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Weblogs and the epistemology of the news: some trends in online journalism

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Abstract

Journalism has been slow to develop distinctive forms in response to the new contexts provided by the internet. One rapidly developing form, unique to the world wide web, is the weblog. This article reviews the claims made by proponents of the form and explores, through the case study of a weblog produced by the British *Guardian* newspaper, epistemological differences to the dominant Anglo-American news form. The article argues that the rearticulation in this institutional product of the relation between journalists and users, of the claim to authority made in the news text and of the news text as product, provides historians of both journalism and new media with a case study of the adaptation of journalism to new contexts.

Key words

epistemology of news • journalism • online journalism • news discourse • weblog

INTRODUCTION

This article explores one possible direction in which Anglo-American news journalism is evolving on the internet, using as its focus the growth of news weblogs since 1998. Online journalism is regarded by many

commentators as a site where outmoded and unsatisfactory news reporting traditions might be revised and renewed. John Pavlik speaks of the possibility to 'reengage an increasingly distrusting and alienated audience' (2001: xi). Katherine Fulton describes the online environment as a challenge to the practices of journalism, in which:

The answers will create a new generation of journalistic conventions that could well affect old media as well. New technologies, therefore, give journalistic reformers an ideal opening to try new ideas. (Fulton, 1996: 3)

This potential for renegotiating what is conventional and normal in the everyday practices of journalism is all the more interesting because of the general conservatism and rigidity of many of journalism's practices. The great coercive power of the normal, as Foucault (1977: 184) puts it, which shapes journalism in the absence of formalized codes, is weaker as journalism adapts to a new context.

The realisation of the possibilities and challenges envisaged by critics of online journalism has been slow. Boczkowski (2002: 274) cites a host of studies which find that online newspaper content is often 'shovelware', that is, largely unmodified print content. Jay Rosen makes a similar observation:

There's plenty of journalism *on* the internet [but v]ery little of it is *of* the internet.

Precisely what interactive journalism actually entails is still unclear:

We don't know yet what the Net makes possible because we're still asking how the journalism we've known and loved translates to the new medium – or doesn't. (Rosen, quoted in Outing, 2001)

Jon Katz (1997) has attacked US newspapers for remaining 'insanely stagnant in an interactive age', failing to provide such minimal interactivity as reporters' email addresses on stories. Research confirms that institutional journalism – as opposed to informal news networks – follows print and broadcasting in its forms (Deuze, 2002; Newhagen et al., 1995; Schultz, 1999). Other research (e.g. Paulussen, 2002; Quinn and Trench, 2002) suggests that many journalists working online are enthusiastic about the potential to rearticulate practice in the new forms that are available online, but the texts that these same journalists produce do not show strong evidence of this.

Against this backdrop, the weblog provides a case study of how one form of online journalism is rearticulating existing norms, and particularly some of the epistemological foundations of newswork. This article, then, seeks to contribute to thinking on what the 'new generation of journalistic conventions' Fulton talks of might involve by tracking a major emerging

online form. It suggests that elements which are basic to the knowledge-producing stance of the news producer are modified in this emerging form.

Why look to weblogs, rather than to other forms in which journalism is happening on the internet, in order to track such epistemological shifts? This article argues that weblogs are likely to reward such examination, first, because they have developed in the context of the world wide web. The weblog is a form of writing that is unique to the web, reliant on what is arguably its key characteristic: the hyperlink. It thus allows us to explore the adaptation of journalism to a new context, at some distance from the heavily print-dependent styles of much online news. Second, the form has also quickly become very popular, with figures of between 500,000 and 2 million weblogs cited (Blogcount, 2003; Perseus Publishing, 2002), including a substantial number that are focused on public affairs.

After theoretical preliminaries, the article briefly describes both weblogs and critical discussion of them. It then presents a qualitative analysis of the characteristics of one weblog produced within a British newsroom, the *Guardian* weblog (www.guardian.co.uk/weblog), detailing changes to news conventions taking place within institutional practice.

THEORETICAL POSITION

This article begins from an interest in the epistemology of journalism – the ways in which journalism operates as a knowledge-producing practice (Ekström, 2002). Following Foucault, it assumes that the conventions of newswriting do not simply chronicle the world but that they constitute certain claims to knowledge about such matters as the audiences for news texts, the position of journalists in that world and the relationship between audience and journalist. Therefore, the article also assumes that journalists adhere to these conventions in order to be able to make the kinds of authoritative statements about events and individuals which we are accustomed to hear from them. News discourse can be seen as a particular instance of the more general ‘will to truth’ which motivates and constrains institutional forms of knowing in modern society (Foucault, 1989). On the one hand, only certain things are sayable through the voice of the journalist, so that the journalist is limited by the forms of journalism. On the other hand, these conventions open up possibilities to make sense of the world. They are techniques to do such things as sort events and statements as newsworthy or not, bring them into language, position audiences and justify all these actions as authoritative, truthful and, in other ways, effective.

The article is particularly interested in journalistic conventions from the perspective of the way in which journalists work. The forms of the news embody claims about such matters as how journalists think of themselves, their endeavours and the position of journalism in society. Indeed, the claims of journalism to status are often inextricably linked to particular

stylistic issues. We can talk, following Bourdieu (1991), of the symbolic power of news language within journalism. The institutional claim to authority which surrounds news practice resides partly in the recognition by journalists and audiences of the authority of news language. Stepping outside that set of conventions risks stepping outside the claim to be able to 'get at the truth'. At a wider level, it also puts the legitimacy of the forms of news discourse themselves at risk. James W. Carey writes that, for journalists, their 'practices seem to be preternatural, and to abandon them seems like an invitation to abandon the craft entirely' (1999: 53). There is considerable risk to the symbolic power of news conventions, then, in different ways of telling the news. This article explores news weblogs from the perspective of what is at stake in stylistic and formal changes.

There is considerable interest among scholars in alternative journalisms and practices at the edge of journalism, where the struggles for that symbolic power and for alternative modes of knowing become visible.¹ However, this article seeks different ways of telling the news within the heart of the normalizing and homogenizing discourse of news journalism. Journalism has always had a wide margin but it has also had a rather static core set of news practices, and has indeed reinforced that core by placing other journalistic practices at its margins, giving them titles such as features or opinion or reviews (see Hartley, 1996: 16). Radical practices that challenge the legitimacy of mainstream journalism can be found. For example, Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner (Kahn and Kellner, nd) argue that the commentary on, and contribution to, news stories in the huge number of personal weblogs have revolutionized journalism. Drawing on Guy Debord, they argue that personal weblogs reconfigure politics around people's everyday lives, increasing 'the realm of freedom, community, and empowerment'. However, it can be questioned how much social capital such practices have and therefore how much symbolic power they wield in the wider social field. By contrast, challenges to the idea of news and to newswriting which emerge from within institutional journalistic contexts are perhaps richer in suggestions about how news discourses are rearticulated in the online context. It is for these reasons that the weblog produced within the offices of the *Guardian* was chosen as a case study.

This is not to discount the radical. Marginal developments are likely to have some impact upon the dominant in any social field. Within Raymond Williams' (1977) model of social change, social life is always in flux. Whether in culture, in the more general sense, or in a practice such as news journalism, there will always be a residue of old practices and meanings and the emergence of alternative or oppositional ones surrounding the dominant. These residual and emergent forms articulate what the dominant neglects, represses or sometimes cannot even recognize, but which it is always trying to incorporate (Williams, 1977). This article theorizes the

emergent journalistic practices of the institutional weblog in such terms, as pointers towards a potential change in the orientation of journalism towards social life – its ‘structure of feeling’, as Williams puts it. While Williams’ model suggests that we should pay attention to radical developments, it also points us towards emergent forms that interrelate with the dominant ‘structure of feeling’, and have the potential to rearticulate it, as perhaps the more significant developments.

Therefore, this article is more about journalism than it is about the internet. Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone give a threefold definition of new media as technological devices, the communicative practices engaged in with those devices, and the social contexts and institutions of their use (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002). In Lievrouw and Livingstone’s terms, here we are discussing primarily the latter two dimensions. Hugh Mackay and Tim O’Sullivan further remind us that new communication technologies arise in the context of existing media, and ‘in many ways the greatest significance of the new communication technologies lies in their impact on existing media’ (Mackay and O’Sullivan, 1999: 3–4). While weblogs belong to a relatively new medium, we miss much of the struggle for power if we neglect their position in wider attempts to reform existing news practices. Indeed, the *Guardian* weblog’s senior staff member Christian Alden has described his work precisely in such terms:

If we’re thinking about where we ought to be going as journalists, about what duties we have to our audience, what our news values are, what formats would best fit those relationships and those values, then we’re better journalists. Even if they end up being a footnote in journalistic history, I think weblogs are a valuable step on that road. (Alden, 2001)

The qualitative analysis below echoes Alden’s claim. Weblogs need not be revolutionary, but they are indicative of one way in which journalism is changing, under pressure from reformers who are aware of a new medium with its concomitant new economic, social and production contexts.

The article is an exploratory case study in method (Berg, 2001), seeking to describe the epistemological orientations of one news product, in order to open up avenues of research on online journalism. The approach taken was more hermeneutic than systematic: the *Guardian*’s weblog was monitored for the whole of August 2002, with particular attention given to formal aspects (that is, aspects of the text that were not dependent on particular content) which characterized the site during that time. Mats Ekström seeks the epistemology of broadcast journalism in ‘the *rules, routines and institutionalised procedures* that operate within a social setting and decide the form of the knowledge produced and the *knowledge claims* expressed (or implied)’ (Ekström, 2002: 260; emphasis in original). Evidence of such rules, routines and procedures in particular was sought in the layout, style,

voice, textual coherence and forms of hypertext reference, and most particularly by implicitly contrasting these with the textual practice of Anglo-American print news, based on my competence as a journalism critic and former news reporter. In the analysis below, more objective and explicit contrast is made at times between the text and characterizations of journalistic epistemology to be found in sociological and discourse analytic literature. However, the emphasis is upon the *Guardian* weblog as an intrinsically valuable object of study. In the inevitable conflict between learning from the singular and generalizing from it through comparison of selected dimensions with other texts (Stake, 1998), the former was chosen. Further research that is being planned and undertaken is discussed in the conclusion.

THE WEBLOG PHENOMENON

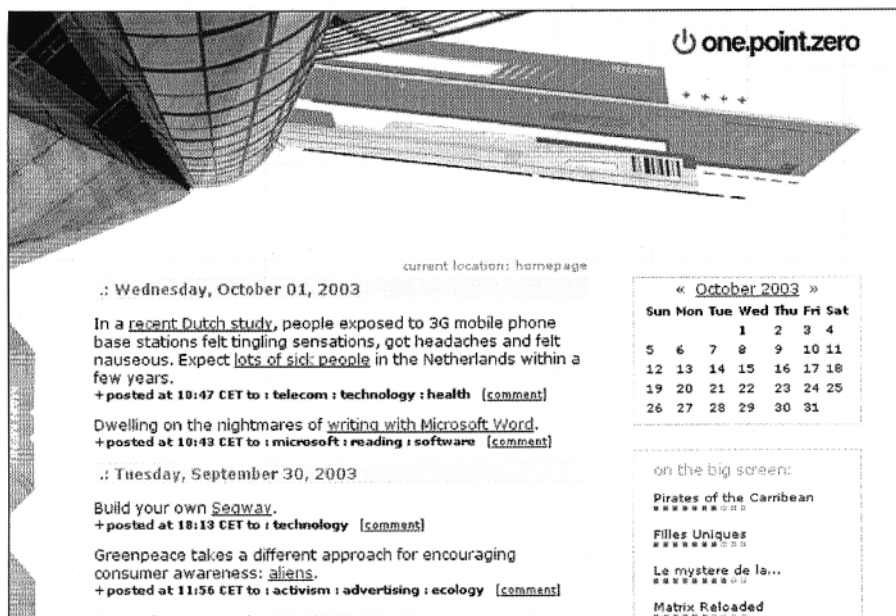
Weblogs, or 'blogs', existed just as a handful of sites until 1998 (Blood, 2000), after which they rapidly became more prominent on the world wide web. The form is defined to a considerable extent by the cheap or free software that has emerged to enable users to construct and update pages without the need for technical expertise, specialist software beyond a web browser or even their own existing server space. The user simply logs on to their weblog account and uses a form to add text, hyperlinks, images, audio files and other objects. The software then typically formats the material in HTML, records a date at the top of the entry, and inserts the text at the top of the user's weblog, pushing previous entries down the page.

Therefore, a weblog can be characterized as an online diary, a page of small entries chronologically organized down from the latest entry. It is also characteristically rich in hypertext links to other sites, and indeed the term 'web log' and the statements by early 'bloggers' suggest that this kind of webpage developed as a record of the user's latest browsing, which was made available for others' interest. The form thus differs markedly from a homepage, which tends to be much more static. However, weblogs are not a clearly delimited category. Even in the subcategory of journalistic weblogs there is considerable variation within the parameters above, and many weblogs show similarities to other online genres. A brief glance at three weblogs produced by BBC journalists illustrates the point. One, Crippled Monkey (www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/weblog), features news on disability culture and is more akin to an electronic newsletter or e-zine in its aim to inform and organize a particular community. The Up All Night weblog (www.bbc.co.uk/fivelive/upallnight/links.shtml) associated with a BBC Radio 5 Live programme is a static collection of links, similar to many other links or metapages. Scotblog (www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/webguide/scotblog) contains personal commentary from staff at BBC Online Scotland, and belongs most clearly to the category of the weblog because it has the least

similarities to other online genres. However, general categories of weblogs can be identified. Blood (2000) divides weblogs into those which emphasize the diary aspect and those which emphasize hyperlinking. She calls the latter filtering sites, which 'pre-surf the web' for readers, providing annotated links to sites that the writer finds good, bad or otherwise noteworthy. The screenshot from one weblog, one.point.zero (www.onepointzero.com/) in Figure 1 illustrates this latter type.

There are, moreover, certain general conventions to the genre, including an ephemeral and informal quality, with little attempt to impose a hierarchy on material, and often irreverent commentary or opinion accompanying the links. Most weblogs are written by a single person, although institutional weblogs are developing rapidly, both in the media and within business intranets, while group weblogs such as Metafilter (www.metafilter.com) and Newstrolls (www.newstrolls.com) also exist.

The line between journalism and other forms is blurred by the many news-related weblogs maintained by people who are not employed as journalists (and in a rough estimate made in July 2003, perhaps half of weblogs deal frequently with public affairs).² Within journalism as practised within news institutions, interest outside technology reporting can be dated to about 2000, when the *Guardian's* weblog was launched and high-profile journalists such as the former *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan set up their sites. The Eatonweb portal website (<http://portal.eatonweb.com>) listed



• Figure 1 A typical filtering weblog (www.onepointzero.com/)

1278 news weblogs and many other current affairs-related weblogs (for example, 79 alone on US foreign policy and Columbia) among 14,051 weblogs on 1 October 2003, while Cyberjournalist's (www.cyberjournalist.net) list on that date includes 77 institutional weblogs, mostly from North American publications such as *Christian Science Monitor*, *Slate*, *American Prospect*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *Wall Street Journal* and CBS News. The site lists many more event-specific weblogs from news organizations, independent news weblogs and personal journalistic weblogs. The US trade magazine *Editor and Publisher* has called for newspapers to give weblogs to all their reporters (Outing, 2002). The *New York Times* has worked with one weblog software provider, Userland, to allow webloggers to cite and link to its site at a single click. *Wired* magazine reported in 2002 that a course in blogging as journalism was due to run at the University of California at Berkeley journalism school (Schachtman, 2002).

The *Guardian's* weblog fits Blood's category of filtering websites. The site is part of the Guardian Unlimited domain, which in total had an audited readership of 7.2 million unique users per month in June 2003 (ABC Electronic, 2003).³ The weblog comprised one main page, with a short section, 'Latest issues in links', at the top, and a much longer, chronologically-sorted section, 'The best journalism from around the web' below it, which is cleared into an archive each month. Each section contains annotated links to online journalism in English, either news or comment. A large proportion are on international news topics. Publications range from the *Zambian Post* to the British *Daily Telegraph*, *Wired* magazine and the online publications *Spiked* and *AlterNet*. There are also prominent links to special reports elsewhere on the Guardian Unlimited site. A column down the left of the page provides links to newspaper and magazine sites from around the world. The weblog therefore requires journalistic research skills of its staff rather than much writing skill, and has almost no original content. The annotations of one or two sentences are largely factual, with no personal or distinctive voice and no by-lines,⁴ although the weblog conventions of irreverence and informality are present to a degree. This places the *Guardian* weblog at the institutional end of a spectrum: a number of other newspapers produce weblogs which summarize and link to news stories (such as *Slate's* Today's Papers weblog: <http://slate.msn.com/id/2089090/>); but most news weblogs appear to be organized around a particular voice or set of voices speaking as commentators, if not private individuals. Instead, the *Guardian* weblog contains text such as:

The Death Convoy of Afghanistan

August 19: Newsweek investigates claims of a massacre of up to 1,000 Taliban prisoners in Dasht-i-Laili, Afghanistan, and considers whether two investigators from the Boston-based Physicians for Human Rights have unearthed dirty little secrets of the Afghan war. *Newsweek* (www.guardian.co.uk/weblog).

The site is one of the longest established institutional weblogs in Britain. As noted above, BBCi journalists write a number of weblogs and the *Guardian* hosts a specialized weblog on technology issues, Onlineblog (www.onlineblog.com). But there appear to be few other institutional journalistic weblogs produced by British media outlets, in contrast to the large number from the United States.

WEBLOGS AND JOURNALISM

Research is scarce on the relationship between weblogs and journalism, and also scarce on weblogs more generally, with much of that research in areas outside communication or media studies, such as education journals (e.g. Oravec, 2002; Zerger et al., 2002). Weblogs can be situated within wider social histories of digital textual practices, including personal and community genres such as newsgroups, chatrooms, homepages and online diaries (see, for example, Döring, 2002; Kawaura et al., 1998). Empirical research on this theme is being carried out by Susan Herring and colleagues (see the Blogninja website: www.blogninja.com). News weblogging can be situated also within a wider history of alternatives to established news forms, such as teletext in the 1980s, newsgroups, customized digital newspapers and online storytelling (Aumente, 1987; Bender et al., 1996; Boczkowski, 2002; Davenport and Murtaugh, 1997). This article, concerned as it is with the potential for change in the news episteme, instead takes as its critical point of departure the wide commentary on the relationship between journalism and weblogs in the media and in weblogs themselves. Particularly since the terrorist attacks in the US on 11 September 2001 (Allan, 2002), newspapers, magazines and online fora have discussed the relationship between such sites and journalism.

Much of that writing inserts the phenomenon into existing, even traditional, discourses of journalism and public discussion. Three major themes emerge:

- (1) weblogs as a space for journalistic thinking for which institutional journalism provides little room;
- (2) weblogs as a challenge to corporate journalism; and
- (3) weblogs as a democratic, interactive space.

These themes are by no means newly-raised in relation to the weblog, and therefore risk underplaying the particularities of the form. They also illustrate in themselves the process of recuperation of this new public communicative form into the dominant journalistic tradition. Each theme is discussed briefly below.

A number of prominent news-related weblogs are kept by professional journalists and a key discourse in their understanding of 'blogging' appears to be that of expressing experiences which find no outlet in conventional

reporting. For a number of such writers, these sites are a chance to say what cannot be said on the news page (Searls, cited in Lasica, 2001b; Praschl, cited in Lorenz-Meyer, 2001), or to be creative beyond the confines of the newsroom (Branscum, cited in Lasica, 2001a). Derek Powazek (2000) talks of finding a home for the 'little fleeting thoughts' in his life. There is thus also a claim to a particular authenticity of the personal, of 'people in their natural dialect, writing from the gut (complete with warts, typos and feelings), saying things that wouldn't normally make it through the newsroom editing machine' (Lasica, 2002a). These comments reflect the value placed on individualism and gut instinct in newsroom culture (Harrison, 2000), as was evident in the way in which many US journalistic commentators responded to CNN's decision to force one of its correspondents, Kevin Sites, to stop writing a weblog on the 2003 Iraq War (Mernit, 2003). Such statements also represent an assertion of the value of the personal in the public sphere, a social and cultural change with much broader contours (see, for example, Fairclough, 1995; *Discourse Studies*, 2001) and which echoes much of the enthusiasm for homepages in the 1990s (Cheung, 2000), as well as discussions about the potential for electronic democracy (Dahlberg, 2001).

The discourse of weblogs as journalism is also organized, particularly in the US, around the idea of challenging mainstream journalism. The statement by one weblogger, Ken Layne, in a polemic against British journalist Robert Fisk, 'It's 2001, and we can Fact Check your ass' (Layne, 2001), has been repeated as a slogan by a number of others in discussing their position with respect to journalism. A number of weblog writers see their sites as instant critique of newspapers and television (Sullivan, quoted in *Economist*, 2002). Others have emphasized the speed with which weblogs have reported events, recording events such as earthquakes faster than news agencies or television networks (Walker, 2001), or the depth and thoroughness with which a network of webloggers has followed up a story compared to an individual professional journalist (Hiler, 2001). Such thinking values weblogging by bringing together conventional ideas of quality journalism as fact-based, up-to-the-moment and in-depth with the anti-establishment, anti-corporate liberalism of much commentary on the internet. Weblogging, in this set of ideas, betters the *New York Times* and CNN at their own practice. Drawing on similar criteria of quality, weblog critics often attack the amount of opinion rather than fact circulating in the networks of links from one weblogger to the next or to other sites (e.g. Cavanaugh, 2002; Small, 2002).

Many webloggers also present a more radical communitarian view, drawing on idealizations of the internet as a democratic space in which all social actors' voices may be heard, and where audiences can become active publics. Weblogs are seen as marshalling the knowledge and resources of

large numbers of people and thereby displacing elite sources (Shulevitz, 2002; Sullivan, 2002; Wolcott, 2002). Quasi-biological metaphors of webs or complex adaptive systems are invoked, as well as democratic discourses, to describe the spread of ideas about public issues through weblogs (Hiler, 2001). These themes, versions of wider claims made for the internet (Dahlberg, 2001), have their critics, making similar criticisms as those about other visions of e-democracy – for example, the power imbalances among such voices, or the not always high quality of argument to be found (see, for example, Clark, 2002; Small, 2002). A related discourse important for many journalistic webloggers is that of a shift from a mass medium to a more intimate one, where they can hear and respond to audiences on a personal level (Bricklin, 2002; Fleishman, 2002), and where the tension between writing authoritatively *for* a public and writing *to* a public is renegotiated constructively.

THE *GUARDIAN* WEBLOG

This commentary is close to popular discourses of the internet and journalism, and has little to say about how the forms of mainstream journalism and those that have emerged in online communities might each be changed by the encounter with the other. Indeed, one finding below is that the *Guardian* weblog is not characterized by the issues raised above, and is interesting partly for that reason. It represents a response to the meeting of journalism and online media in ways not well-described in popular discourses. This weblog provides glimpses of mainstream journalism responding along three dimensions: the establishment of a different interpersonal relation, of a different authority and of a journalism focused upon connection rather than fact.

A different interpersonal relation

As noted above, there is some pressure from within news journalism to explore ways to re-engage with what are perceived as distrusting and alienated audiences (Pavlik, 2001: xi). The *Guardian* weblog participates in such renegotiation of the communicative space opened up between journalism and its consumers in subtle, but important, ways. These constitute it as a different communicative endeavour to the dominant practice. In particular, the exploratory analysis conducted here suggests that it makes less claim than news discourse typically does to know what readers want or to know what an event means. An implied reader, or 'network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text' (Iser, 1978: 34), is still constructed, but this reader is less massified and more open. As a result, the site where knowledge about events in the world is constructed is shifted further across the space between journalist and user.

This point should not be overstated. The *Guardian* weblog is an institutional product, and therefore constrained by journalistic conventions of the news professional's authority to speak and choose topics. The weblog links to other, institutional news texts and hence sanctions the forms of knowledge that they embody. This is not the radically democratized weblog journalism which enthusiasts such as online journalist Doc Searls talk of, an 'any-to-any system of talking and sharing rather than the traditional "hard journalism" model of writing that is distributed to the masses' (interviewed in Lasica, 2001b). The *Guardian* is among many news institutions where interactivity is limited in scope and carefully controlled. As Quinn and Trench suggest on the basis of a study of 24 online news providers in four European countries, fora for user opinions such as polls are often 'a supervised playground for users where their contributions never impinge on or shape the news' (Quinn and Trench, 2002: 33; see also Riley et al., 1998). Their difference from the telephone numbers and reader fora provided by print and broadcast news outlets is not substantial. There is also evidence that online news providers with a heritage of mass media publication or broadcasting to millions of people have difficulty in imagining, let alone interacting with, audiences in the two-way communication between journalists and users facilitated by internet technologies (Newhagen et al., 1995). Such two-way interaction conflicts with a traditional view of professional journalists as producers and users as consumers and threatens the social status of the journalist (Quinn and Trench, 2002: 33; Newhagen, 1998: 117).

The *Guardian* weblog's relationship with its readers is limited by such factors above, and there is no evidence on the webpage of any invitation to users to contribute to its texts beyond emailing staff with ideas. However, the textual practices which characterize it, from the promotional slogan to the use of hyperlinks, address users in ways which reorient some of the conventions around the relationship between news and audience. News journalism rarely addresses its audiences directly or invites participation in assessing the value of news items. It typically presents its texts as self-evidently newsworthy, prior to and independently of the journalist's selection of the material. Moreover, journalists tend to value the ability to judge what readers should or would want to know as 'the expertise that distinguishes them from nonreporters' (Zelizer, 1993: 220). The presentation of news content in the websites of established news organizations also makes sense in such terms. Studies are beginning to show that few news sites actually offer extensive offsite links (Barnhurst, 2002; Jankowski and Van Selm, 2000). Hyperlinks may take users further in depth into an item, or to related stories or websites outside the news site for further information. They allow multiple ways to consume the news material (Rich, 1999: poynter1.htm). To an extent such texts give some power to users, facilitating

consultational interactivity or the ability of 'the user to choose, by request, from an existing selection of pre-produced information in a two-way media system' (McMillan, 2002: 274; see also Jensen, 1998). But the news item itself still depends fundamentally upon the notion of the journalist as an authoritative professional making instinctive news judgements on behalf of audiences (Soloski, 1989).

The *Guardian's* weblog appears predicated upon a slightly different communicative endeavour. It makes explicit the act of choosing news material, vouching for the value of the material that it includes. Its site is tagged: 'Our pick of noteworthy reads online'. The pronoun 'our' is significant. The communicative interaction invoked here involves the offering of material to the user by the embodied voice of the news producer, rather than the existence of unembodied, self-evident information. In an article accompanying the weblog's launch in 2000, an editor described its aim as being to provide annotated links to 'the most fascinating and noteworthy journalism on the net' (*Guardian*, 2000). This foregrounding of the value judgements involved in selecting the material, through the adjectives 'fascinating' and 'noteworthy', similarly suggests a reorientation of the relationship into which audience members are being invited to participate by reading. While the news institution still chooses what appears on the page – while it is still a gatekeeper – the implicit claim to know what the user wants is considerably qualified as it is joined by an explicit claim to be choosing material. A different kind of authority is also invoked (a point explored further in the next section below).

The weblog also moderates the traditional claim of news journalism to know, on behalf of readers, what is happening in the world. Its collection of links to news and comment, gleaned from a range of publications for users' consumption, stands at a remove from events in a supplementary or even parasitic relation. While most news texts are the result of the processing and editing of other texts (Bell, 1991; van Dijk, 1988), they are constructed within a set of conventions that aim for 'a unified text which conceals the editor's intervention' (Bell, 1991: 51). The sourcing of material in press releases or interview questions or news agencies is edited out. Moreover, the reshaping of news material in the text around a news angle and in a descending hierarchy of importance is made to appear to be the natural shape of the news event itself. The news text stands almost in the stead of the event, gaining status by claiming to know 'what happened', positioning newspapers as 'the arbiters of events in society' (Zelizer, 1993: 80). The weblog, by contrast, is a much more 'raw', less 'cooked', source of information, allowing users to participate more in constructing knowledge about events in the world. The *Guardian's* weblog contains links to articles from competitor newspapers, governmental organizations and overseas papers, as well as from the *Guardian*, and frequently links to different

interpretations of the same material. As a result, it requires more work from users to make sense of events by finding their own way through that material.

The implications of such reorientations of the way in which knowledge is constructed between journalist and user extend beyond weblogs and indeed beyond online journalism. A number of senior journalists have argued that too many readers are dissatisfied with the way in which the news makes claims to knowledge. The former president of Reuters NewMedia, Andrew Nibley, talks of 'real outrage at the traditional media', particularly from young people who no longer want to be told how to think (Nibley, 2000: 37–8; see also Bender, 2000; Hargreaves, 2000). The *Guardian's* editor, Alan Rusbridger (2001), has spoken of his discomfort with 'how we present ourselves to people' in the newspaper, with the claim that journalists are 'in the truth business', providing 'all the news that's fit to print'. He argues, quoting *Washington Post* political correspondent David Broder, that ideally the newspaper should include a warning in each edition that:

It's the best we could do in the circumstances and we'll be back tomorrow with a corrected and updated version. (Rusbridger, 2001)

Concerns such as these are not uncommon in journalism, and this article does not claim that sites such as the *Guardian* weblog pose new *questions* about the ways in which the news addresses its audiences. The problem of journalism is rarely self-criticism, but more a difficulty in finding alternative modes of newswriting that do not unravel its power to tell authoritative stories. This weblog gives some sense of how different *answers* to journalistic problems are emerging online, allowing journalists to produce texts outside the dominant tradition, with its restrictive mode of address and professional claim to know on behalf of the reader.

A different authority

How does such a text maintain the authority of news discourse? The *Guardian* weblog's act of linking to a story on another news website clearly constitutes less of a claim to know what 'really happened' and does not subordinate statements by news sources and other texts to that claim to know. The weblog entries looked at for this study appear to depend upon a different kind of authority instead, implying discernment, an ability to locate needles in the haystack of the internet and therefore a claim to breadth of knowledge, even comprehensiveness. The weblog's act of collecting 'noteworthy reads online', as the site branded itself, speaks less of the editors' knowledge of events than of their knowledge of the online world and online journalism.⁵ This renegotiation of the news text's authority is a double process. On the one hand, the (problematic) claim of news journalism to know with authority is less evident in the weblog. On the

other, a kind of mesh of authority is built up where the weblog's linking accords a certain status to the linked article, while the value of that linked piece reflects back upon the weblog.

The annotations accompanying each link that the weblog makes to a piece of journalism are, by definition, supplementary to the material at the end of those links. More significantly, the assemblage of a large number of links from different publications, in different styles and sometimes making contradictory claims, tends to dilute the claim of any one of those texts to facticity. Each can be read in the perspective of the others. So, a special section on food and the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (*Guardian*, 2002) links to a number of news texts. One, a story from the Lusaka *Post*, reports (without qualification or the inclusion of other perspectives) a speech by Zambian agriculture minister Mundia Sikatana that Africa needs trade more than aid. Another report, by journalist Jacqui Goddard from the *Scotsman*, is thick with emotional appeal and thin on political context in describing the plight of two families affected by AIDS and famine in Malawi. For users who read both, each report contextualizes and qualifies the other. The *Guardian* does not do that synthesizing, and therefore does not claim to know the reality of food shortages in southern Africa.

The implications of this are significant. We may not be in a realm where journalism's monologic idea of truth is abandoned, replaced by a journalism that puts rival truth claims in dialogue (Allan, 1998). Often, the *Guardian's* weblog is still couched in the style of the dominant tradition which calls up expectations of traditional journalism – 'US vice-president, Dick Cheney, says US must launch preemptive military action against Iraq' runs one annotation (27 August 2002), 'Newsweek has the story' (16 August 2002), states another. These are authoritative, unmodalized statements, characteristic of the news (Fowler, 1991). But online news forms such as weblogs, which are characterized by a heavy use of hyperlinks, point towards a model of knowledge in which the truth of what is happening in the world cannot be channelled exclusively through one news text. Instead, the weblog can be thought of as claiming a more contingent authority in its use of these multiple links. There is thus a mesh of authority, in which the site's use of the article vouches for the text's value, while the status of the *Washington Post*, Human Rights Watch or the quality of the reporting and writing reinforce the weblog's authority.

The *Guardian* weblog proclaims its breadth of knowledge as much as its timeliness or access to the 'real' story. In the left-hand column, topical collections of links on various topics ('weblog specials') from the current month's weblog are given in index form. Below these, there are links to hundreds of sites under the headings, 'News websites', 'UK magazines', and 'World magazines', from which the weblog sources the majority of its

stories. Clearly, the range of its sources is an important part of the site's value, in its creators' view. As Jakob Nielsen (1997) argues, online news uses links to gain credibility for its product. In this it differs from the press or broadcast news. A newspaper will draw upon news agency copy, but more often than not it will present such articles as its own reporters' work. Somehow drawing on articles from other publications dilutes the authority of a newspaper. This 'scoop' logic seems less urgent online; indeed, some critics have argued that the absence of technical production deadlines for online news means 'the story's "firstness" is of minimal market value in this new media landscape' (Hume, 1999; see also Pavlik, 2001).

Thus, a different competitive logic arises, one of knowing more, knowing better, knowing comprehensively, and knowing in as much depth or extent as readers would wish. Nora Paul perhaps envisages something similar in her proposal for 'annotative journalism', in which a politician's speech is published, supplemented by links to material such as previous statements on the topic or critics' arguments (quoted in Fulton, 1996: 5).

A journalism of connections

One way of characterizing such emergent practices is as a journalism of linking rather than pinning things down, that is situated within a model of knowledge-as-process rather than knowledge-as-product. Readers of the news weblog are set along paths of exploration rather than given nuggets of information, and the status of that information therefore changes.

Online journalism critics talk of the ease with which an online news text can link to any other informational text online as an opportunity to construct a new (and implicitly better) form of journalism. Pavlik writes:

This represents a new form of journalism that places stories in a much more historical, political and cultural context. 'The fact that massive repositories of information are only a few mouse clicks away offers a richness of hypermedia that sets it apart from traditional media,' conclude Fredin and David. (Pavlik, 2001: 16, quoting Fredin and David, 1998: 35)

However, this often seems to entail an add-on element, such as a link to a database which users may search, or to a news archive that sits behind a conventionally written news story. The weblog takes the practice considerably further towards a form of journalism in which hyperlinks are integral to the way in which meaning is constructed. One enthusiastic commentator on weblogs, Rebecca Blood, talks of the 'targeted serendipity' of weblogs (interviewed in Rodgers, 2002). The internet's vastness and lack of hierarchy has the potential to surprise users with the unexpected and previously unknown. Weblogs constitute one qualitative strategy to find a way through this surfeit. The news weblog genre's reliance on writers' idiosyncratic choices – 'our pick of online reads', as the *Guardian* weblog

sums up its status – and their practice of directing users away from the sites to other news or information sites (Blood, interviewed in Gallagher, 2000) make the genre considerably less inwardly-focused than conventional news.

Of course, modern print journalism, developing in the context of metropolitan society, has always taken to itself such a task of sorting out the important and interesting from the chaos of daily urban life – Walter Lippmann attempted to define news as ‘the report of an aspect that has obtruded itself’ from social life (1922: 341). But conventionalized forms of print and broadcast news confront us with the new in terms of the old, in terms of limited models of newsworthiness and narrative. The identity of the newspaper or bulletin and the genre of news indeed depend upon such formal continuity, although journalists have been uncomfortably aware of the extent to which news is ‘olds’ (Galtung and Ruge, 1970: 264) or stereotypical (Darnton, 1975: 189) or ‘the formula which generations of journalists had tried in vain to change’ (Lambert, 1980: 27). The heterogeneity of the news material to be found through the *Guardian* weblog stands in contrast to this tradition.

We can also contrast the weblog with another thread of development in online journalism, personalized news services (Lasica, 2002b), which do a similar job to the weblog in helping users to cope with the huge and increasing amounts of material available online. Such ‘Daily Me’ services have been criticized for their potential to confirm users’ horizons of understanding as they pre-order the kinds of news that they prefer (Sunstein, 2001). If the risks associated with journalists’ stereotypical news values are replaced in such services, it is with the risk of individuals not extending beyond preconceived world views. Part of the weblog’s appeal to critics and users appears to be that it has the potential to disrupt such cognitive structures. The news weblog’s particular mix of a heavy dependence upon hyperlinks to a wide range of different kinds of text, its chronological rather than hierarchical organization of material on the page and its less rationally codified pages mixing news and opinion, domestic and foreign themes – its move, in short, away from ‘the established vocabulary of newspaper authority’ (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001: 21) – has the potential to reach beyond the formulae of news. The *Guardian* weblog does not do this consistently, often tending to link to elite western newspapers. But it certainly depends upon an ethos of casting a wider net for newsworthy material. At the time of writing, it featured many links to Middle-Eastern news stories and commentary on the 2003 Iraq War, including the Lebanese *Daily Star*, the Egyptian *Dar al-Hayat* and the British/Egyptian *Middle East Times*. In this, perhaps we are seeing the return of what Barnhurst and Nerone call the premodern newspaper and the end of the monopoly of the modern newspaper’s professional logic (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001: 83, 290). To a reader familiar with the dense layout of a nineteenth-century

Anglo-American newspaper, perhaps the pages of the weblog exhibit a similar sense of news as a miscellany gathered by the editor, and as therefore in some way providential, rather than shaped by the editor's construction of a consumer product. In the weblog, news does not happen through the newspaper's reporting of it, but through a wider range of texts.

CONCLUSION

There is much about the *Guardian* weblog that is 'old media'. Predominantly, it links to established news institutions. It preserves the journalistic role of gatekeeper. It constructs a journalistic claim to authority and does not let the user talk. It is not in any way revolutionary and despite what popular commentary on weblogs might lead us to expect, it does not provide a new personalized democratic space in which the mainstream media are held to account. However, within the fold of news discourse, it exhibits a rearticulation of the basic stance of the journalist in a number of ways. The news weblog engages in a different communicative endeavour to the dominant news practice, making less of a claim to know what readers want or to know what an event means. It depends upon a different model of its authority, establishing itself as a site of multiple knowledge and of breadth of knowledge of the world. It produces meaning also within a notion of knowledge as a process and matter of connection, rather than contained within one text. It seems to be neither an example of the alternative online journalism discussed by Searls (interviewed in Lasica 2001b) or Kahn and Kellner (nd), nor a product fully situated within the normalizing discourse of the news. As a one-to-many form, it can remain something of a mass form of communication, although it invites user participation in a more strongly interpersonal relationship than much news. As a form that depends on the journalist's selection of material but which at the same time foregrounds that act of selecting, it reorients the authoritative, public position of the journalist without abandoning it for the solipsism of the 'Daily Me'. The weblog is grounded in traditional notions of the role of the journalist, but provides evidence of those notions undergoing some change.

The epistemological issues raised here point to one of the possible futures of online journalism, in which the communicative relation between online journalist and user is more than the transmission of 'data bits', of decontextualized nuggets of information. It is therefore a development that contrasts sharply with news aggregators such as Yahoo! News or Google News, which in some sense are the apotheosis of the telegraph and news agency news conventions that are so powerful in news discourse. The weblog moves away from the rather abstract authority assumed by such news texts to a more situated authority, in which we hear a journalistic voice choosing material as well as multiple and often discordant journalistic voices

accessed through the links. In this context, meaning must be more actively constructed by the user.

The extent to which such change in the epistemology of the news text can be predicted outside the *Guardian* weblog, or even outside the online context, is an open question. As Peter Dahlgren points out, the success rate for online media futurology is rather low (1996: 60). Caution is particularly appropriate in this article where important questions about the political economy, consumption or newsroom organization of news weblogs have not been asked. This is an emergent form, whose place in news journalism is far from certain. But whether or not news weblogs become established at the heart of the practice – and on the *Guardian Unlimited* site, the weblog sits alongside a wide number of genres of journalism, ranging from normal news stories to in-depth analytical sections, multimedia journalism, discussion fora, live online interviews and frequently asked questions – the brief analysis here suggests that in forms such as the weblog, journalists are finding ways of doing mainstream journalism that escape some of the limitations of the dominant form. The form should be taken, then, as indicative of certain kinds of change, rather than as anything like a model for online journalism.

The author is conducting further interview-based research to establish the validity of these exploratory findings. This work includes study of the modes of knowledge drawn upon by webloggers writing about the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq – so called ‘warbloggers’⁶ – study of how news organizations negotiate and adapt the weblog and study of the relationship between lay and expert writers of news weblogs. It is hoped that this work, when combined with research conducted elsewhere on weblogs as genre and social practice, will provide a foundation for detailed discourse analysis of the forms of knowledge that are constructed in such journalistic weblogs. This is likely to have a particular focus on the way in which weblog text relates to other texts through intertextuality, the ways in which links are appraised and the extent to which larger thematic structures are invoked. We hope to be able to situate such work against the work of other scholars on other journalistic practices which appear similarly to test epistemological boundaries, in order to explore how such practices interrelate with wider changes in journalism, as well as against work on the way in which users engage in the communicative space that is opened up in news weblogs.

There is a wider social context to such research on journalism’s exploration of weblogs. Kevin Robins noted in the first issue of this journal that there is an urgent need for ‘a richer debate on knowledges in contemporary societies’ (Robins, 1999: 24). Rather than assume a radical dissociation of the new from the old, we need to explore how new media forms take part in established social structures. The research agenda explored in this article has not assumed that the weblog of a substantial British news

organization is a place of new community or cyberfreedom, but in fact it has tended to assume that its significance lies in its articulation with dominant news practices. We have sought to show that it is possible to understand both the similarities and differences of this case study to mainstream news practice in terms of journalists' desire to step outside some of the limits of news discourse and explore the potential of online media. The incentives and sanctions on the journalism of weblog writers are situated foremost in news culture. At the same time, the newness of new media forms holds considerable appeal for a number of journalists because of the rigidity of aspects of that culture.

One can only speculate about the kind of news that emerges from such attempts to renew traditions and the absorption of such attempts within the dominant. There are many facets to such change. One aspect of the British context in which the *Guardian* weblog is situated is a general disillusionment about the trustworthiness and relevance of news – particularly political news – among young people, and most strongly among young people of ethnic minorities. These people are precisely the largest user group of online news forms, with a recent study finding that the internet 'appeals strongly to young people and especially to young people from minority ethnic groups, some of whom are among our most politically disengaged citizens' (Hargreaves and Thomas, 2002: 52). On the one hand, forms such as this weblog – which emphasize plurality and the negotiation of meaning not just in their content, but also in the way that they shape that content – are more likely perhaps to reflect the sense-making practices of groups who struggle to be heard in a monoglot media, and therefore to gain particular kinds of niche audience. On the other hand, the weblog's claim to gather 'the best journalism on the internet' also perhaps reflects the mainstream media's response to changing consumer tastes, feeding a desire for a broadening of the realm of the knowable with products that provide the illusion of extending that realm to the vastness of the internet. As with the proliferation of television channels and radio stations, perhaps the news weblog provides another example of the fragmentation of publics into isolated consumers of information. Such larger social issues can be adequately explored only using other methods of analysis. Journalistic products such as the one explored here, however, provide evidence of journalism's attempts to rethink its values and relations with its publics in the context of such social change.

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Notes

- 1 See, for example, Downing et al. (2001), Atton (2002) and Threadgold and Jewell (2003).
- 2 This rough, preliminary estimate derives from the categorization of weblogs on one major indexer of weblogs, the Eatonweb portal, which, on July 8 2003 listed among its 12,429 weblogs 1825 of commentary, 358 of debate, 693 media, 1088 news, 766 news/entertainment, 1050 politics, 838 politics/law/government and 377 war, a total of 6995.
- 3 The British Audited Bureau of Circulations attempts to count unique users by a combination of IP address, cookie and registration information. The monthly figure for Guardian Unlimited breaks down into an average number of unique users per day of 417,088 in June, 2003 (ABC Electronic, 2003). Figures for the sub-section of the domain, guardian.co.uk/weblog, are not available.
- 4 Although a glance at its archive shows early pages were much more irreverent in choice of material and in style of annotation, even using a chatty first person voice at times. The annotation on one link on October 16, 2000, reads, "If I were attending a workshop entitled "Physics and the biology of making Mars habitable", you would probably conclude I had too much time on my hands." Such quirky material and ironic tone are rare by 2002.
- 5 The site later changed its slogan to 'Global news: Guide to the best news sites from around the world', further emphasizing the claim.
- 6 Co-authored with Stuart Allan.

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