

JAK BOUMANS: Blogging as journalistic tool

Abstract

The information age started roughly in the forties with the first computers. It took some forty years to move from administrative machines to all round machines. But once internet was there, the culture started to change. This phenomenon was dubbed Web 2.0. Its major feature was the influence of the user. Also the pendulum in print and broadcast journalism is swinging from printed paper to digipaper and from analogue television to the mobile phone. One of the new Web 2.0 features is blogging, reports of people about their cats and guinea pigs, opinions about politics and professional reviews of conferences, books and movies. Blogs are incorporated in the media policies of newspapers and television and radio stations. BBC for example is riding the waves with applications like blogs, but the company is repressively tolerant; the company guards its name. Blogging can help editors pick up early signals of opinions and problems in society; it can stimulate public debate. Presently the media is still too arrogant to recognise the professional bloggers. But with better tools like blog search engines and micro-chunking, journalists would be able to pick up signals from professional bloggers earlier. Media companies on the other hand could feed the bloggers by forwarding texts and transcripts of articles and programs.

1. Culture of the Information Age

In 1970 I returned from the USA to the Netherlands to start a career in publishing. I got a job with a publishing company which was just setting up a new general encyclopaedia. The project remotely introduced me to the computer. In the next ten years I remained in the encyclopaedia domain and saw computing as a production improvement and perhaps as a new way of publishing. By the end of the decade there were roughly 100 people in the Netherlands who could spell the word online and most of them had a library or a publishing background.

In 1980 I moved into digital media setting up a studio which produced videotext pages. Without knowing, we were busy with e-commerce, producing pages with advertisements and job vacancies.

By 1990 internet transferred from the academic to the business and consumer environments. The personal computer became a household product, and e-mail was the main trigger. But from 2004 internet started to change from a social point of view. For the first time a link was laid between culture and technology. The French sociologist Dominique Wolton remarked that the greatest renewal of digital media was the two-way communication which worked from a clear cultural identity. "Communication is not only a technical phenomenon", he said, "it is an anthropological phenomenon. Communication is more than an exchange of messages. It is also the ability to listen to and understand the sender of the message. No message makes any sense in itself, but the sense comes only within a context, a cultural identity within which the message can be understood." (NRC Handelsblad, Nov. 20, 1998)

And information changed, from a one way information, from a sender to a receiver to e-content: "E-Content is digital information delivered over network-based electronic devices, i.e. symbols that can be utilised and interpreted by human actors during communication processes, which allow them to share visions and influence each other's knowledge, attitudes or behaviour. E-Content allows for user involvement and may change dynamically according to the user's behaviour.

It is a subcategory both of digital and electronic content, marked by the involvement of a network, which leads to a constant renewal of content (contrary to the fixed set of content stored on a carrier such as a CD-ROM, or the content broadcast via TV and Radio). This constant renewal of content in tie with its dynamic change allows for a qualitative difference, thus making it E-Content." (Bruck, Peter A. et al. (2005), E-Content: Technologies and Perspectives for the European Market. Berlin, New York: 8)

And not only internet started to change, but professional publishing and broadcasting in general started to change. Private publishing, called fancy publishing up to that time, became en vogue with user generated content such as blogs, Flickr, YouTube and social networks such as LinkedIn, MySpace, and Facebook started to show up. (A cynical colleague of mine groups Facebook, Twitter and Jaiku under the denominator of digital exhibitionism).

2. Journalism

In journalism a similar movement happened. In the eighties newspapers were very busy changing their production system from lead typesetting to photo typesetting. By the nineties the transformation was complete, just in time to start experimenting with internet. The printed newspaper received its digital counterpart from SMS to pdf files.

This leads also to the pendulum swing. The newspaper business is declining rapidly. It still has a 46 billion Euro turn-over worldwide. The newspaper business now invests in online editions and social media and experiments with digipapers like mobile, e-readers and hopes for electronic tabloid newspapers by manufacturers like Plastic Logic. The advantages are seen as a lightweight newspaper, updates with wifi, to be printed anywhere with dynamic, customised content and advertisements. A similar pendulum swing can be seen on television and radio broadcast from the analogue television screen to the smart mobile screen and from the smart mobile screen to the streetcast screens which can be seen in the metro of Vienna or at the Rembrandtsplein in Amsterdam.

Another trend is that content is no longer bound to a carrier. Users have newspapers, radio, television and internet at their disposal to consume news; in fact news has become a commodity for which people hardly want to pay. And it is not only consuming news, but also producing news. Newspapers and broadcast companies jump on the band wagon of social media. Recently, I listened to a presentation of Tin Radovani, the BBC strategy analyst. He was looking at a shift in pattern in news. He cited the speed of news which

yielded news for the BBC in the first 6 hours of the day of his presentation: 1000 photographs, 4000 sms, 20.000 e-mails and 20 videoclips. He compared this with the speed of content increase of Technorati, YouTube, MySpace and Facebook. He also touched the trends of citizen's journalism and user generated content and granted that the BBC could not ignore these trends. He admitted that BBC was riding on these waves and not initiating trends themselves, except the video plug-in. BBC accepted and integrates the trends. But it sounded almost like citizen's journalism and user generated content is tolerated by the BBC, as long as the name of BBC is not affected.

3. Blogging

Blogging officially goes back to 1994, when Swarthmore student Justin Hall started his first blog on Links.net. But the term weblog was only coined in 1997 by Jorn Barger for logging the web. In April 1999 Peter Merholz shortened the term from weblog to blog. In August 1999 Google launched Blogger, a tool and a site for blogs. In August 2006 there were more than 50 million blogs with 175.000 new blogs being created every day and 18.6 postings per second.

The subjects of blogs can range from blogging about the cat or the guinea pig to technical and political subjects. But there is also a technical range of blog: blog, micro-blog, shock blogs and photoblogs. The population of independent professional bloggers and professional company bloggers launch regularly or even daily postings, using Blogger or Wordpress as content management systems for texts, photographs, audio fragments and videos.

Blogs take many forms and shapes. It can be compared to a column in a newspaper or magazine. But readers can react to a blog either directly or by moderation. Blogs can be written by one person or by a blog collective. A collective blog is usually maintained by a group of professionals, for example people working in marketing. A Blog maintained by a collective may become a community. In this community several groups can be detected: passers-by, lurkers, participants and evangelists. These groups follow the 10 percent rule. A site which attracts 100.000 visitors a month will have 10.000 visitors come back regularly. In turn 1.000 visitors become participants, who like to take part in the discussions on the blog. Roughly 100 visitors become evangelists and start writing for the blog.

A blog has characteristics which differ from columns in print and newsletters. Columns in print and newsletters are usually rather formal. Bloggers talk to their audience as if they were sitting at the other end of the table.

I have been blogging since May 1, 2005, using Blogger (<http://www.buziaulane.blogger.com>). I deliver every day an A4 on an item in the field of digital media and media. This can be a trend, but also an item on e-readers, for example. Besides the daily postings, I have some mini-series in my blog dealing with the history of digital media and retro gadgets (<http://www.weblogmuseum.blogspot.com>). The advantage I have is that I

can report about developments in the Netherlands in the English language, which sometimes gives me an advantage. Contrary to a community, I do not have a faithful flock which check in daily to lap up my words. In fact, people from 130 countries are irregularly searching for particular information. The searchers are not journalists, but mainly researchers for venture capital countries or research institutes.

4. Blogging a Journalistic Tool

Blogging is skirting journalism. Bloggers have been in court and have claimed journalistic immunity. Bloggers have requested access to the US presidential press conferences. So blogging is a related journalistic activity. The question can be posed, whether blogs are derivatives, reflecting the opinions of newspapers, magazines or television or radio programmes or whether they are sources and tools for journalists.

Journalists are not blog lovers; in fact they look with a certain disdain to blogs. The bloggers express opinions which in their opinion are based on their articles. They might have added a different aspect, but basically in the opinion of journalists they build on the articles of newspapers and magazines or on broadcasts.

On the other hand, bloggers can feed information to the official media. In my opinion, editors are using blogs too little to pick up information from the ground swells. However, it is true that blogs are not fully accessible with search engines.

Some newspapers have integrated a blogroll with text fragments from blogs into their publications. But this is mostly a cost saving feature as the bloggers are not paid.

Another feature is providing bloggers with texts of articles and broadcasts. The official media does this in order to be cited properly. The Slovenian television has started a site representing the texts in videos. A news broadcast has been cut up into small chunks (micro-chunking), a photograph is selected, the text of the item is represented and the link to the video applied. In the text links are automatically added to the item and the item is automatically distributed to a series of bloggers.

5. Conclusion

Blogging has become part of the culture of the information age. It is not a column as in the printed media, but in successful cases a major news and reaction forum or site for niche information on a particular subject. Blogs can be used by journalists as a feeder of subjects and news, a source for text and photographs (but with respect for copyright) and as a gauge to read reactions to an item. Media can work together with bloggers for journalistic and promotion purpose by feeding the bloggers with customised feeds.