

Are You Serious?

The potential and the reality of weblogs as mass media, and why they matter.

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Are you serious? In your weblog? And/or in the way you think (or talk) about weblogs? Do you think that there are way too many weblogs that don't really serve a purpose? Are you annoyed by cat pictures and 'cheese sandwich blogging'? Do you think there are too many weblogs that just are not serious enough?

I have to admit that I am not very serious in my weblog. For example, I have a guestblogger on my weblog every Sunday who happens to be a fluffy toy moose. His name is Haldur Gislufsson, and he is extremely popular among my readers, to the point that sometimes they are writing to ask if anything is wrong when he has not blogged anything in a while.

I intend to be very serious in this paper, though. In fact, I am so serious that some people, especially those who are very serious in their weblogs, may regard what I am about to say as blasphemy. I can take this risk easily because I do not take weblogging all that seriously. It is the the phenomenon of weblogging itself that I take very seriously.

In this paper I will not distinguish between a 'weblog' and an 'online diary'. This is because what I am going to talk about is not so much a certain kind of content, but instead the medium through which all kinds of content are published — in the sense of 'regular, chronological online publication via weblog software for public perusal', even though the public perusal may not be fully intended as such.

Weblogs are not journalism

And while I will be talking about a mass medium, I will not be talking about weblogs as journalism. In fact, there is this long-standing and sometimes rather intense debate whether weblogs will one day replace 'traditional' journalism, including the long-standing and sometimes rather intense debate whether weblogs are journalism or not.

This debate has gone on for quite a while, despite the fact that the answer is obvious: *of course weblogs are not journalism*. Weblogs can be used for journalism, but only a minuscule percentage are actually used for journalism. The large majority is something else. Weblogs are a medium, just like a newspaper or television is a medium. Whether something is journalism or not depends, however, not so much on the medium, as on the content.

My standard answer to people who insist on equalling the two is to say: *weblogging relates to journalism as using Microsoft Frontpage relates to web design*.

I am not a web designer just because I know how to use Frontpage. Knowledge of the tools does not automatically include knowledge of the rules. I need to know a lot that goes far beyond using a web page editor — essential things such as user interface design, information architecture, graphic design, usability, markup language, and more — to qualify as a web designer.

Similarly, I am not a journalist just because I am publishing a weblog. Publishing something on a daily basis is not journalism, it is *publishing*. That is not the same thing at all.

Journalism goes far beyond mere publishing in being very much about adhering to journalistic principles in your work, a work ethic if you wish. In this context, the Austrian

media law uses the term *Sorgfaltspflicht* (duty of care), in other words, a journalist must by all means assure that s/he has done everything to assert that the published article is correct. This would include among other things:

- first-hand research
- use of multiple sources
- inclusion of different perspectives
- careful and conscientious verification of sources
- quality control through an editorial process before publication
- clear distinction between statement of fact and statement of opinion

I venture to say that from any sample of weblogs only a minuscule percentage fulfil even just one of these criteria. Note that I am not saying that there are not any weblogs that would count as journalism — there certainly are —, but what you typically get from weblogs is, mostly:

- republication of second- or third-hand news (thanks to RSS)
- multiple references to just one source
- the author's perspective only
- no verification of sources — weblogs as rumour mill
- instant publication — quality control, if any, is through reader feedback *after* publication
- a mixture of fact and personal opinion

Interestingly, some of the bloggers who are insisting most fervently on being regarded as journalists, are not really following these standards in their weblogs either. People like Andrew Sullivan may excel at commentary, opinion pieces and punditry, but again this is not journalism. Or take the following examples from Glenn Reynolds' *InstaPundit.com*:

"PLENTY OF READER REVIEWS for Clinton's book over at Amazon now. You could write a dissertation in sociology or political science from these. And somebody probably will."

"STANDING UP for free speech."

"CNN'S SOURCE is changing his/her story on Rumsfeld and interrogation notes [sic] Ed Morrissey. Think this will get as much play as the original accusation?"

(Reynolds 2004)

These are three full articles (repeat: three full articles) by someone who considers himself a journalist. I do not know what you would think if you found these in a newspaper, but you probably would not take Glenn Reynolds, who apparently has some 300,000 hits per day on his website, as seriously as people take him. Some of the sentences are not even proper English. The point here is, however, that his entries *do* make sense, but only in their function as a *link hub*. Remove the links from the text, and it becomes totally devoid of meaning.

The mass media revolution

And here we see already the first way, or the first step in which weblogs are changing our perception of how news can be communicated: we are seeing that in addition to the direct communication via a written article, there is also the indirect communication via a mere hyperlink. Suddenly people who are creating *access points* to other people's articles seem to become as important as the people actually writing these articles.

But it does not end there.

We are in the midst of what we might call a mass media revolution, and it is exciting to see how weblogs are a part of this revolution. Which is why I wrote this paper in the first place —

not to bash weblogs, but to point out why the fact that they are not journalism, but more of a *complement* to journalism, is the truly great thing about them, and why we must not limit ourselves to focussing on the 'serious' side of weblogs and instead also take a serious look at the non-serious side of weblogs. Weblogs are not journalism, *and that is the great thing about them*.

What is happening is that we are witnessing a fundamental change as to what we perceive as 'news'.

Making the media more democratic

As much as we are talking about democracy and equality, our society is still fundamentally hierarchic in that it differentiates between those who make the decisions for others, and those who are subject to these decisions. Even a democracy does not change that. You elect your politicians, they decide for you. Traditionally, and this has been changing slowly over the past decades, but traditionally, what is mostly communicated through the mass media and even more so, what ends up in history books, are almost exclusively the actions and decisions of this ruling class (the political élite) and what one could refer to as 'the extraordinary', singular events of enormous impact on, or of great entertainment value for a large number of people (always with a few exceptions of course).

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a growing realization that the mass media were not truly democratic in that citizens were excluded from the journalistic process. In that period we have numerous examples of projects to make participation in the mass media possible for a larger number of people. That is the age of *Stadtteilfernsehen* in Germany, when experimental TV stations were set up for single city districts and everyone was invited to participate, and it is of course also mirrored in the increasing regionalisation of all kinds of mass media, but the traditional media never became truly 'democratic' in the meaning that *everyone* could participate, in that they lacked an infrastructure that was really open to a large number of participants.

This changed with the Internet. Contrary to previous forms of publishing, the Internet allowed more people than before to publish whatever they wished to publish. All you needed was Internet access, dedicated server space and an HTML editor. The Internet has an infrastructure that can (potentially) accommodate everyone, in terms of participation it is therefore (potentially) more democratic than any other mass medium.

Weblog software has taken this development one step further, because now all you need is Internet access, and you can publish your own 'news' every day if you wish, theoretically (depending on your weblog software) without any technical knowledge. This is a total transformation of the media landscape, a veritable mass media revolution: you now have the power to publish your 'news' on your own mass medium.

But what exactly is this 'news'?

The metamorphosis of 'news'

In a development that has started already a few decades back, the definition of 'news' has started to change significantly in one particular direction, and it has gained more and more momentum as time progressed. We have been moving away from 'news that are relevant to the world' to 'news that are entertaining for the world', but more recently there has been a pronounced shift to 'news that are relevant to me'. In traditional media, this development has led to the proliferation of reality soaps, which are a misdirected and somewhat futile attempt to turn everyday life (and, of course, everyday voyeurism) into media content. What has

happened, though, is that the way somebody brushes his teeth inside the *Big Brother* container is suddenly no less newsworthy than the latest events in Iraq.

And oddly, if you think about it, it even makes sense. In terms of direct relevance for a person's life, the events in a war thousands of miles away or the events in some weird container are first and foremost virtual. Knowledge of these things would not be there without the mass media in the first place, and both could be complete constructs, for the average consumer is perfectly unable to verify it personally without being in the location him- or herself. So, as harsh as this may sound, any emotional involvement is just as much a construct, depending on how much you trust or distrust the media, but not by what is actually happening somewhere.

Essentially, we live in a world of media constructs, in a world that is devoid of emotional involvement. Therefore, people are looking just for the kind of media content that provides this involvement, and, as there are now no longer locked out of the mass media, when they do not find it, they can use newly available publishing tools like weblog software to generate just this kind of content.

Which is why weblogs are often compared to, or even described as 'reality soaps'. Some of these weblogs are very aware of this:

"This blog [...] has been described by a friend as a mixture of 'The Osbournes', 'Absolutely Fabulous' and 'My Family'."
(McCarthy 2003 f.)

Life, let's admit it, is often banal. Quite often, the news on TV are not the news that really affect me. I am most likely more affected by my daughter's new boyfriend, my cat's illness, or if my computer acts up than by the speech of some head of state in some foreign country. These are the things I am confronted with every day in the first place. News is what is new in *my* life, not really what is on TV. And up until the arrival of weblogs, that was exactly the kind of media content we did not have. And now we not only have it, but we can produce and publish it ourselves.

By the way, this kind of news has always existed. Only we called it 'gossip'. It has always had a tremendously important role in and impact on our lives. However, until very recently it never had a medium over which it could spread other than talking person-to-person.

In addition to this, in a world of constructs, of course nothing prevents people from publishing constructs themselves. You can also call it 'artistic expression'. If you feel you are not yet ready for publishing in book form, you can publish your writing on your website or weblog. In fact, you can publish anything you wish, which is why there is such a vast diversity of weblog content, including a lot of content that does not seem to make sense. Take for example, this bit from *The Dullest Blog in the World*, an oddly popular weblog:

"A light in one of the rooms of my house was on. I decided that I didn't need the light on any longer. I pressed the light switch thereby turning off the light."
(Walker 2004)

Weblogs are not about the truth

Earlier on, I talked about how weblogs generally do not fulfil the criteria of journalism, like research, duty of care, and all that. That may have sounded like it was a bad thing. The point is, unless you take journalistic weblogs, or weblogs as information sources, it does not matter. As a truly democratic medium, weblogs are not about truth. They are not about what is true or not, but about what concerns one particular person. Their whole point is one

individual's distorted point of view. Their whole point is letting one individual express whatever is important to him or her.

And that is a great thing. If you think of it, the contents of people's weblogs give a considerably sharper picture of what really concerns people, of what they are dealing with in their everyday lives and of what these lives look like than any newspaper, TV show or other 'old media' format that I can think of.

A mosaic of everyday life

In writing weblogs, people are generating little less than a mosaic picture of everyday life in the early 21st century, perhaps not of all people, but of a large enough social section. From a historical point of view, this kind of source material will give a picture that is radically different from what we find in our own history books.

Weblogs are not journalism, but hell, are they one revolutionary mass medium. And that is just because most bloggers do not take blogging all that seriously. They do not want to write just about what is considered 'serious', 'important' stuff by others, but only about what matters to themselves.

They do not want to be journalists. They just want to be themselves. They just want to express themselves. And that is why weblogs are so important: without weblogs, these people would not be able to express themselves and we would not learn who they are. And that possibility of public self-expression — including its consequences and even dangers, about which I am not going to talk about in this paper — is a very serious development.

Are you serious about expressing yourself?

References

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Vita brevis

Horst Prillinger graduated from the University of Vienna with a master's degree in English and Communications/Media studies and holds a PhD in English literature. He currently works as lecturer in English and Media studies at Vienna University and the Vienna State College of Education, and as a librarian at Vienna University library.

Horst started his first weblog *The Evil Empire* (<http://www.aardvark.at/evil-empire/>) in 1999, long before he knew what a weblog was; his personal weblogs *The Aardvark Speaks* (<http://www.aardvark.at/blog/>) and *The Aardvark Cooks* (<http://www.aardvark.at/cooks/>) followed in 2002; together they have a readership of several hundred visitors every day. A

collection of selected weblog entries, poetry, collages and photographs was published in book form in 2004 ("Cursed", ISBN 3-8334-1255-0).