

THE BLOGGING BBC: Journalism blogs at ‘the world’s most trusted news organisation’

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Blogging has shifted from an activity largely taking place outside established media to a practice appropriated by professional journalists. This study explores how BBC News has incorporated blogging in its journalism, looking at the internal debates that led to the adoption of blogs and charting how they became a core part of the corporation's news output. Using a case-study approach, it examines the impact of blogging on BBC editorial values and considers how journalists have sought to maintain their authority in a digital media environment by integrating a new form of journalism within existing norms and practices. The BBC offers a unique case study as its long-standing editorial values of accuracy, impartiality and fairness appear at odds with the notion of blogs as immediate, uncensored and unmediated. The research reveals that blogs emerged initially as an activity peripheral to the main newsgathering functions of the organisation and were rapidly transformed into key mechanisms for communicating analysis and commentary to the public. It contends that, for now, blogging has had a greater impact on the style, rather than substance, of BBC journalism. While the systems whereby journalists deliver information have evolved, the attitudes and approaches have, so far, remained relatively static.

KEYWORDS: BBC; blogs; journalism; online; public service broadcasting; professional practices

Introduction

The BBC has long enjoyed a privileged position in the mainstream mediascape for its adherence to the highest ideals of truthful, objective and fair journalism. It is, according to its mission statement, “the world’s most trusted news organisation: independent, impartial and honest”, (BBC, 2005a). Notwithstanding its rapid adoption of blogging over the past four years and the fact that an economics blog by a senior editor in October 2008 broke one of the biggest media stories on the 2008 financial crisis, this notion of the BBC’s news values prevails. This, despite the fact that blogging is challenging the authority of the BBC’s traditional news norms and practices by integrating unmediated, subjective commentary in its traditional news. Indeed, some commentators question whether the BBC should let its reporters blog as “its form chips away at the corporation’s remit to be objective and neutral” (Glover, 2008), with suggestions that blogging was “very dangerous territory for the Beeb” (Londoner’s Diary, 2008).

The hyperbole reached its height in October 2008 when a blog posting by BBC economics editor Robert Peston revealed that the UK’s leading banks were seeking a government bailout: “The Gang of Three of Barclays, RBS and Lloyds TSB told Darling to pull his finger out and finalise whatever it is he’s eventually prepared to offer on taxpayers’ behalf,” (Peston, 2008). The news shook the UK financial markets, wiping millions off the value of the banks. The posting led some commentators to speculate whether “we’ve reached a stage where one man at his terminal can rain billions over Britain”, (Preston, 2008) and prompted suggestions that “nowhere is the tension between reporting and commentary more fraught than in the blogs written by some BBC reporters” (Glover, 2008). The comments reflected the unease over how a BBC blog had become “the single most influential journalistic product of the moment - in the UK at least”, (Cellan-Jones, 2008a).

Communications and journalism studies scholars have also highlighted concerns that blogging will destabilise traditional media such as the BBC, suggesting that blogs challenge established journalistic norms and values (Wall, 2004) or undermine the institutional nature of news (Bruns, 2005; Gallo, 2004). Yet these concerns may be overstated, with some scholars arguing that established media are seeking to control and normalise blogging by integrating it within existing practices (Lowrey, 2006; Robinson, 2006; Singer, 2005). This study explores this dichotomy between the BBC’s corporate norms of impartiality and objectivity (Hampton, 2008) and the notion of blogs as “uncensored, unmediated, uncontrolled”, (Blood, 2002). It argues that blogging at the BBC is having a greater impact on the style, rather than substance, of its journalism, with journalists regarding news blogs as an extension of, rather than a departure from, traditional journalistic norms and practices.

Blogs and journalism

The blog format has been increasingly adopted by mainstream news organisations, with weblogs “everywhere in and around journalism” (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008). In the United States, 95 per cent of the top 100 newspapers offered at least one journalist-authored blog in 2007, up from 80 per cent in 2006 (Duran, 2007). There has been a

similar expansion of blogging in Europe, with blogs offered by 44 per cent of news organisations (Oriella PR Network, 2008). In the UK, more than 80 per cent of the leading national newspapers offered at least one blog by November 2006, up from just 17 per cent in April 2005 (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). The rapid implementation of blogging by mainstream media is in stark contrast to the cautious approach to blogs in the early 2000s when established news outlets regarded them as “amateurish, filled with errors and not credible”, (Tremayne, 2007: 261). Much of the academic and popular discourse on blogs at the time centered on the debate over whether blogging was journalism (Lasica, 2001; Rosen, 2005), and concerns over the impact of blogging on professional journalistic values (Boyd, 2004; Gillmor, 2003).

Of particular interest to this research is the tension between blogging and journalistic practices. Singer (2005) argues that blogs challenge long-standing professional norms and practices, namely non-partisanship and the traditional gate-keeping role, while Wendland (2003) describes blogging as a new form of real-time reporting that does not have the filtering or editing associated with established media. Thus, blogs can be considered as questioning the historically static core set of news practices of mainstream journalism. Allan (2006) suggests that blogs are inherently subjective, in line with authors’ perspectives or predispositions, at odds with the concept of objectivity found in US journalism and British news outlets such as the BBC (Hampton, 2008). In fact, tensions within newsrooms over reporters’ blogging and perceived impact on impartiality led to several full-time journalists being forced to stop blogging by editors in mid-2003 (Allan, 2006).

These issues can make it problematic for an established news organisation such as the BBC to integrate a new form of media into its journalistic output. Lowrey (2006) suggests that bloggers see themselves as a community, with their own norms and values, forcing journalists to reconcile this occupational culture with their own (Singer, 2005). Domingo & Heinonen (2008) go further, arguing that blogs question the ownership of journalism on the level of profession, with amateurs performing the same routines as professionals.

Considering that the journalistic profession is often characterised by practice, Wall (2004) has described blogs as black market journalism, arguing they defy some of the accepted practices that have historically defined news within the mainstream corporate media. She argues that the informal practices of bloggers are influencing mainstream media, who are incorporating certain aspects of the format. As Matheson (2004) found, some professional journalists have found blogs offer a format for expressing experiences that do not conform to the conventions of traditional reporting.

The journalism studies literature reveals a duality in the attitudes of the mainstream media to blogging at a time when it is determining how to adapt to the “howling and kicking blogosphere”, (Tremayne, 2007: 271). Blogs have been described as “evidence of journalism’s attempts to rethink its values and relations with its publics” (Matheson, 2004: 462). But there are also indications that established media are seeking to normalise this emergent format within existing practices. Some of the research suggests that blogs are being co-opted by the mainstream as a way of fighting back against competition from user-driven news reporting and commentary that bypasses traditional channels. Singer (2005) suggests that journalists are normalising blogs by maintaining a traditional gatekeeper function, even in a format that is characterised by its participatory nature. This is supported by Lowrey (2006), who argues that “news organisations may be more interested in containing and directing the blogging phenomenon than in fostering democratic participation” (Lowrey, 2006; 493). Robinson (2006) argues that while journalists engage in new forms of writing in blogs, they are also attempting to recapture

journalistic authority online.

As a publicly funded organisation, the BBC does not face the same commercial pressure to generate revenues of rival broadcasters. But the very idea of a public service broadcaster has come under strain due to commercial competition, audience fragmentation and the emergence of alternative digital delivery platforms (Born 2002; Enli 2008). The decision by the BBC to introduce blogs, in some cases as a mechanism for greater accountability (Hermida, 2009), can be seen as one way the public service broadcaster is taking on the challenges associated with commercialisation, digitalisation and convergence (Born, 2003; Hoynes, 2003). Enli (2008) found that public service broadcasters have emphasised audience participation as a strategic response to the challenges in the digital age, arguing that this represents a new direction for public service broadcasting as it is in contrast to a previous reluctance towards participatory formats.

This research seeks to understand how BBC News incorporated blogging in its journalism by examining the influence of institutional contexts in shaping blogging as a journalistic genre. It analyses how blogs went from a peripheral activity by a handful of journalists to becoming part of the news output of the corporation. This paper assesses the impact this new form of media has had on BBC journalism by considering the tensions between editorial control and subjectivity in blogging. The research offers insights into how blogs fit into the reorientation of public service broadcasting at the BBC for the institution to survive technological, societal and market changes.

Methodology

This research uses a case-study approach to chart the adoption and implementation of blogging at the BBC and specifically within its journalism. It analyses the evolution of blogging at the BBC from 2001 to 2008, chronicling the events that impacted on its development. A case-study approach was adopted as it is suited to “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (Yin, 1984: 23). The case-study approach provides for “an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units,” (Gerring, 2004: 342). While this research looked at blogs in the context of journalism at the BBC, it has wider relevance as professional journalists tend to share comparable norms and values.

This paper is based on an analysis of documentary evidence on the launch and subsequent growth of blogs at the BBC covering the period from 2001–2008. The public policy documents include annual reports and BBC editorial guidelines dating from 2004 to 2007 and were accessed online via the BBC website and the website of the BBC Trust. The two internal BBC documents date from 2005 and 2006 and were made available by the authors of the reports who were working at the BBC News website at the time and have since left the corporation. One internal report is the principal strategy document commissioned by the BBC into blogging. The second is a set of blogging guidelines produced for correspondents. The research draws on accounts produced by BBC executives who played an integral role in the development of blogging at the corporation. These accounts contain comments by 10 BBC journalists and editors on blogs published by the BBC. The research also examined four personal blogs by BBC editorial and

technical staff involved in the development of blogging, published independently outside the technical framework of the BBC's Internet infrastructure, and as such allow for multiple personal perspectives on the topic.

The material was analysed by combining critical analysis of the content with investigation into its production, drawing from Philo's critique of the need to take account of the context of production (Philo, 2007). This approach was taken as relying simply on content analysis would have overlooked the structural and professional constraints on media production (e.g. Tuchman, 1978). This research sought to contextualise the documentary evidence by also examining the institutional and cultural factors that shaped the emergence of blogging. This was accomplished through e-mail correspondence between March and April 2008 with a small number of key BBC employees involved in drawing up and implementing the corporation's blogging strategy. These included past and current heads of the BBC News website. The interview subjects were selected due to their position and direct role in the adoption of blogging at the BBC.

- Rory Cellan-Jones, BBC technology correspondent
- Pete Clifton, former editor, BBC News website
- Robin Hamman, former head, BBC Blogs Network
- Steve Herrmann, editor, BBC News website
- Nick Reynolds, editor, BBC Internet Blog
- Giles Wilson, editor, BBC News Blogs

While e-mail interaction is not comparable to oral interaction, scholars have argued it may address some of the interpersonal issues commonly associated with verbal interviewing techniques (Thach, 1995). Combining these forms of research provides contextual information, thus avoiding "embarrassing mistakes by researchers who criticise limited discursive strategies within media content instead of limitations of production," (Fürsich, 2009: 242).

As a former BBC journalist of 16 years, and one of the first BBC News bloggers, the author of this study was also able to draw from his personal knowledge of existing professional and cultural norms within BBC News. The author was a founding news editor at the BBC News website from 1997 to 2006, which includes part of the period covered by this research.

The diffusion of blogging

Early experimentation

The BBC as an organisation was a late adopter of blogging despite being an innovator in the field of online journalism in the late 1990s with the 1997 launch of the BBC News website (Allan, 2006; Kung-Shankleman, 2003). Nevertheless, it is significant that early tentative steps into blogging took place at the BBC News website, the online news department of the corporation. Conditions within this young area of the BBC helped create an environment conducive to innovative journalism practices. As a new department within the BBC with an unusually high level of independence within the corporation, the service had considerable freedom to trial new ideas online (Allan, 2006). As a dedicated online news department, it had its own budget and the financial autonomy to allocate internal resources to introduce innovations that went beyond the boundaries of established BBC journalism practices.

While this paper does not intend to present a detailed analysis of innovation theory

and BBC journalism, evidence shows how the news website emerged as the platform for early experiments by journalists who could be considered as the innovators in the diffusion of blogging at the BBC (Rogers, 1995). BBC News Blogs editor Giles Wilson credits senior BBC Online news executives, as well as himself, as establishing an approach that “has been pretty fundamental to the character of BBC News blogging”. As early as 2001, the BBC described an online column by then political correspondent Nick Robinson as a weblog (BBC, 2001), even though it lacked many of the features commonly associated with blogging. Other early experiments by journalists included coverage of the US 2004 presidential vote (Anderson, 2004) and the UK 2005 general election (BBC, 2005b). These initiatives shared some of the characteristics of blogs but lacked some of the key conventions associated with blogging, such as the ability to comment in real-time on a post, a fact acknowledged by senior editors (Clifton, 2005). These omissions were partly due to technical limitations of the BBC web publishing system but also due to editorial concerns among senior editors about presenting professional content alongside comments from the public (Hermida, 2009).

Initial scepticism

Innovation theory suggests that new ideas or practices spread when others observe early adopters and either seek to replicate their actions or are persuaded to adopt (Rogers 1995). At the BBC, a blog by political editor Nick Robinson is credited by executives as a playing a key role in establishing the journalistic credentials of this new platform. Clifton (2008) described it as the best example of a BBC News blog, while Herrmann (2008) said it had become almost required reading for senior editors and managers. One of the more recent correspondents to start blogging, Rory Cellan-Jones, explained the impact of Robinson’s blog:

At first there was some scepticism about this form of journalism as a use of a busy correspondent's time. But that has changed - first Nick Robinson's political blog proved a big success, but more importantly Robert Peston started a blog which has become essential reading in the City. (Cellan-Jones, 2008)

As a respected and established journalist, Robinson served as a role model for his peers, in this case other senior BBC correspondents and editors.

Further evidence from other sections of BBC News supports the Rogers diffusion of innovation theory. The first news blog by BBC journalist Paul Mason came out of Newsnight, a BBC television programme that has a significant degree of autonomy. The “Newsnight G8” summit blog went live on June 16, 2005 after being approved by Newsnight editor Peter Barron (Mason, 2006). It was an unofficial BBC blog in the sense that it operated outside the corporation’s technical infrastructure, yet it was written by a BBC correspondent and sanctioned by a senior TV news editor:

Apparently the BBC bosses had just had a big away-day where they decided to stop being clipboard merchants and prioritise innovation, so no one felt like nixing it. And yet there was nothing that said it should be allowed. (Mason, cited in Douglas, 2005)

Other early BBC forays into blogging outside of news also took place at the edges of the corporation, notably BBC Scotland’s Island Blogging community project in 2003 (Sambrook, cited in Hypergene, 2005).

The adoption of blogging by BBC News clearly did not take place in a vacuum and external factors need to be considered to understand how this innovation was viewed by members of a social system, in this case, the mainstream media. Between 2005 and 2006,

media outlets, including long-standing newspapers such as The Times and The Daily Telegraph, aggressively expanded the number of blogs on their websites (Hermida and Thurman, 2008). Even the BBC itself acknowledged that the corporation could not ignore blogs, even though “with none of the traditional journalistic checks, [blogging] spawns errors, hoaxes and downright lies which can be right round the world before the truth has its boots on”, (Douglas, 2005). This suggests that the BBC, together with other mainstream news outlets, may have been seeking to reclaim the space seized by bloggers who have exploited what Lowrey (2006) has described as the jurisdictional vulnerabilities of professional journalism.

Compatible innovation

However, as Rogers contends, an idea that is incompatible with the values and norms of a social system will not be adopted as rapidly as an innovation that is compatible (Rogers, 1995). There are indications of the institutional resistance to the notion of blogging as a new form of journalism. BBC executive Lucy Hooberman, who worked on a project that led to the launch of the BBC Blogs Network in 2006, recalled “the people who argued vehemently that it was not the route for the BBC to go down”, (Hooberman, 2007). Another leading advocate of blogging at the BBC, Global News Director Richard Sambrook, wrote of “lots of grappling with very practical problems and frustrations.” But he suggested the BBC had no alternative but to continue its blog experiment as “it's fallen to us to reinvent the industry and we won't do it with heads in either the sand or the clouds”, (Sambrook, 2007). BBC staff member Ben Metcalfe, who was involved in the process as the unofficial blogging and technical platform adviser, recalled that the official unveiling of the BBC Blogs Network in 2006 was “rather than a round of momentous back-slapping, the initial launch was commemorated more with a sigh of relief that we can finally be seen to be ‘getting it’. I think it was worth the wait, just,” (Metcalfe, 2006).

Despite the adoption of blogging, there are indications of continued unease at senior levels. In 2006, the head of BBC News, Helen Boaden, indicated a mistrust of blogging, questioning who held bloggers to account and suggesting a blog would be behind a big news hoax in the coming year (Anderson 2006; Kiss, 2006). A year later the veteran BBC correspondent Kate Adie was reported to have described blogs as “egotistical nonsense” and saying that “journalists shouldn't have any time to blog - there are too many stories waiting to be told,” (Mullane, 2007).

Research shows advocates sought to sway opponents by portraying blogging as an innovation that was compatible with, rather a departure from, existing journalistic norms and practices. An internal report produced in 2005 by BBC journalist Kevin Anderson indicates how early advocates tried to position blogging within the BBC's organisational constraints and standardised production systems. It contained a considerable educational section explaining the nature of blogs. Anderson described blogs as “the latest Internet phenomenon of which much is said and little understood”, before going on to add that “there is general confusion over the definition of a blog so we can be forgiven for the level of confusion that exists internally”, (Anderson, 2005:5). Both the Anderson report and an internal blogging guide for correspondents produced in 2006 indicate the extent to which advocates sought to persuade peers by promoting the benefits:

This mid-terms blog would be a different channel for your journalism as well as a platform for your observations, comments and anecdotes. We think it will make an interesting and important addition to the coverage and if we are right we'll use the same model for other major stories. We hope you'll be able to help us make it

work. (Nixon, 2006)

The early advocates also sought to contextualise the beneficial role of blogging within the BBC's ongoing discussion of transparency and accountability. The theme of transparency enjoyed considerable currency within the corporation as it came at a time when the BBC was reassessing its relationship with audiences (Hermida, 2009). Anderson's 2005 report framed blogging as a platform that would "develop a conversation with our audiences, increasing transparency, trust and responsiveness", (Anderson, 2005:1). It chided the BBC for its attitude in the past, saying that "like many traditional media organisations, we have been inconsistent in our language and our approach to weblogs, which has confused our audiences, alienated bloggers and missed opportunities", (Anderson, 2005:1). Announcing plans for the BBC's first in-house blog, the head of the BBC News website, Pete Clifton, publicly stated the priority was to create a blog to "explain some of our editorial decisions, our priorities, answer criticisms", (Clifton, 2005). The initial focus of this editorial blog was the BBC's online journalism, but he added that it would "hopefully draw other parts of BBC News into the process as well", (Clifton, 2005).

Blogs and editorial values

The start of media blogs

The first in-house BBC blog by a BBC journalist was Nick Robinson's Newslog, launched in December, 2005 with the words; "Now I never thought I'd find myself writing this but... My name's Nick Robinson and I am a blogger." (Robinson, 2005). Within a year, the BBC had launched 43 blogs across its output (Hamman, 2006). Within two years, there were 10 blogs written by senior BBC broadcast correspondents (Herrmann, 2007). By November 2008, the BBC Blog Network, found at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/>, listed 81 blogs across the corporation – 37 authored by journalists working in BBC news and current affairs.

These blogs are what Domingo & Heinonen (2008) categorise as media blogs, written by journalists within a media institution. They include blogs by some of the BBC's most high profile and respected journalists including political editor Nick Robinson, business editor Robert Peston, North America editor Justin Webb, Europe editor Mark Mardell, Beijing correspondent James Reynolds and Northern Ireland editor Mark Devenport. The Editors blog, where editors from across BBC News write about dilemmas and issues, included contributions from 105 editors by November 2008.

The number of BBC news blogs and the pedigree of contributors shows how far blogging has come since the corporation started experimenting with ideas from the format at the start of the decade. But the adoption of blogging had to overcome the perceived challenge from blogs to the profession of journalism. Blogs emerged as self-published and unedited reporting, written in an interpretative and subjective style, often at odds with the notion of the journalist as a professional, non-partisan gatekeeper of news and information. This role is intrinsic in how the BBC defines the role a journalist as enshrined in its editorial guidelines. The guidelines state that "impartiality lies at the heart of the BBC's commitment to its audiences", while a section on accuracy states that "our output will be well sourced, based on sound evidence, thoroughly tested and presented in clear, precise language," (BBC Editorial Guidelines, n.d.). The issue of objectivity is revisited in another section of the guidelines that state the BBC "will be objective and even handed in our approach to a subject. We will provide professional judgments where appropriate, but we

will never promote a particular view on controversial matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy,” (BBC Editorial Guidelines, n.d.).

Is blogging journalism?

Concerns over the subjective and interpretative nature of blogs are noticeable in comments by senior editors working in online news at the BBC. In 2003, the then editor of the BBC News website, Mike Smartt was dismissive of blogs: "Dissemination of information is great, but how much of it is trustworthy? They are an interesting phenomenon, but I don't think they will be as talked about in a year's time," (Smartt, cited in Raynsford, 2003). The departmental head of the BBC News website, Richard Deverell, was cited as saying in 2004 that "there are a lot of very mediocre blogs out there," as well as a "number of very good ones" (Thurman, 2008; 144). On the BBC News website itself, columnist Bill Thompson categorically stated that:

Blogging is not journalism. Often it is as far from journalism as it is possible to get, with unsubstantiated rumour, prejudice and gossip masquerading as informed opinion. Without editors to correct syntax, tidy up the story structure or check facts, it is generally impossible to rely on anything one finds in a blog without verifying it somewhere else - often the much-maligned mainstream media. (Thompson, 2003).

Indeed, even an early advocate of blogging, Giles Wilson, acknowledged that "we weren't quite sure what the point of blogging was for us at the beginning. We didn't know whether it was for a diary column or whether it was for commentary or whether it was for analysis," (Wilson, 2008b).

Observations by BBC staff involved in blogging initiatives reveal the deep unease at the corporation, even as the new outlet expanded its range of blogs:

The idea of blogging - and by blogging I mean fully engaging in the use of blogs as a technique, not just as a technology - can, on the face of things, sit awkwardly alongside some of the BBC's editorial values: truth and accuracy, impartiality and diversity of opinion, editorial integrity and independence, serving the public interest, fairness, and privacy. (Hamman, 2006)

As a result, the institutional context at the BBC played a significant factor in shaping the development of blogging as a journalistic genre, given the corporation's self-assigned role as an impartial, fair and objective purveyor of news and information. Documentary evidence indicates how the corporation sought to embed blogging within its existing journalistic norms and practices by maintaining that blogs need not be, per se, partisan, taming aspects that might challenge its core values. The 2005 Anderson report on blogging concluded that the BBC should adhere to editorial guidelines in the blogs just as it does in its traditional journalism. The author, Kevin Anderson, cited his own experience in producing blog-style content for the BBC News website as proof that blogs could work within existing editorial policies:

From my experience doing the US election blog, writing a weblog does not need to conflict with our journalistic values. In fact, it will help us communicate those values to our audience. Everything that I wrote was signed off by an editor before it was posted. If I thought something was coming close to crossing a line, I flagged it up for an editor and made sure that a few people weighed in on it. (Anderson, 2005: 15)

A platform for personal commentary

The BBC sought to incorporate blogs within its existing journalistic routines by imposing the same system of checks and balances as in the rest of the news operation. While BBC news bloggers may enjoy a degree of autonomy in terms of decisions on content, entries on news blog entries are subject to scrutiny by at least one other journalist since “we don’t think of blog content as being any different from other news content which appears on the BBC website,” (Wilson, 2008b). Comments by BBC news bloggers suggest that individual journalists are aware of the limitations on their posts and the need to remain with BBC norms and values:

Same rules apply as on air – impartiality is the watchword. Which means bloggers have to tread a careful line – they can be engaging and judgmental, but must not take sides. So I can say Vista appears to be a bit of a turkey, or Leopard does not deliver, but can’t say that it means you should switch from Microsoft to Mac or vice versa. (Cellan-Jones, 2008).

We cannot write, we would not want to write, partisan copy in any way, shape or form. That doesn’t mean in my view that we cannot be analytical. We can analyse what is going on What we mustn’t do is cast a judgment as between one particular formula advanced by one party and a formula advanced by another. We mustn’t do that, we shouldn’t do that and we wouldn’t do that. (Taylor, 2008).

In any case, there are indications that BBC bloggers do not consider blogging as substantially different from other forms of media work, particularly in a broadcast context:

People get very fussed up about blogs without any need and they think it is incredibly different to anything we do. People worry that suddenly because blogging is about being instant and it is about getting out there very quickly, that somehow people will abandon BBC standards. Well, why on Earth? We all go on BBC radio and television and talk instantly about something that may just have happened, so we are all very used to that. (Mardell, 2008).

Other journalist bloggers have used similar language when describing their work, drawing comparisons between the immediacy of blogging and live commentary on radio and television (Heyboer, 2004).

The editorial constraints on BBC journalism have, so far, largely shaped the type of blogs it publishes. Using the typology developed by Domingo and Heinonen, (2008), most BBC news blogs can be categorised as media blogs that offer primarily news commentary by correspondents who expound on stories they are working on for broadcast and publish material that would not fit within the constraints of established media formats. This is particularly relevant to a broadcast organisation such as the BBC that is deeply rooted in the established practices of television and radio journalism.

Consequently BBC journalists view blogs as a way of writing about news that “is hard to discuss on TV or radio” in a more personal and informal manner, according to Cellan-Jones. The 2006 blog guidelines explained “how blogging allows us a different tone of voice... being less formal,” (Nixon, 2006) and senior correspondents appeared drawn to the idea of a conversational platform:

It is an opportunity for me, frankly, to be cheeky at the public expense, to use the vein of humour that is possible on radio, possible on the television but far, far more suitable to writing on a blog, to something that is a combination of diary, comment piece and analysis than simply a bit of insolence from me. (Taylor, 2008)

However, while the tone of the writing may differ from that of broadcast, news bloggers are expected to remain within existing editorial parameters:

The thing we explain to all our bloggers, and thankfully they've all got it, is that they shouldn't misunderstand the apparent informal atmosphere of a blog to let their commitment to impartiality drop. They've got to be conversational but they have still got to speak in a BBC voice and to follow the BBC guidelines on reporting. (Wilson, 2008b).

Guidelines issued to 15 BBC journalists who contributed to a blog on the US mid-term elections in 2006 suggest there was some concern about informality: "One word of caution: the blog is as public as all other items on the News website, so please bear in mind how key phrases might appear in tomorrow's Telegraph," (Nixon, 2006).

Relationship with audiences

Editorial insights

The adoption of blogging came at a time when the BBC as a public service broadcaster was seeking to establish its continued relevance in the light of challenges from deregulation, the proliferation of digital platforms and audience fragmentation (Born, 2002; Enli 2008). A key part of this strategy was to revise its relationship with audiences by becoming a more open and accountable organisation, particularly within BBC News (Hermida, 2009). Scholars contend that journalism as an institution has become disconnected from its constituency (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008; Singer, 2005). Unlike institutional journalism, blogs are considered a participatory format given that one of the key attributes is the ability of users to publish comments below each post.

This research indicates that blogs were considered by BBC journalists more as a way of reconnecting with audiences, than as a means of having a dialogue with readers. The Editors blog is frequently cited by executives as an example of the corporation's willingness to be more open about its editorial operations (Hermida, 2009). For BBC News, blogs "help us convey not just the stories, but what we think of them and how we get them," (Herrmann, 2008). Through the blogs, journalists can "convey more of an insight into the perspectives, predicaments and personalities of our reporters (and editors); we can show better what goes into the whole newsgathering and reporting process, showcasing the BBC's strengths in this area," (Nixon, 2006).

While this suggests a greater degree of transparency of the journalistic process, research indicates that there are limitations on how far journalists are engaging with audiences on the blogs. BBC journalists appreciate the ability to gauge audience reaction to their content:

It's fantastic, almost an hour, half an hour later, after you've written something, reading what people think about it, getting an argument going. Sometimes you write something a month or two ago and people are still arguing about it to this day. (Mardell, 2008)

The instant feedback mechanism offered by comments on blogs has been described as a "game-changer" for BBC News as it allows correspondents "to engage in the kind of debate with the audience that it is hard to achieve in a two-minute piece for TV news", (Cellan-Jones, 2008). While comments may turn the blog into an area for debate, BBC journalists rarely engage in a dialogue by responding.

Beyond a one-way conversation

Research commissioned by the BBC in 2007 acknowledged how the institutional

legacy of the corporation as a broadcaster had influenced its implementation of blogging, meaning that “we’re pretty good at using blogs as a publishing platform. But we’re not doing as well as we could engaging with the conversations our blogs could, and in many instances should, be a part of,” (Hamman, 2007b). The growing popularity of blogs, time pressures on journalists and problems with the technical infrastructure have all been cited as reasons for the failure to engage with readers (Hermida, 2008). Within BBC News, BBC News website editor Steve Herrmann said that editors recognise that responding to comments is “one of the biggest challenges for all concerned” and that the BBC is still learning “how to integrate the opinions of their readers, listeners and viewers in new ways” (Boaden 2008).

One significant change since the introduction of blogs in 2005 was the adoption of registration. As of April 2008, the BBC required users to register in order to post a comment, arguing that this was in line with trends in the news industry and “seems to be an effective balance between maintaining access to the blog and the standard of debate” (Wilson, 2008a). The editor of BBC News blogs, Giles Wilson, summed up the corporation’s approach:

We have shown ourselves unafraid to publish plenty of comments which are critical of the BBC. We draw the line at comments which are abusive, offensive or libellous, but otherwise we’ve got a pretty strong stomach for comments. This is part of what people expect from blogs. (Wilson, 2008a)

Comments are moderated, in line with the approach taken by other mainstream UK publications (Hermida and Thurman, 2008), though the BBC admits that in the past “there’s not much transparency about how we moderate comments on BBC blogs (Scullion, 2008). As with other media organisations, the BBC is maintaining a gatekeeper role, taking what scholars argue is a conservative approach to participation (Domingo and Heinenon).

Conclusion

This study examines how one of the world’s most established and respected news organisations has integrated one of the most contested forms of new media technologies as part of its mainstream journalism. It reveals how blogs emerged initially as an activity peripheral to the main newsgathering functions of the organisation and were rapidly transformed into key mechanisms for communicating analysis and commentary to the public. BBC blogs have found a steadily growing audience, with the number of monthly visits to all blogs rising from under one million in April 2006 to more than seven million by October 2007 (Hamman, 2007a). A year later, for the month of October 2008, Nick Robinson’s blog received one and a half million page views, while Robert Peston’s blog alone got eight million page views (Boaden, 2008).

Domingo and Heinonen (2008) suggest that media blogs have created a new genre in institutionalised media journalism, where the author is more visible and the style is more personal. BBC News blogs can be seen a new genre of journalism offered by the corporation, but it is one that has been largely defined by established professional parameters. The BBC experience suggests established news organisations may be taming the “black market journalism” aspects of blogging (Wall, 2004) by subduing it within journalistic norms and practices. The corporation offers a unique case study as its long-standing editorial values of accuracy, impartiality and fairness would appear at odds with the notion of blogs as immediate, uncensored and unmediated. But this study shows how the BBC sought to normalise an emergent media format to conform with established professional values of impartiality and accuracy, consistent with existing research on blogs

and journalism (Singer, 2005; Robinson, 2006). An analysis of the content of BBC news blogs would take this research further, providing additional insights into the impact of digital technologies on journalistic practices.

The professionalism of BBC journalists has played a major part in the use of this new media technology. Senior correspondents have embraced the notion of the blog as a delivery system for journalistic elements that do not fit within established broadcast news. It suggests that journalists are indeed “enthusiastic about the potential to rearticulate practice in the new forms that are available online”, (Matheson, 2004:444). But this study indicates that correspondents do not view blogging as a significant departure from existing forms of journalism, as other journalists have suggested (Heyboer, 2004). Instead blogging is seen as a platform for delivering content that complements broadcast output, albeit in a more personal and informal tone. In this sense, the difference between broadcast and blogging seems to be more about the style, rather than the substance, of reporting. As a result, while the systems whereby journalists deliver information have evolved, established editorial attitudes and approaches at BBC News have, so far, remained relatively static.

However, BBC News has been less adept at incorporating what some argue is the defining feature of blogging – the conversational and social nature of the format (Bradshaw, 2008). If it is considered as a process that involves both the author and the audience in an exchange of ideas, then BBC news blogs fall short. As this study shows, BBC executives acknowledge that the corporation has been poor at engaging with the audience on its blogs. Singer (2007) argues that the open and participatory nature of blogs has not, historically, been an attribute of professional journalism. The BBC experience highlights the challenges facing established media organisations seeking to adopt participatory formats such as blogs. As Deuze, Bruns and Neuberger conclude “participatory ideals do not mesh well with set notions of professional distance in journalism; notions which tend to exclude rather than to include”, (2007: p335). In the BBC’s case, the institutional context of broadcast journalism significantly shaped how blogging was practiced at the corporation. While blogging as a conversation has yet to become commonplace at the BBC, there are signs of an inclination to foster a greater dialogue (Hermida, 2009), shifting away from blogs as a publishing platform and towards “more of a consensus across the BBC about what constitutes good and bad practice” (Stone, 2008).

As O’Sullivan and Heinonen have found, “the social institution called journalism is hesitant in abandoning its conventions, both at organisational and professional levels, even in the ‘Age of the Net,’” (O’Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008: 368). This may be even more so at a news organisation such as the BBC, with its strong institutional legacy of more than 80 years of broadcast news. However, this is a rapidly changing area of journalism and is an important subject for further research. There are already indications that the BBC correspondents such as Robert Peston may be straining at the limits of established professional norms as they edge towards practices drawn from the occupational culture of bloggers. Future research could examine if there is, indeed, a shift towards more unmediated journalism when news organisations start blogging, and consider how this may impact on professional norms of credibility, trust and reputation.

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