlykitty through

¹⁷ See Agence France Presse, “Japanese biggest posters in exploding weblog universe: study,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 6, 2007, at: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/Technology/Japanese-biggest-posters-in-exploding-weblog-universe-study/2007/04/05/1175366399396.html> (accessed April 7, 2007).

¹⁸ Lisa Kocian, “Citizen journalists fill a niche with e-news,” *The Boston Globe*, December 15, 2005 at: http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2005/12/15/citizen_journalists_fill_a_niche_with_e_news/?page=1 (accessed April 7, 2007).

other blogs that linked to friends... who linked to others who linked to her – in a viral spread of links. Others trolling the web on Sept. 19th for any possible scraps of information about what was happening on the ground in Bangkok found her through search engines. Journalists started quoting her, and suddenly she had been catapulted to the ranks of “citizen journalist.”¹⁹

Gnarlykitty’s blog is decorated in a pink theme and has a banner at the top declaring “Oh! See what the cat drags in!” Despite her sudden spike in traffic – bringing with it many new readers who held different expectations than her usual audience – she refused to change her style. Feeling pressure to act like a professional journalist, about one week after the coup she found it necessary to “clarify some stuff:”

... I am no expert at the subject (Coup, or politics in general). I don't even know how to use some of the terms to identify those "officials" in Thai or even in English. But the reason why I am blogging about this is that it is the least I can do to help report what is really going on while other channels of communications are altered, tampered, or even stopped. Over here in Thailand, to tell you the truth, there really isn't much going around because all sources are monitored, some censored, by this new Martial Law.

So I apologise if I cannot fully answer your questions about the Coup, or have a more "professional" looking blog. I know people are coming here from all sorts of directions and I thank you all so much for linking but I'm just a girl who's trying to graduate so she can get out of this big mess of a country, or at least get out there to help try to improve it.²⁰

Gnarlykitty committed “random acts of journalism” which added to the outside world’s understanding of what happened during the first hours and days of the coup. She provided the perspective of an ordinary person living through an event that was valuable due to her perspective and point of view. Yet at the same time she was not making a bid to replace the Associated Press or any other news organization.

There are many parts of the world, however, that simply are not getting regular coverage by major global news organizations. In these cases, the work of independent bloggers becomes much more important, by default.

¹⁹“Military Coup!” *Gnarlykitty*, September 19, 2006, at: <http://gnarlykitty.blogspot.com/2006/09/military-coup.html>; “Normalcy,” *Gnarlykitty*, September 21, 2006, at: <http://gnarlykitty.blogspot.com/2006/09/normalcy.html>; “Mob at the Paragon,” *Gnarlykitty*, September 22, 2006, at: <http://gnarlykitty.blogspot.com/2006/09/mob-at-paragon.html> (all accessed April 7, 2007).

²⁰“Life like this,” *Gnarlykitty*, September 24, 2006, at: <http://gnarlykitty.blogspot.com/2006/09/life-like-this.html> (accessed April 7, 2007).

Media attention

In 1980 UNESCO published a commissioned report titled “Many Voices, One World,” more commonly known as “The MacBride Report,” after the commission’s leader Sean MacBride of Ireland.²¹ The report highlighted a tremendous imbalance in information flows – with the bulk of news and information flowing from the Western developed world to the developing world, and a disproportionately smaller amount flowing in the other direction.

Among the report’s many proposed solutions for remedying this global information imbalance, the commission recommended that “Conventional standards of news selection and reporting, and many accepted news values, need to be reassessed if readers and listeners around the world are to receive a more faithful and comprehensive account of events, movements and trends in both developing and developed countries.” Further, it recommended that: “The press and broadcasters in the industrialized world should allot more space and time to reporting events in and background material about foreign countries in general and news from the developing world in particular.”²²

The MacBride commission also concluded that for-profit commercial media alone does not adequately serve the public discourse – and can exacerbate global information inequities. The report’s recommended solutions were so controversial in their challenge to the credibility of the world’s most corporate-owned news organizations that they contributed to the U.S. decision to withdraw from UNESCO in 1984, returning only in 2003.²³

More than decades since the MacBride report was released, the imbalance in global information flows is not greatly improved. In 2003, Ethan Zuckerman, a Research Fellow at Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, conducted a quantitative study to examine patterns of attention given by major English-language news organizations to various countries around the world. A computer-driven statistical analysis of content from the Washington Post, AP, Reuters, the New York Times, New York Post, Google News, CNN, BBC and AltaVista found that the way in which these news sources distribute their attention to different countries around the globe “is more

²¹ MacBride, et. al., “Many Voices, One World: Towards a new more just and more efficient world information and communications order,” Unesco, 1980. Downloadable at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0004/000400/040066eb.pdf> (accessed April 7, 2007)

²² *Ibid.* Note the MacBride report is available online unofficially in HTML format at: <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~rvincent/mcbcon1.htm>; The conclusions section can also be found at: <http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/papers/vp01.cfm?outfit=ks&folder=4&paper=7> (all accessed April 7, 2007).

²³ Kaarle Nordenstreng, "Something to Be Done: Transnational Media Monitoring" *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, No.6, Spring/Summer 2001, at: <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring01/nordenstreng3.html> (accessed April 7, 2007).

directly proportional to national GDP than to any other single factor.” The one exception was the BBC, whose global attention correlated more directly to population size.²⁴ Like the MacBride commission, Zuckerman expressed concern about the global policy consequences when major news media pay much more attention to rich nations than to poorer ones. In a later article he cited a 2004 report by the Center for Global Development titled “On the Brink, Weak States and US National Security,” which suggested that roughly 50 failed and failing states must be closely watched and aided lest they become breeding grounds for global terrorism and crime. Zuckerman pointed out that all but three of the states listed in the report “are systematically undercovered by mainstream media.” His conclusion: “Like the U.S. intelligence community, the U.S. news media are better configured for a world where threats come from superpowers than from failed states.”²⁵

Since then, U.S. news organizations have continued to downsize international news coverage, with a 10 percent decline in the number of foreign newspaper bureaus between 2000 and 2006. A 30 percent decline in the number of foreign correspondents for smaller and mid-sized newspaper has led a growing number of news outlets to rely on the same pool of news agency and syndicated news reports.²⁶ Such trends leave little hope that the news media informing the citizens of the world’s major superpower will find the resources to give better coverage to the developing world.

Solutions, it appears, must be found elsewhere. Thanks to the Internet it is easier than ever before to create non-commercial, non-government, and alternative news services that fill the gaping gaps left unfilled by mainstream commercial media. Writing about possible solutions to the demise of the foreign correspondent in American news, Jeffrey Dworkin, Executive Director of the Committee of Concerned Journalists recently wrote: “the role of the blogger in foreign reporting needs to be rethought. It is just possible that a blogger-correspondent might be the next phase of reporting.”²⁷

The Global Discourse

²⁴Ethan Zuckerman, “Global Attention Profiles - A working paper: First steps towards a quantitative approach to the study of media attention,” The Berkman Center for Internet and Society, Research Publication No. 2003-06, 8/2003, downloadable at:

<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications>

²⁵ Ethan Zuckerman, “Using the Internet to Examine Patterns of Foreign Coverage,” *Nieman Reports*, Fall 2004, pp 51-53.

²⁶ Jill Carroll, “Foreign News Coverage: The U.S. Media's Undervalued Asset,” Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy, Working Paper Series, Fall 2006 (Revised March 2007), downloadable at:

http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/presspol/research_publications/papers.htm

²⁷ Jeffrey Dworkin, “Finding the Next Generation of Foreign Correspondents,” *Committee of Concerned Journalists*, February 22, 2007, at:

<http://www.concernedjournalists.org/node/674> (accessed April 7, 2007).

The media world first awakened to the global power of first-hand, personal, “non-professional” accounts of events when a young Iraqi architect using the pen name “Salam Pax” captivated readers around the world with his personal accounts in English of what it was like to live through the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Since then, tens of thousands of people around the world have emerged to become “bridge bloggers:” people who blog about what is happening in their country for a broader global audience.²⁸

A classic example of “bridge-blogging” can be found on the blog of Mahmood Al Youssif, an engineer living in the Gulf state of Bahrain. His blog “Mahmood’s Den” provides biting (and often sarcastic) analysis of Bahraini politics in detail not available in the mainstream English-language Western press – or in Bahrain’s official English language press, for that matter. Mahmood, an entrepreneur, makes no money from his blog. (<http://mahmood.tv>) He publishes online to participate in his region’s political discourse, and also to act as a badly-needed bridge between East and West. As he writes on his blog’s “About” page, his mission is to help bridge gaps of understanding between cultures: “Now I try to dispel the image that Muslims and Arabs suffer from - mostly by our own doing I have to say - in the rest of the world... I am no missionary and don’t want to be. I run several internet websites that are geared to do just that, create a better understanding that we’re not all nuts hell-bent on world destruction.”²⁹

Throughout the Middle East, citizens have been turning to blogs not only to engage with the West in English. Blogs – in English, Arabic, Persian, and other languages – have also fast become a form of alternative press in which people discuss things that are either not welcomed or ignored by the region’s official media. Egyptian women have turned to blogs to express themselves in a society where they have limited outlets to do so, and also to publicize issues such as sexual harassment. Most blogs in the Middle East are not espousing to be the source of neutral news, but rather have become a vehicle for political activism in many countries. Blogs and the bloggers who write them have been observed to have a significant impact on the Kefaya opposition movement in Egypt, political protests in Bahrain, the 2006 Kuwaiti elections, anti-corruption campaigns in Libya, and political developments in Lebanon surrounding the 2006 war.³⁰

²⁸ Zuckerman, “Meet the Bridgebloggers,” *op cit.*

²⁹ See: <http://mahmood.tv/about/> (accessed April 7, 2007).

³⁰ See Mark Lynch, “Blogging the New Arab Public,” *Arab Media & Society*, February 2007, at: <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=10>; Sune Haugbolle, “From A-lists to webtifadas: Developments in the Lebanese blogosphere 2005-2006,” *op cit.* at: <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=40>; Mona Eltahawy, “Arab blogs: Or how I learned to stop worrying and to love Middle East dictators,” *op cit.* at: <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=11>; Luke Schleusener, “From Blog to street: The Bahraini public sphere in transition,” *op cit.* at: <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=15>; and Sharon Otterman, “Publicizing the private: Egyptian women bloggers speak out,” *op cit.* at: <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=13> (all accessed April 7, 2007).

In Hong Kong, media researcher and translator Roland Soong uses his blog “EastSouthWestNorth” as a bridge between the Chinese-language Internet and the English-speaking world. (see: <http://www.zonaeuropa.com>) Speaking at the 2006 Chinese Internet Conference in Singapore, Soong explained how he uses his blog to bridge between the “two different worlds” of English-language news and Chinese-language news. He pointed out that for many reasons, the English-language international media covers China in less detail than the Chinese-language media (including media from Hong Kong and Taiwan who report under much more free conditions). Much of the China news coming out in English is delayed, and Western journalists tend to have different perspectives on news events in China than Chinese people do. His goal is not to replace the English-language mainstream media but rather to supplement it, and specifically: “(1) to make a difference in specific cases and (2) to create an awareness that things may be more complex than it seems.”³¹

With more than 17 million active blogs in China, blogging has become very popular despite Internet censorship by the Chinese government as well as by private companies responding to government pressure. While censorship makes it difficult for Chinese bloggers to be as overtly political as in some other places, many Chinese bloggers nonetheless write about many things that cannot be found in China’s mainstream media. Increasingly, Chinese blogs have become the place where controversial stories first appear and capture public attention – then once the Chinese internet is buzzing about them, journalists can justify covering these stories for mainstream Chinese media. In a survey of 72 foreign correspondents who cover China, 90% said that they follow blogs from or about China – written either in Chinese or English or both. More than half said they check Soong’s blog, as well as Danwei.org, another English-language bridge blog that frequently translates content from the Chinese-language blogosphere, at least weekly.³²

The journalists surveyed made it clear that they view the blogs as sources of story tips, ideas, and opinion which need to be followed up and confirmed; just as a journalist won’t do a whole story around unconfirmed information given by one source, journalists surveyed do not directly report as fact what they read on blogs.³³ At the same time, the bloggers are contributing to the journalists’ understanding of a country, in addition to engaging readers directly in the journalists’ home countries. Thus for instance, people in the United States who read China related stories in the *New York Times* can now also read

³¹ Roland Soong, “Individual Blogging for Social Transformation,” Paper presented at The Fourth Chinese Internet Research Conference: China’s Internet and Chinese Culture, July 21-22, 2006 Singapore, online at: http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060722_1.htm (accessed April 7, 2007).

³² Rebecca MacKinnon, “Blogs and China Correspondence: How foreign correspondents covering China use blogs,” Paper presented at The World Journalism Education Congress (WJEC) Singapore, June 25-28, 2007; MacKinnon, “Blogs and China Correspondence – survey results,” *RConversation*, December 22, 2006, at: http://rconversation.blogs.com/rconversation/2006/12/blogs_and_china.html

³³ *Ibid.*

the work of many people blogging from China, if they want to get a deeper sense of what is happening there and how people living there actually view the country. Sensing from the impact of Soong's work that there is a demand by non-Chinese speakers for direct, personal perspectives from the Chinese blogosphere, several online volunteer-driven collective translation projects have emerged, providing translations of citizen writing from the Chinese-language Internet.³⁴ This is one of many examples of how media sources from various parts of the world are becoming more diversified, and how individual voices are making a difference via blogs in terms of how people in one country can learn about people and events in another.

The non-profit bloggers' network, Global Voices Online (co-founded in 2004 by this author and Ethan Zuckerman) is another attempt to help curate and aggregate credible voices coming from bloggers in the developing world and non-West. As of this writing, the site's content is managed and edited by a team of ten blogger-editors – all respected bloggers in their own regional “blogospheres.” These editors also manage a stable of nearly one hundred volunteer bloggers who contribute longer feature posts about what bloggers in their countries are buzzing about. Seven more bilingual bloggers translate content from blogs written in Chinese, Arabic, Persian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian. The site does not set out to replace existing global news agencies, but rather seeks to serve as a supplement, creating a channel via which citizens around the world can bring attention to events, issues, and viewpoints that may not be getting media attention otherwise. Global Voices editors also make clear that while the site's regional editors are selected for their knowledge of the blogs they are linking to, any source should be approached with skepticism until it earns one's trust. According to the site's “Frequently Asked Questions” section:

We do not believe that any one piece of information or analysis from any single source should be unconditionally believed by the reader (or listener or viewer). This goes for works by professional journalists as well as the work of bloggers. We encourage you to approach all information on all blogs – including Global Voices – with skepticism until you get to know the background, biases, and inevitable human weaknesses of the people writing the blog.³⁵

With much online citizen media being created by people who have open political biases (like the Egyptian opposition blogger) or clear professional agendas (like the Congolese park ranger), and with Western news professionals forsaking much of the developing world, what are the consequences? How is the public to separate truth from agitprop? Some warn that we are entering a dangerous era of mob rule in media. Others argue that professionals originally laid claim to more credibility than they ever deserved, that

³⁴ Jeremy Goldkorn, “Open source translation websites,” *Danwei*, March 30, 2007, at: http://www.danwei.org/internet/open_source_translation_websit.php (accessed April 7, 2007).

³⁵“Frequently Asked Questions,” *Global Voices Online*, at: <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/top/faq-frequently-asked-questions/> (Accessed April 5, 2007)

objectivity is a nice but unreachable ideal, and that the ability of more voices to speak more easily will make it more likely that lies, omissions, or inaccuracies in reporting will be exposed – all to the public benefit.

Questions of Credibility

Arguments about the credibility of blogs and journalists have raged in the United States since blogs first began to impact the news cycle there in 2002. While some occasionally “break” news, most often in the U.S. they have called attention to events and issues overlooked or under-emphasized by the mainstream media. In late 2002, several bloggers, including the anonymous blogger called “Atrios,” bloggers Joshuah Micah Marshall of *Talking Points Memo* and Glenn Reynolds of *Instapundit* called attention to segregationist remarks made by then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, remarks which had largely been ignored by the mainstream media. The ensuing buzz-storm they created helped lead to Lott’s resignation.³⁶ While Lott’s controversial remarks were originally reported by mainstream media, they were not treated as significant at the time they were made. It was the weblogs that picked up on what had been a fleeting media mention of Lott’s controversial comments. The blogs continued to insist that these comments required public attention, igniting a public debate which eventually fed back into the mainstream media. Media professionals and political analysts agreed that this debate was unlikely to have been ignited if it had not been for the blogs, because the professional media had moved on to other stories – and because of the way in which the media works in “news cycles,” it is not in the habit of revisiting “old” stories if those stories failed to generate controversy when initially reported.³⁷

Since then, American bloggers have had a growing impact on public discourse and political outcomes in the United States. In 2004 conservative bloggers brought down the U.S. Television anchor Dan Rather after one of his reports on the CBS news magazine show, 60 minutes, was found by bloggers to have relied on forged documents in its research about President George W. Bush’ national guard service record.³⁸ In 2006 liberal democratic bloggers were credited with the victory of antiwar candidate Ned Lamont against incumbent Senator Joseph Lieberman in the Democratic primary election

³⁶ Oliver Burkeman, “Bloggers catch what Washington Post missed,” *The Guardian*, December 21 2002, p.13 .

³⁷ Esther Scott, “Big Media Meets the Bloggers,” Harvard Kennedy School of Government Case Study commissioned by Alex Jones, director, Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, at:

http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/presspol/Research_Publications/Case_Studies/1731_0.pdf

³⁸ Mark Memmott, “Scoops and skepticism: How the story unfolded,” USA Today, September 21, 2004, at:

http://www.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/nation/president/2004-09-21-guard-scoops-skepticism_x.htm (accessed April 7, 2007)

for senate.³⁹ The partisanship - and frequent rejection of ideals such as “neutrality” or “objectivity” by many bloggers in the United States - has frequently been cited as cause for concern by media scholars and members of the professional news media.⁴⁰ Many bloggers counter that the so-called “mainstream media” is neither as neutral nor objective as it claims, and that bloggers are merely being more honest and transparent than most media organizations about their biases.⁴¹

In response to such debates, in January 2005, a conference titled “Blogging, Journalism and Credibility” was convened at Harvard University. 50 journalists, bloggers, news executives, media scholars, and librarians were invited to sit down over the course of two days to try and make sense of how blogging is transforming journalism. According to the conference report, the gathering sought to address a number of fundamental questions:

To what extent have blogs chipped away at the credibility of mainstream media? Is credibility a zero-sum game - in which credibility gained by blogs is lost by mainstream media and vice versa?

Conference participants believed the answer, ultimately, is no. Bloggers and professional journalists alike share a common goal: a better informed public and a stronger democracy.⁴²

New York University’s Jay Rosen, in an essay for the conference and opening remarks, declared “Bloggers vs. Journalists is Over.” While professional journalists no longer hold complete “sovereignty” over journalism, he argued, that need not mean the end of the profession:

...this does not have to mean declining influence or reputation. It does not mean that prospects for the public service press are suddenly dim. It does, however,

³⁹ Shailagh Murray, “Lamont Relied On Net Roots -- And Grass Roots,” *The Washington Post*, August 9, 2006, at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/08/08/AR2006080801766.html> (accessed April 7, 2007).

⁴⁰ See Nicholas Lemann, “Amateur Hour,” *The New Yorker*, August 7, 2006, at: http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/08/07/060807fa_fact1 (accessed April 7, 2007); and Corey Pein, “Blog-Gate,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 2005, at: <http://cjr.org/issues/2005/1/pein-blog.asp> (accessed: April 7, 2007).

⁴¹ One strong proponent of this viewpoint is Glenn Reynolds, of the blog *Instapundit*. See Glenn Reynolds, *An Army of Davids: How Markets and Technology Empower Ordinary People to Beat Big Media, Big Government, and other Goliaths*, (Nelson Current, 2006).

⁴² Rebecca MacKinnon, “Blogging, Journalism, and Credibility: The Conference Report,” Harvard University, 2005, at: <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/webcred/?p=71> (accessed: April 7, 2007).

mean that the old political contract between news providers and news consumers will give way to something different, founded on... a new "balance of power."⁴³

The conference's "take-away" conclusions were as follows:

- The new emerging media ecosystem has room for citizens' media like blogs as well as professional news organizations. There will be tensions, but they'll complement and feed off each other, often working together.
- The acts of "blogging" and "journalism" are different, although they do intersect. While some blogging is journalism, much of it isn't and doesn't aim to be. Both serve different and valuable functions within the new evolving media ecosystem.
- Ethics and credibility are key, but extremely hard to define. There are no clear answers about how credibility is won, lost, or retained - for mainstream media or bloggers. It's impossible and undesirable for anybody to set "ethical standards" for bloggers, but it's also clear that certain principles will make a blogger or journalist more likely to achieve high credibility. Transparency is key but isn't enough. Credibility also depends on a relationship of trust that is cultivated between the media organization or blog and the people it aims to serve.
- Many media organizations now see blogging - or the use of some form of participatory citizens' media - as a way to build loyalty, trust, and preserve credibility. They are still experimenting with ways to do that.⁴⁴

To date, examples of ways in which news organizations are using blogs or building synergies with bloggers include: Blogging by reporters at the *Greensboro News & Record* and cross-linkages between the newspaper's website and a local blogging community, Greensboro 101; the hosting of a blogging community, "Comment is Free" by *The Guardian* newspaper in the United Kingdom; links to blogs on article pages of the *Washington Post's* website; a partnership between Reuters news agency and the international bloggers' network *Global Voices Online*, in which links to blogs are highlighted on select pages of Reuters news websites.⁴⁵ There are also other projects geared toward synergizing the best of what bloggers and journalists have to offer. The most ambitious to date is a project called Newassignment.net, founded by Prof. Jay Rosen, whose goal is "to spark innovation in journalism by showing that open collaboration over the Internet among reporters, editors and large groups of users can

⁴³ Jay Rosen, "Bloggers vs. Journalists is Over," *Pressthink*, January 21, 2005, at: http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2005/01/21/berk_essay.html (accessed: April 7, 2007).

⁴⁴ MacKinnon, "Blogging, Journalism, and Credibility," *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ See: *Greensboro News & Record* at: <http://www.news-record.com/>, *Greensboro 101* at: <http://www.greensboro101.com/>, *Comment is Free* at: <http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/index.html>, *Reuters Africa* at: <http://africa.reuters.com/> (all accessed April 7, 2007).

produce high-quality work that serves the public interest, holds up under scrutiny, and builds trust.”⁴⁶ The project’s first “assignment,” called “Assignment Zero:” a report about the online phenomenon of “crowdsourcing” carried out in collaboration with *Wired* magazine. As of this writing it is still ongoing. Daily progress reports can be found at the project website: <http://zero.newassignment.net/>.⁴⁷

Seeking synergies

As the Global Voices international bloggers community has grown, its participants have pointed out that bloggers in most countries tend to represent internet-savvy, affluent white-collar elites, and cannot be considered representative of their nations’ people as a whole.⁴⁸ Until people from all social strata and from most of the world’s countries are speaking out online, the global blogosphere can only be considered a conversation amongst the world’s wired elites. This is one reason why the role of professional journalists remains important: to get to the many places where no internet connections exist, and talk to people who for whatever reasons are not finding the time or the resources to go online and blog. In future, news organizations with sparse resources might consider making special effort to deploy journalists to places where ordinary people are creating little or no online media.

Another barrier to truly representative participation in the global discourse is censorship. According to the OpenNet Initiative, a joint project of Harvard Law School, Cambridge, Oxford, and the University of Toronto, about two dozen governments now censor the Internet in their countries. Internet blocking, or “filtering” not only prevents people using the Internet networks in a particular country to access certain overseas websites.⁴⁹ Censorship and surveillance conducted by service and content providers (often with the help of Western companies) are preventing people from publishing online, either by

⁴⁶ Jay Rosen, “Welcome to NewAssignment.Net,” *Newassignment.net*, August 19, 2006, at: http://www.newassignment.net/blog/jay_rosen/welcome_to_newassignment_net; and, “Journalism goes pro-am,” Comment is free, September 20, 2006, at: http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/jay_rosen/2006/09/post_394.html (both accessed April 7, 2007).

⁴⁷ Jay Rosen, “Letter to All Participants: Why We’re Doing This,” *Assignment Zero*, March 14, 2007, at: <http://zero.newassignment.net/about>

⁴⁸ Rebecca MacKinnon, “Global Voices Summit: Emergence of a Conversation Community,” *Global Voices Online*, December 13, 2005, at: <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/2005/12/13/global-voices-summit-emergence-of-a-conversation-community/> (accessed April 5, 2007)

⁴⁹ Richard Waters, “Web censorship spreading globally,” *The Financial Times*, March 14, 2007, at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/1dbb5faa-d268-11db-a7c0-000b5df10621.html> (accessed April 5, 2007) ; Also see: Nart Villeneuve, “The Filtering Matrix,” *First Monday*, January 4, 2006, at: http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issu11_1/villeneuve/ (accessed April 5, 2007)

causing their content to be deleted or websites shut down, or by making the act of publishing certain types of information too risky to be worthwhile.⁵⁰

If all journalists stopped doing their jobs tomorrow and left global news coverage entirely to bloggers, the public would not be well served. Yet at the same time, bloggers are showing they can fill public informational needs that professional journalists have not managed to fill on their own. Debates about the credibility of bloggers will always exist, but so will major questions about the objectivity, fairness and balance of professionals working in any given media market. Building new kinds of synergies and symbiotic relationships between professionals and concerned amateurs would seem to be the best way forward if we hope to build a new kind of journalism: a journalism that can serve the global public discourse by listening to and reporting on the perspectives of all the world's people – not just the most wealthy and powerful ones.

⁵⁰“Race to the Bottom: Corporate Complicity in Chinese Internet Censorship,” *Human Rights Watch*, August 2006 Volume 18, No. 8(C) at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/china0806/> (accessed April 5, 2007).