



We, the media

Citizen journalism heralds like Dan Gillmor, JD Lasica and Steve Outing would have us believe that there is a media revolution underway, that the “big media” companies are rapidly losing their audiences to a network of individual publishers who would previously have been their sources. This network, says *Vincent Maher*, is called the “blogosphere” and consists of a large – as in 15-million-pages large – network of bloggers, mobloggers (bloggers who post multimedia from their mobile phones), public

→ fora like the *Mail&Guardian* Online's Blogmark (<http://blogmark.mg.co.za>), blog aggregator sites like Technorati and Google News and RSS (Really Simple Syndication) reader software.

A blog, in its most simple form, is a website that allows its owner to post content in a headline and body form, much like a news story, and then organises these postings into categories and orders them by date.

There is nothing new about the technology that makes blogging possible but there is much more to blogging than immediately meets the eye.

As a technical medium, the blog has played a persuasive part in the formation of the practice of blogging that distinguishes it, for instance, from the practice of writing an article for an online newspaper.

Besides being fuelled by narcissistic assumptions about the global audiences' reading needs that simply cannot be sated without a daily dose of Me and My Opinion, the practice of blogging is a typical example of Western individual endeavour: one person writes, edits and publishes – the lone pamphleteer.

At some point in history though, the lone pamphleteers and their printers decided that they wanted to make money, and money, as we know, changes everything. Hence we have large media conglomerates expanding their media reach while chanting the mantra of convergence, and small media like the bloggers claiming to be moving into the journalistic media space.

This immediately presents several important questions: Firstly, can one really attribute the decline in audience numbers to the emergence of this new everyone-is-a-publisher phenomenon? Secondly, how much truth does one attribute to the journalistic claim made by bloggers? And thirdly, how does one then approach the practice of blogging from a critical standpoint?

The US print media is definitely experiencing a decline. Philip Meyer predicts in *The Vanishing Newspaper* that the last newspaper will be printed on 8 April 2040 based on the current rates of decline in readership. This decline has to do with many things: the increased availability of free content on the web, the increased lack of convenience of getting and then handling a physical artefact, tensions between the need for global and local news, and so on.

It's not a simple matter of blogging being the new journalism of choice, as is often claimed by the bloggers themselves. In fact, the real question is not whether we will stop printing newspapers but rather, whether we will stop the type of journalism that was found in those newspapers.

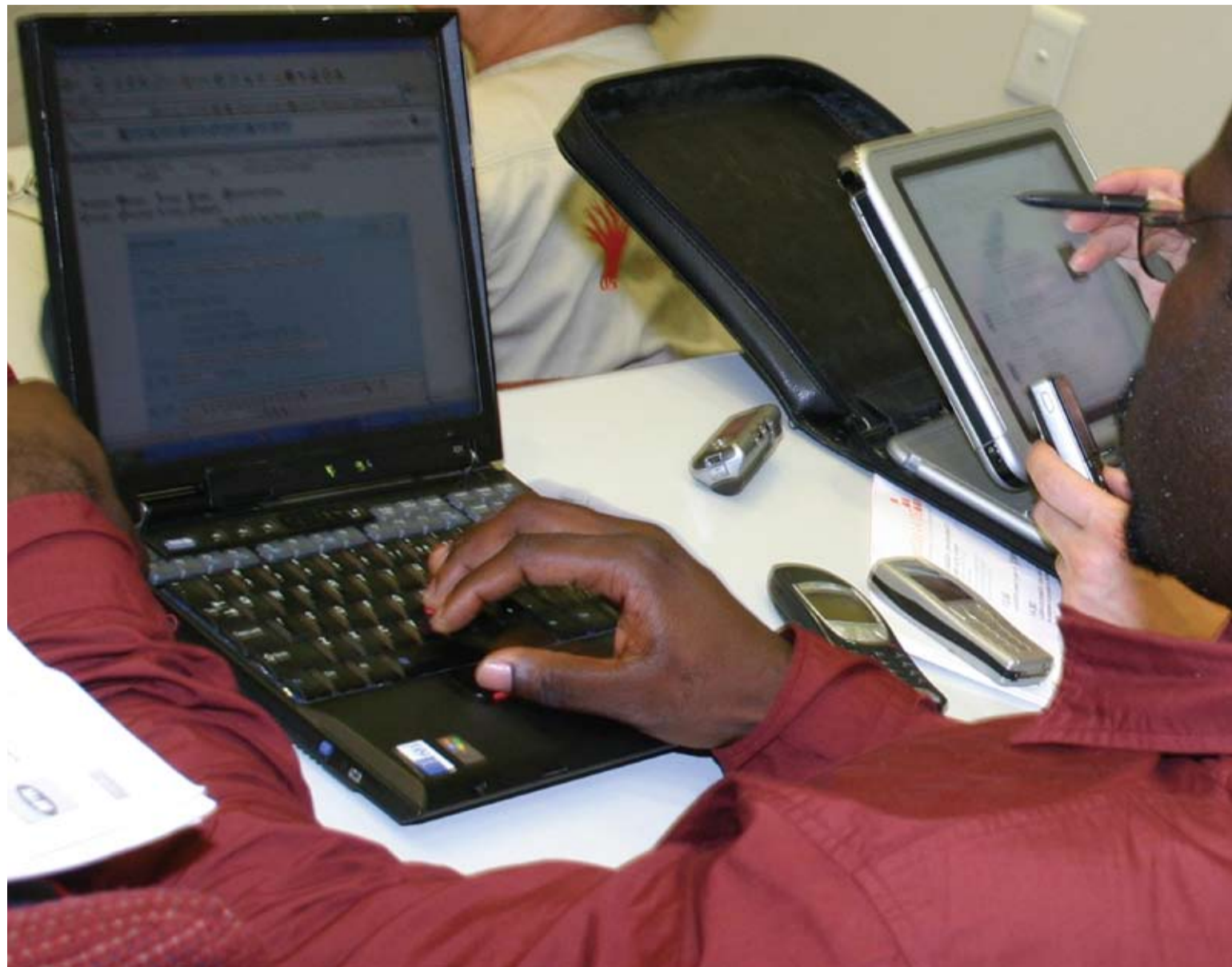
It is also increasingly difficult to say what is and is not journalism these days. Editorial independence is certainly a key aspect in differentiating journalism from all the other content available to us, the separation of editorial selection from economic or political influence.

With this in mind, let us examine the idea that blogging and citizen journalism somehow pose an alternative to the traditional media.

The examples commonly quoted are the cell-phone images of the London bombings this year, or the Baghdad bloggers, or the large-scale citizen journalism initiatives like the South Korean ohmynews, the San Francisco-focused Bayosphere and backfence.com. But each of these represents the exception rather than the rule.

It also becomes clear very quickly that there are three different categories of content creation here:

Firstly, there are those bloggers who simply blog because they like doing it and feel their message and opinions need to be published. They are not journalists but they may occasionally fall into the second category, which is the bloggers who happen to be around when something important happens or who decide to disclose information that they are not supposed to. Suddenly their experiences become rel-



“The practice of blogging is a typical example of Western individual endeavour: one person writes, edits and publishes – the lone pamphleteer.”

evant and newsworthy because they are eyewitnesses or sources but they too do not see themselves as journalists. The third and much smaller category are those who volunteer, sometimes for small amounts of money, to be part of a loosely-organised network of amateur journalists. Their work is edited and subject to selection based on editorial criteria, and the style of writing is quite different to that of a common or garden blogger.

This is not to say that bloggers are unimportant. They generate significant amounts of web traffic and the greatest challenge for many successful bloggers is the question of how to make money doing it, and this

is where bloggers get onto really shaky ground from a journalistic perspective.

The only real way to make money as a blogger right now is to display advertising on your pages or link to retail sites via a partner programme that would yield a small referral commission. The leader in small-scale advertising is Google AdSense which places ads on a page that match keywords in the content of the page itself. There is no equivalent print media advertising model and it seems fantastic at first because now the advertising seems relevant to the content you are reading.

The danger here is that bloggers begin to tailor

What is and isn't journalism

by Adam C. Powell III

Citizen journalism

Shortly after the London explosions happened the BBC invited members of the public to submit their cellphone photos of the blasts to the broadcaster, these people could do this quicker than BBC crews could get to the scenes. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_pictures/4660563.stm)

In the US the major TV networks are inviting similar submissions. The ABC Eyewitness News Team invites people to “be part of our news team”. http://abclocal.go.com/wabc/news/interact/wabc_2005_eyewitnessnewsteam.htm

And recently I heard the News Director at the *New York Times* commenting that this means that media organisations have to check that they are being sent real photos. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/18/technology/18cellphone.html>

In Korea ohmynews.com has 33 000 registered “citizen journalists” <http://ohmynews.com/> (But see the *Newsweek* story: Is Ohmynews really news? At <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5240584/site/newsweek/>)

com/id/5240584/site/newsweek/)

Again in the US, a community in northern Virginia is claiming via their website “we know what is going on in our neighbourhood, not those journalists at the *Washington Post*”. <http://www.backfence.com/learnMore.cfm>

This is having a major economic impact on the *Washington Post* as the classifieds on the website are free and classified advertising is a newspaper's traditional way of making money.

So what does this mean for journalism?

- Trends from 2005 State of the Media Report just published – items 3 and 4. http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2005/narrative_overview_eight.asp?cat=10&media=1
- From the USC pilot study of the future of news (scroll down to sec 5, p 110) <http://ascweb.usc.edu/pubs/powellreport1.pdf>



Paul Greenway

their content to the type of stories that generate high levels of ad revenue and they can get away with it because there is no editor and no editorial independence from economic influence. It's like having the same person as business manager and editor at a newspaper.

A further temptation is to begin linking to things like books, DVDs, movie rentals and second-hand toys on amazon.com because money trickles in every time a transaction is referred successfully.

One can see from the three categories of citizen journalist and the blogonomics of content production in this new medium, there are degrees of journalistic

integrity. A minority of bloggers fall into a truly journalistic category and even less of them fall into the category of trustworthy and consistent journalism.

This debate will also become less relevant as the traditional media begin assimilating these new media techniques, as Gillmor urges them to do in his book *We The Media*.

Good examples of this are the Guardian NewsBlog and Vaughan Ververs, the CBS TV News Public-Eye. Ververs is a blogger installed at CBS to write about the news in a way that is going to be, in his own words, "un-opinionated" – is that even possible? ■

Ask the right question, stupid

by Mark Comerford

"Is blogging journalism?" is a stupid question. It's like asking "Are telephones journalism?" Both are types of technology.

What we need to talk about is what's **in** it. The stories we have to tell. The most important tool is what's between the ears.

How can mainstream media use new forms and methods of production and distribution to do journalism, which will create new forms of journalism and can also resuscitate old forms of journalism such as storytelling.

One of the crisis issues in journalism right now is the global phenomenon of trust in journalism and the transparency of journalism.

Journalism is not just about getting facts, it's about the interpretation and analysis of those facts.

The public must be given enough detail in order to follow the journalist's trail, and to examine that same data. That's the only way that their right to make up their own minds can be facilitated and informed.

The model cannot be paternalistic or patronising. The mirror is not the right metaphor (you can angle a mirror), but rather the open window.

Journalism should not be a megaphone, but a conversation. Technology is a vehicle.

And new media processes allow for transparency. This can lead to some excellent things – when both disagreeing (with the journalist) and trust (in the journalism) are possible.

The cellphone is going to become central to new media operations.

This will allow for many people to be empowered to get information, but don't forget capitalism will incorporate this technology too. We need a plan and a strategy: don't let the money people take control of the distribution systems.

Lots of local communities have the same problems but the solutions don't get spread around. Cellphone technology and radio can distribute information cheaply.

The system is there and it's possible to use a phone to make a report, send it to a blog and then subscribe and get it delivered to another cellphone or to use community radio to reach an entire community.

Journalism now?

Blogging

With the destruction of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans the *New York Times* ran a story focusing on the very large impact blogs had on people's understanding of the story. http://www.nytimes.com/cnet/CNET_2100-1028_3-5844419.html

- There was heavy reliance on non-journalists for the "reporting" of this disaster.
- In Saudi Arabia a blogger called "Saudi Girl" is required reading for the Saudi royal family to keep in touch with their citizens. <http://saudigirl.blogspot.com>
- The Egyptian election was covered by the Big Pharaoh, an Egyptian blogger, again this blog is required reading for the rulers of this country. <http://bigpharaoh.blogspot.com/>
- The Online Journalism Review at USC pays extensive attention to blogs in the Arab world see <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/050830glaser/>

- Soldiers in Iraq started their own blogs see http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com/index.php/newsroom/worldcast_detail/050906_sgt_liz-zie_s_army/

Help for non-journalists!

A journalism site offering help to non-journalists <http://www.j-learning.org/>. This is "how-to site for community journalism" and offers information on topics from planning websites through to ethics.

Wikis

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikinews> and OJR on wikis <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/050721gupta/>

Smart mobs

<http://www.trendbuero.de/trendtag/index.php?CategoryId=6&en>, <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/050609Ulmanu/>

Robots do news

Another new trend which has become apparent is semi-automated news which has become totally automated news. This is not a blog and there are no journalists compiling this information.

It is a robotic site done by software and automatic programs. See: <http://www.topix.net/> and OJR on robot journalism at <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/050802glaser/>

Experiential journalism

What Integrated Media Systems Centre is already doing. We can already experience three senses across the Internet, and the other two (taste and touch) – not yet. But my centre is working on remote media immersion.

So for example, if a human being cannot physically be near the launch of the space shuttle, it is possible to create a virtual digital experience. <http://imsc.usc.edu/research/> offers some examples of this.

Immersipresence

We call it "immersipresence" – you are there, but is it journalism? <http://imsc.usc.edu/rmi/>

- Immersipresence and the musicians who aren't really there, http://imsc.usc.edu/news/releases/i2_040929.html
- Immersipresence and "walking" through 3D models, <http://imsc.usc.edu/research/project/virtcamp/index.html>

Two-way haptics

You can feel it, but is it journalism? <http://imsc.usc.edu/research/project/haptics/>

Two-way haptics: already a reality in health care – in this instance a therapist at a terminal can reach through space to help a stroke patient at another location do physical therapy, and the patient can actually feel the therapist's help. http://imsc.usc.edu/news/releases/050526_haptics.html