User-generated content and the changing news cycle

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Abstract

Blogs represent a major development in media consumption and practice. The Pew Center in the United States reported in mid-2005 that about eight million Americans had created blogs and 32 million read them. That’s equivalent to two-thirds the number of people who read a daily newspaper during a week, a challenging figure in the context of dwindling circulations. Blogs represent the start of the “personal media” revolution, but are only the tip of a range of new media developments. This paper describes the blog phenomenon and notes its arrival via a series of major news stories. It suggests we are seeing the emergence of a new news cycle, as blogs and other internet-based media usurp broadcast’s role in breaking news. The paper describes a range of emerging digital journalism forms that make up the “personal media” revolution. These include blogs delivered via mobile phones (moblogs); video-based blogs (v-logs); newspapers’ use of podcasting to deliver content; and wikis, or peer-generated online content. The media’s reaction to this new form of content is described, and the paper concludes by looking at the forces driving this new form of journalism.

Coverage of the London bombings on July 7, 2005, was a watershed in the history of journalism, as the event was the catalyst for the emergence of a new form of reportage in the United Kingdom that has come to be known as “participatory” or “citizen” journalism. The Boxing Day 2004 tsunami represents a similar landmark in journalism’s history, in the sense of a story in which citizens around the world contributed to a news website.

Similar revolutions have been taking place around the world since the turn of the new century in places such as South Korea, the US, South-East Asia and Australia. The best known example in South Korea is the ohmynews.com site, launched in February 2002, which boasted almost 40,000 citizen reporters as of...
late 2005 (Oh, 2005). The rise of "participatory" journalism has occurred at the expense of traditional media. The Pew Center in the US reported in June 2005 that eight million Americans had created blogs, and 32 million read blogs. To put that into context, that's two-thirds of the 50 million people who read a daily newspaper during the week in that country. In November 2004, Tom Curley, CEO of the world's biggest news organisation, Associated Press (AP), noted that bloggers were creating about 16,000 posts per hour - more than his organisation's total content. "And we thought we had the big hose," he commented wryly. "We [journalists] have to learn to free our content from those expensive containers we call the newspaper or broadcast bulletin. It means a change from the news as lecture to the news as conversation." (Curley, 2004)

The spread of blogs becomes even more significant in the context of declining newspaper circulations and free-to-air audiences against population growth: in the 50 years to 2004, the combined Monday-Friday circulation of all American newspapers gained 0.2 per cent, while the population almost doubled. Over the same half century in Australia, the population in the six state capitals rose 257 per cent, but average weekday newspaper circulation dropped by almost a third (Quinn, 2006a, p. 30). In the past decade alone, per capita consumption of Australian newspapers has dropped 20 per cent for Monday-to-Friday editions, and 18 per cent on Saturdays. Free-to-air viewing of news has declined 20 per cent since 1965, with a quarter of the fall happening since 2001 (Mitchell, 2005, p. 15).

What are blogs?

Anecdotal evidence suggests many Australian journalists, journalism students and journalism academics know little about new forms of content delivery. This is not atypical. At Ifra’s annual Expo conference in October 2004 – the world’s biggest media technology showcase – most editors and publishers had not heard of moblogs (Quinn, 2005a). What, then, are blogs and moblogs? What about other tools for "personal" or "participatory" journalism?

Blog is an amalgam of web and log. Like a ship’s log, it is a record of a journey, with the most recent entry at the top of the screen. Most blogs consist of text, and can be created and read on a website. Moblog is an amalgam of mobile phone and blog. These blogs are designed to work with mobile phones. People post content to a website by sending a multimedia message or email from their phone to a website linked to the blog. The email’s subject line becomes the headline for the posting, and the message text the body of the story. Software places the attached photograph in the posting as a thumbnail linked to a full-size image. During the 2004 presidential election campaign, student journalists covered the Democratic and Republican national conventions, in Boston in July and New York in August respectively, equipped only with mobile phones. It was part of a Newsplex project to demonstrate the
power of camera-equipped telephones as newsgathering tools. Newsplex is an experimental newsroom at the University of South Carolina at Columbia. Randy Covington, director of Newsplex and a professor with the university’s College of Mass Communications and Information Studies, oversaw the election project:

This is a new form of journalism. In terms of thoroughness and depth, we beat the pants off the [local] TV stations. For newspapers, this is a way to compete with television. For TV, it’s a way to add depth to coverage. Technology and resourcefulness are blurring the lines between traditional print and broadcast journalism in a way that is creating new forms of storytelling. (Covington, 2004)

In November 2003, the BBC began experimenting with video blogs, or vlogs. It gave 40 of its reporters and producers mobile phones that could record and send video. Philips Software, a division of Royal Philips Electronics, reconfigured the Nokia 3650 phones so picture resolution was of broadcast quality. The phones were able to record several minutes of video, instead of the 20 to 30 seconds available on consumer models. Head of newsgathering Adrian Van Klaveren said the phones were not intended to replace traditional television cameras but to augment them (quoted in Patsuris, 2004).

A wiki is a collaboratively-written document published online. Interested people add to the article, building up a body of knowledge. Wikis are developed and refined through a peer-review process. They are written in a Web browser and can be updated or commented on by anyone who has access to the website. The best known is the Wikipedia encyclopedia. Its news offshoot, Wikinews (http://en.wikinews.org), publishes stories from a network of volunteer reporters. Wikinews follows essentially the same set of rules as Wikipedia, which allows anyone to create entries or edit and correct other people’s work, provided each change is recorded. But unlike Wikipedia, which is a reference work, Wikinews reporters are encouraged to submit original photographs and stories (Glassner, 2005). The BBC has about 40 wikis, and about 400 contributors moderate or contribute to the sites. About 150 BBC staff write their own blogs. One of the most popular is written by Richard Sambrook, the former head of the BBC’s World Service, who in July 2005 took on the role of establishing the BBC’s college of journalism (Pike, 2005, p. 19).

A podcast is a do-it-yourself form of broadcasting that became popular about the middle of 2004. The term comes from Apple Computer’s iPod, a portable digital music player. Listeners download podcast files on to their music players. Podcasting represents another example of personal media, where individuals choose what they hear rather than relying on radio stations. Convenience is king. Listeners can automate the download process so new items are available on their computers as they are published. Dozens of US
newspapers and magazines embraced podcasting in 2005. Some summarise the day's news; others provide radio-style programs complete with interviews of reporters and newsmakers. Wall Street Journal reporter David Kesmodel said most podcasts had small budgets and were hosted by print journalists with "scant broadcast experience". He said some newspapers wanted to be seen as innovators with podcasts because they believed they were behind in embracing blogs. "But, just as with blogs, it is unclear whether podcasts will become a commercial success or help newspapers gain readers. So far, audiences are small, with some news podcasters reporting only a few hundred listeners per show." (Kesmodel, 2005) Some podcasts have attracted advertising.

A new news cycle

Coverage of the London bombings produced a huge change in the way news unfolds. Until the arrival of radio in the 1920s, newspapers and their loyal servants, news agencies, had a monopoly on the delivery and announcement of news. Their only competition was word of mouth. From the 1920s and 1930s, radio developed and maintained dominance as the breaker of news until well after television broadcasting resumed at the end of World War II (television was considered too strategically important during the war and development was delayed until after it ended). Television gained dominance in the 1960s and 1970s as journalists became accustomed to live broadcasts. By the end of the 20th century, because of the ability to go live via satellite or mobile phone, broadcast media – especially 24-hour all-news channels – became the place where big news stories broke. As the news cycle evolved, print media acquired a new role: to provide analysis and reflection the next day, and to offer the best available still images.

Mike Game, chief operating officer of Fairfax Digital, the online arm of the newspaper publisher, noted how people were turning to the internet for breaking news. The internet's great strength, he said, was its ability to attract people during the day for short news grabs: "In many ways it is displacing more traditional media like radio news services." (quoted in MacLean, 2005, p. 18) In response to this change, major American newspapers such as The Washington Post, The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times introduced groups of rewrite journalists on "continuous" or "extended" news desks. These publish breaking news online as soon as possible after stories become available, and function similarly to the rewrite desks common on afternoon newspapers until the 1960s. Groups of senior editorial staff talk to reporters about stories they are working on, or rewrite reporters' early versions of stories in conjunction with wire copy while events are unfolding.

The continuous news desk at The Washington Post is based in the newspaper's newsroom in Washington, DC. The website, WashingtonPost.com, is located across the Potomac River in Arlington, Virginia. Robert McCartney,
assistant managing editor for continuous news, said a team of three editors and two writers solicited and edited breaking news from reporters in the field—"especially during peak web traffic hours of 9am to 5pm"—and also wrote their own stories. The goal was to increase the flow of original staff files to the Web to distinguish the paper's coverage from that of other publications. McCartney said ideally a newspaper reporter wrote the early file for the Web. "We want to take advantage of the beat reporter's expertise, sourcing and credibility." When reporters did not have time, they telephoned notes to the desk, where a writer produced a story under a double byline. "This arrangement encourages beat reporters to file for the Web while relieving them of the burden if they're too busy." If necessary, continuous news department editors wrote stories on their own, "doing as much independent reporting as possible, and citing wires or other secondary sources" (McCartney, 2004).

Dan Bigman, associate editor of NYTimes.com, said the continuous news desk at The New York Times had been a catalyst for changing newspaper journalists' opinions about online, and vice versa. In August 2005, the New York Times Company announced that its print and online newsrooms would merge when the company moved to new headquarters in 2007. Online commentator Mark Glaser suggested this was the beginning of a philosophical change that would echo through the newspaper business. Publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. and the man in charge of NYTimes.com, vice-president of digital operations Martin Nisenholtz, had been planning the merger for a decade (Glaser, 2005). Joseph Russin, assistant managing editor for multimedia at the Los Angeles Times, said his paper had created an extended news desk to get immediacy on the paper's website. "The extended news desk takes stories - wire or LA Times reporters' stories - and rewrites or edits the items and gets them on the website." This allowed the site to get ahead of stories. "We compete with The New York Times and The Washington Post. To be more competitive we needed to be more current." He said a strong push for the desk came from national and international reporters who wanted their stories published faster (Russin, 2003).

**Changing media consumption habits**

We are seeing the end of the broadcast-led breaking news cycle that became common with live television crosses in the 1970s. News has become a 24-hour continuous process, as audiences consume more news from more and more sources. The 2004 Communications Industry Forecast reported that Americans spent 10.04 hours a day with media, an increase of almost an hour a day since 1998. Analysts at merchant bank Veronis Suhler Stevenson predicted the time Americans spent with media would increase by another hour a day by 2008 (Quinn, 2005c, p. 21). It is relatively easy to extrapolate these figures to Australia. We will see major changes in the way journalists operate as they seek to accommodate fragmenting audiences. Research groups such as the Carnegie

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moblogging had played a significant part in a breaking news story in the UK. "Mobloggers are more focused on the idea of community and using technology to really engage with other people than doing the jobs of journalists," he said, noting that traditional media would have to change because moblogs were "the next major step in publishing" (Reeves, 2005, p. 17). Photographs by amateurs with mobile phones and digital cameras provided the bulk of the pictorial coverage of the bombings. The Sun is the highest-circulating daily in the UK. Its front-page photograph on the day after the bombings came from an eyewitness, as did the front-page image of rival tabloid The Daily Mirror, from a Japanese tourist. A UK Press Gazette reporter noted: "Mobile phone images taken by survivors underground were widely used by broadcasters and the national press." (Ponsford, 2005, p. 19)

Guardian Media reporter Julia Day said the long-predicted democratisation of the media had "become a reality" as members of the public turned photographers and reporters:

Claustrophobic videos shot in smoke-filled, bombed-out London Underground carriages, photographs of the blasted Number 30 bus and horrific scenes of body-strewn roads were among the most powerful images to emerge. All were shot by members of the public, and some of them became the iconic pictures of the day. (Day, 2005, p. 2)

John Ryley, executive editor of Sky News in London, said mobile phones permitted "a democratisation of news". His studio received video, emailed by mobile phone, of the bombed tube between King's Cross and Russell Square stations at 12.40 pm and had it on air by 1 pm: "News crews usually get there just after the event, but these pictures show us the event as it happens." (quoted in Day, 2005, p. 2) Another Guardian Media reporter, Owen Gibson, noted that after July 7, blogs "may come to be seen as the new news essential". Blogs had become "a familiar part of online life" as people spread information about the explosions (Gibson, 2005, pp. 2-3).

The process probably started becoming accepted about half a year earlier, with coverage of the December 26, 2004, tsunami and its aftermath. Hugh Martin, editor of news.com.au, said the citizen reporting noted in the aftermath of the Boxing Day tsunami had evolved over the past half decade. "It has been a developing trend since the Kosovo War in 1999 when residents under siege in Pristina were able to email public internet message boards." In 1999 the mainstream media were not able to check the posts were authentic. "These days we are more accustomed to non-journalists reporting their experiences of newsworthy events, so, while establishing the credibility of the report is as important as it ever was, we are in a better position to judge that." (Martin, 2005) News Interactive, the online arm of the BBC, received 25,000 emails in the first week after the tsunami disaster, and nearly two million people looked at the
BBC website established to help locate the missing. Vicky Taylor, editor of interactivity for News Interactive, said many BBC programs and websites used these Web-based bulletin boards to find people to interview, write stories about survivors and provide updates on searches: “Here was a great opportunity within News to share content sent from our users, viewers and listeners more effectively, and for it to become a newsgathering base for programs.” The BBC’s reaction was to establish a “user-generated content” desk. It funded a pilot study for three months, employing three journalists to manage content contributed by audiences. By mid July 2005, the UGC team was receiving 10,000 emails, text messages and video contributions a day. The team subsequently expanded to eight journalists, with staff from each of the main bulletins. “Already the benefits are being seen on screen and heard on air,” Taylor said. Iraqis told stories of life inside an occupied country, UK citizens posed questions to guests on programs, Iranians talked about voting in their country’s elections, people contributed to the “have your say” section on News 24, the domestic digital television news channel. “Users of the website can listen to the interviews to which they have contributed questions.” (Taylor, 2005, p. 12)

Hits on the BBC’s website boomed during and after the tsunami, and even more after the London bombings. The websites of the BBC, Sky News and The Guardian reported significant increases in visitors. Guardian Unlimited reported that on July 8, 2005, 1.3 million people accessed almost 8 million pages, the most on any day since the site was launched almost a decade earlier. (On a typical day, Guardian Unlimited gets 3.5 to 4 million page views.) On the same day, the BBC News website accounted for almost 29 per cent of all internet news traffic in Britain. The next nearest organisation attracted less than 5 per cent. BBC TV also rated well. Almost 7 million people watched the extended 6pm bulletin, more than double the 3.3 million who usually watch at that time (Plunkett, 2005, p. 3).

It’s a little surprising it has taken some media companies such a long time to appreciate the benefits. In some respects, talkback radio has been making money from audience-contributed content for a generation. The biggest questions, as with any advance in technology, usually relate to legal issues. Talkback radio deals with some of the issues through the use of delayed transmission. But technological changes run ahead of legislation. Some key questions need to be answered when considering audience-generated content in the digital world. Who owns the copyright of contributed material? Who is liable if the material is defamatory? How accurate is the information? These questions, while vital, are beyond the scope of this paper, but worthy of future research.

**Forces driving participatory journalism**

As the headline of the Guardian Media cover story in the week after the London bombings noted: “We are all reporters now.” (Day, 2005, p. 2) This
tables, URLs, digital copies of documents that support what we've written – essentially every piece of material and information we can gather and generate in our reporting efforts on a given topic. (Northrup, 2000)

The new journalistic skill needed in an age of multiple-media storytelling involved devising the richest and most effective links between all of this content to create an integrated package (Northrup, 2000).

Former San Jose Mercury News columnist Dan Gillmor has advocated what he calls grassroots journalism: “Every reporter should realize that, collectively, the readers know more than they do about what they write about.” (quoted in Vara, 2005) Gillmor is not confident the changes will occur overnight, or among the people of his generation (he is in his mid 50s):

I won’t be the one who really figures this out. Someone who’s five years old and growing up in Helsinki or Seoul is more likely to do that than anyone my age or a generation younger. She’s going to understand journalism in a way I literally cannot comprehend today. I just hope to be around long enough to grasp it. (quoted in Jardin, 2004)

This article contains more questions than answers. So it’s fitting to end with more questions. How many Australian journalists read or write blogs, or produce podcasts? How much do we know about people’s adoption of these innovations? How many journalism educators have created a moblog, or a podcast, or a v-log? The answers to these questions will show how much or little we know about the emerging force of participatory journalism. If nothing else, they will suggest some lively areas for further research.

References


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