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The Democratisation of INFORMATION

The process started with Gutenberg, whose printing press put the Bible into the hands of the common man, and continued when cable TV ended the era of big-network dominance. Today, the democratisation of information has reached a new level, with the growing popularity of the web log, or blog, argues **Chris Dillon**.

Blogs first appeared in the late 1990s as on-line journals where people posted entries about their experiences, opinions or hobbies. Initially, this required some programming skills, but as easy-to-use software and cheap broadband access became available, blogging entered the mainstream.

Today, there are millions of blogs devoted to everything from aboriginal art to zoo-keeping. And while the United States is home to the largest number of blogs and English remains the dominant language, blogging is rapidly becoming a global phenomenon. Directory site Blogwise (www.blogwise.com) lists blogs in 186 countries, including more than 100 in Hong Kong and over 220 in China. Some estimates put the number of blogs in China at over a million.

Like everything else on the Internet, blogs vary wildly in quality. Some are so mawkish they would make an angst-ridden teenager blush, while others are so extreme they would test the conviction of the most ardent free-speech advocate. Many simply fade away as the author loses interest. But there have been some interesting and unexpected developments. The rise of corporate blogs is one.

Technology companies are in the forefront of the corporate blogging movement. Microsoft's Robert Scoble (<http://radio.weblogs.com/0001011/>) is among the best-known corporate

bloggers and over 3,000 IBM employees now maintain blogs on topics ranging from autonomic computing to software architecture. Boeing, General Motors, Google, HP, Sun Microsystems and Yahoo! all publish blogs, and consultants now offer guidance to CEOs who want to join the blogosphere.

The emergence of corporate blogging surprised many people, because the speed and spontaneity of blogging challenges the traditional command-and-control model of corporate communications. However, many organisations have found that this risk is offset by the ability of blogs to rapidly disseminate information and gather feedback. And because blogs bypass intermediaries like media outlets and market research firms, they allow companies to interact directly with their audiences.

Blogs also promote openness. Companies have discovered that audiences ignore – or worse, ridicule – blogs that are sanitised by lawyers or filled with

PR platitudes. By recognising mistakes and sharing lessons learned, blogs put a human face on the company and deepen relationships with customers and partners. This openness does have limits, however. Earlier this year, the word “dooiced” was coined to describe the act of being fired for blogging about your job.

Sites such as Instapundit (www.instapundit.com), which combine original commentary with links to other blogs and news stories in the conventional media, are another departure from the blog-as-diary model. Run by Glenn Reynolds, a law professor at the University of Tennessee, Instapundit is one of the most popular sites in the blogosphere, receiving over 120,000 visits each day.

Instapundit brings an element of serendipity to its readers by linking to less well-known sites run by people with special expertise. Vice Squad (<http://vicesquad.blogspot.com>), a blog published by a group of Chicago academics with an interest in public policy on alcohol, tobacco, drugs, prostitution, gambling and pornography is one such site. The Volokh Conspiracy (<http://volokh.com>), founded by UCLA Law School Professor Eugene Volokh – an authority on free speech law, copyright law, the law of government and religion – is another.

Instapundit also highlights emerging issues that have caught the attention of left-leaning bloggers including Eschaton (<http://atrios.blogspot.com>) and the Daily Kos (<http://www.dailykos.com>) or their right-of-centre peers Little Green Footballs (<http://www.littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog>)



www.instapundit.com



www.rogerlsimon.com

or Power Line (<http://www.powerline-blog.com>) as these stories make their way into the mainstream media.

For example, in 2002 Eschaton played a key role in publicising a speech by Republican Senator Trent Lott that endorsed the segregationist views of Senator Strom Thurmond. Continuing coverage by Eschaton, Instapundit and others kept the story alive until it was picked up by the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. This sparked dozens of other articles and op-ed pieces calling for Lott's resignation, which he tendered on December 20.

Last autumn, a report on CBS's 60 Minutes II alleged U.S. President George W. Bush received preferential treatment when he served in the Texas Air National Guard in the 1970s. The claim was based on what the TV network said were newly uncovered National Guard memos. Within hours of the broadcast, posts appeared on Power Line and Little Green Footballs stating that the memos were forgeries. Typography experts soon proved the memos could not be genuine because they had been produced using Microsoft Word. Ultimately, blog coverage resulted in the resignation of veteran news anchor Dan Rather.

More recently, Captain's Quarters (<http://www.captainsquartersblog.com>), a site run by a Minnesota-based call-centre manager, sparked an uproar in Canada by leaking the proceedings of an inquiry into alleged misdeeds by the governing Liberal Party. The blogger's reports, which circumvented a nationwide publication ban, may yet result in early parliamentary elections in Canada.

Incidents like these and bloggers' enthusiasm for chasing down and critiquing stories in the mainstream media have provoked animosity between the two camps. Bloggers have been called unprofessional, conspiracy theorists and a lynch mob, while bloggers accuse journalists of incompetence, arrogance and liberal (or alternatively, conservative) bias.

Things have become more complex as the line between bloggers and journalists begins to blur. Several mainly conservative newspaper columnists have taken up blogging and in March, Garrett Graff became the first blogger to receive a White House press pass. Bloggers have also begun posting first-hand accounts of unfolding events, in what has been dubbed the Citizen Journalist movement. Blogs such as Iraq the Model (<http://iraqthemodel.blogspot.com>) and Hammorabi (<http://hammorabi.blogspot.com>) have been well received in the West, where people have been hungry for news about Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Blogging is also taking off in Iran, with sites such as Iran Focus (<http://www.iranfocus.com>) and Regime Change Iran (<http://regimechangeiran.blogspot.com>) covering developments in that country. This coverage has not been welcomed by the Iranian authorities, which recently sentenced blogger Arash Cigarchi to a 14-year prison term for expressing his opinions on the Internet.

Closer to home, Chen Jiahao, a 23-year-old Singaporean student living in the U.S., shut down his blog after a

Singapore government agency threatened to sue him for defamation.

A*STAR, an agency focusing on science and research, withdrew its threat of legal action after Chen closed his site and apologised for his remarks.

In addition to making governments uncomfortable, some see citizen journalists as a challenge to global news-agency giants such as Reuters, the Associated Press and AFP. Los Angeles-based blogger and author Roger L. Simon (<http://www.rogerlsimon.com>) has suggested that, in addition to providing a fresh perspective on events in the Middle East, citizen journalists could displace foreign correspondents. Simon believes that bloggers' superior local knowledge, language skills and ability to operate without guides or interpreters gives them a tremendous advantage over foreign correspondents.

Liveblogging – posting commentary on a blog while an event is occurring – is also blurring the distinction between journalist and blogger. Events ranging from the Academy Awards to President Bush's last State of the Union Address have been liveblogged, a trend that is fuelled by increasingly ubiquitous wireless networks, mobile phone technology and bloggers' desire to test the limits of a new medium.

Organisations are also experimenting with liveblogging as a way of publicising their activities.

In official blog coverage (http://www.forumblog.org/blog/2005/01/dous_troops_ta.html) of a World Economic Forum session in January, CNN chief news executive Eason Jordan, "asserted that he knew of 12 journalists who had not only been killed by U.S. troops in Iraq, but they had in fact been targeted." Forum participants and bloggers quickly demanded that Jordan substantiate his claims. On February 11, CNN announced Jordan's resignation citing concerns that his remarks "threatened to tarnish the network he helped build."

So will blogs put the mainstream media out of business? Probably not. While they offer a growing volume of original reportage, the bulk of the



www.vicesquad.blogspot.com



www.iranfocus.com

news found on blogs continues to come from the mainstream media. And despite fabricated quotes, plagiarism and other scandals that have hit some of the world's largest media outlets, these companies still command levels of trust and brand recognition that blogs can only dream about.

Then there is the question of money. Advertising and reader contributions provide some revenue, but the vast majority of blogs are labours of love, not businesses. Steady, sustainable revenues may eventually come from initiatives like Pajama Media Partners (which is developing an ad network for Internet advertisers, feeds blog content to mainstream media and the public, and is developing systems to help the public find blog content) but this is still some way off. In the meantime, blogs will be constrained by the reality that, as a wise person once noted, "Opinions are free, but facts cost money."

Rather than spelling the end of the mainstream media, blogs are more likely to be a complementary source of information, much as cable TV programmes supplement those on network television. Blogs also have a valuable role to play as a watchdog, scrutinising coverage in the media. These functions are likely to expand, as podcasting, photoblogging, videoblogging and other multimedia techniques become more common.

One thing is certain, however. As technology becomes even more powerful, the cost of data storage continues to plummet and wireless networks proliferate, the blog genie is unlikely to climb quietly back into its bottle. FCC

Chris Dillon is the principal of Dillon Communications Ltd. He doesn't publish a blog, but he does like to read them. He cites Jazz great Thelonius Monk as saying: "Writing about jazz is like dancing about architecture." Magazine articles about blogging are equally awkward. For an online version of this story, with hyperlinks to the each of the blogs mentioned in the text, visit the Dillon Communications site at www.dilloncommunications.com.



A Protracted Farewell

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the recent series of commiserations over the death of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* was that it was remarkably civilised. Indeed, shouting matches were rare, sordid gossip was kept to a minimum and blatant hostility largely kept under wraps.

(Well, a senior Dow Jones editor was asked how he had the "unmitigated temerity" to attend the Wake, but hey, let's be nice!)

Warm fuzzy feelings spread across three days and nights of convivial drinking (and eating), and it seemed the widespread desire

was to stop lamenting the heinous crimes of the past and to enjoy the friendships of the present.

Could it be that the *Review* was mellowing just as it died? Was its cult status as the seat of ferocious intelligence and vitriolic political incorrectness at last on the wane? Or was everyone just a little bit tired and emotional as the days and nights wore on?

Certainly the schedule was grueling for those who stayed the course. Many former staffers and contributors to the once great magazine pitched up at the Club on Friday,