

Blogging on newspaper websites

Paper for the International Conference
Journalism Research in the Public Interest
19-21 November 2009, Winterthur, Switzerland

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Abstract

What is the impact of blogging, either by journalists or readers, on journalism? Do entries on readers' blogs lead to stories for professional journalists and how is the work of a blogging journalist influenced by the fact that he or she now also has another publication platform and is more in contact with readers through the blog? We conducted content analyses of blogs and interviewed professional and amateur bloggers with blogs on Dutch national and local newspaper websites as well as editors who are responsible for the blogs on the websites.

Newspapers employ different strategies when it comes to allowing either journalists or readers to blog on the newspaper website. Local papers seem to profit most when it comes to getting story leads, or even scoops, from readers' blogs. Blogs on national newspapers' websites function more as personal dairies for the bloggers. The blogs by journalists and invited experts seem to flourish more on national papers' websites. There is also a difference in 'direction' bloggers get. With a stricter policy, mostly meaning that off-topic entries are discouraged, readers' blogs are more focused and are more valuable for journalists' looking for news.

Professional journalists use blogs to give a more personal view on the news, or cover subjects in a way that would be impossible for the printed version, particularly because to 'space' constraints of the traditional newspaper. Nevertheless they stress they use the same journalistic standards for both platforms.

Blogging on newspaper websites

Audiences looking for news have not ‘migrated’ online, they seem to use all kinds of media next to each other. The time the Dutch population devotes to TV and radio is still high and hardly declining while even the number of people who read newspapers is only declining marginally over the last years. What has changed is that people use the Internet as well when it comes to accessing news. In the first six months of 2007 4.6 million people (33% of the population) visited a website of a Dutch newspaper, in the first six month of 2008 this was 6.3 million (43%) while in 2009 it increased to 6.9 million (50%); the number of visits went from 14 in 2007 to 19 in 2009 (*Cebuco, de krant verslaat alles*, 2009). Apart from that, news websites not connected to traditional printed newspapers like nos.nl (national broadcaster) and nu.nl (web only news site) are very popular as well.

‘Using’ the Internet is to some extend a fundamentally different experience than reading a traditional newspaper. A news website can be used in a traditional way, reading from top to bottom, in the order the editors presented it; but websites offer much more opportunities. Readers can select their own stories and their own reading order; move away by clicking on links; but most of all interact with the content and the medium itself by posting comments, filling in polls, participating in discussions on forums and social network websites (MySpace, Facebook), upload pictures (Flickr) or videos (YouTube), and write their own blogs. When contributions from non-professionals appear on regular media websites, they are often referred to as user-generated content (UGC).

In this study we concentrate on blogs on websites of traditional newspapers, mainly because blogs offer, compared to other forms of UGC, the most options when it comes to presenting news or voicing opinions, including possibilities of using pictures or video and linking to other relevant sources. And blogs also offer discussion possibilities when they allow people to comment on stories. We specifically concentrate on blogs on websites of traditional newspapers because we want to assess whether these contributions from users actually have an impact on the news and journalism on these websites. Therefore we also include blogs from professional journalists, as these often appear alongside of the users' blogs.

Hermida and Thurman (2007, p. 4) do not, in their definition, make a distinction between professional and non-professional blogs, they just state that blogs are:

posts laid out in reverse chronological order and most allow readers to comment on the entries. Blogs are explicitly authored by one or more individuals, often associated with a set of interests or opinions, and can include links to external websites.

When non-professional journalists engage in blogging on current affairs, they engage in participatory journalism and ‘invade’ the space formerly monopolized by professional journalists. When journalists themselves start blogging they engage in activities that are supposed to receive comments and involve interaction while blogging is also considered as a rather personal activity compared to traditional journalism. Therefore an impact on news and journalism could be expected.

According to Reich (2008) there are different approaches when it comes to assessing the value of blogging for journalism. There is a utopian ‘school’ with high expectations when it comes to blogging and other forms of participatory journalism (Bowman & Willes, 2003; Gillmore, 2004; O'Reilly, 2005) Traditional media could expect a genuine revolution as a result of the opening up of journalism to citizens who would turn news into a conversation, interesting for other readers and providing also new views on topics. A second school on the contrary, expects very little of amateurs flooding the Internet with information, with Andrew Keen's (2006) *The Cult of the Amateur* being the most prolific example. A third approach focuses on local initiatives as the most promising area of citizen journalism according to Reich (2008), although expectation in general might be low as well. A Pew Research Center research confirms this 'somewhat' approach:

Editors don't seem to see citizen journalism as the silver bullet some predicted a decade ago—a source of content that could one day replace reporters. While a quarter of editors describe it as valuable, nearly six out of ten describe it in more qualified terms as only “somewhat” valuable (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008, p. 26).

Allowing non-professionals to enter the sacred ground formerly occupied by professionals was not a smooth operation; apart from the genuine interest in starting a conversation with readers also the rather precarious position of online media stimulated innovation, but as many other websites had no problem with contributions from users, news media soon followed suit. The prospect of getting compelling

content from the audience at no or low costs convinced many traditionally reluctant journalists and publishers. Although there is therefore a real business perspective in inviting amateurs in a professional news operation, in this paper we concentrate on the journalistic consequences: is the news reported on these websites affected because of contributions of the audience and do journalists involved in dealing with these contributions or those who engage in blogging themselves, see their own journalism being affected by blogging?

In order to assess whether there is any impact on news and journalism, it might be important to investigate the reasons why traditional media allowed amateurs to blog on their websites and why traditional print journalists started blogging themselves. What were the expectation regarding blogs and blogging, particular in respect to the value for journalism? Was it strengthening the bond with existing readers or was it meant to attract new (possibly younger) readers? Apart from that it is also important to ask citizen bloggers for their motivations (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Was dissatisfaction with traditional media and mainstream journalism for instance a reason for citizens to start blogging (Chung et al., 2007)?

One of our main purposes if to see whether these expectations actually have become true. Have citizens provided news websites with compelling content? Have they added to the journalism practised on these websites? Have professional and citizen journalists started collaborating? Or are others strengthened in their idea that ‘amateurs’ never can contribute to ‘real’ journalism? Engaging citizen journalists would not be an easy task, which is demonstrated by an US research from the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2008, p. 26), which stated:

In interviews, a majority of editors (...) complained that getting acceptable written content—e.g. stories—from citizen journalists usually required significant investments of newsroom staff time to train, coach, educate, confirm and edit.

Although getting valuable content could be difficult and expensive, this doesn’t mean it is impossible. One of the main problems of citizen journalists, is according to Reich (2008) is their limited access to sources compared to traditional journalists. Also they often refrain from letting different parties offer their view on a story, a common practise for ‘traditional’ journalists. These traits – limited access to sources and lack of balancing reports by using different sources – will be investigated as well when it comes to the value citizen journalism could offer. Apart from that it is important to investigate whether local citizen journalism differs from national experiences.

Method

We analysed citizen and journalists blogs on the websites of four national paid dailies, one free daily and two local Dutch dailies. At national quality morning dailies de Volkskrant and Trouw both journalists and readers can blog. Popular morning broadsheet De Telegraaf offers a special ‘what you say’ website for readers. National evening quality broadsheet NRC Handelsblad offers only limited opportunities for readers’ blogging, but has instead so-called expert blogs, where external experts on specific topics are invited to write a blog. Also de Volkskrant invites experts to blog but does not display these very prominently. Free daily DAG and regional papers AD/ Utrechts Nieuwsblad and TC/Tubantia offer mainly citizen blogs.

Citizen and journalist bloggers were interviewed as well as editors who were responsible for the blogs. Only regular bloggers (blogging at least one time a week) were interviewed. Interviews were conducted in person in the second half of 2008, using a standardized topic list for all interviews. In total 16 interviews were conducted. At national daily de Volkskrant one editor, two citizen bloggers and one journalist-blogger were interviewed. At NRC Handelsblad one journalist, one editor and one invited expert blogger were interviewed. Two readers who blog at national daily Trouw were interviewed as well as an editor responsible for the Internet operation. One citizen blogger who blogs at the ‘what you say’ website of national morning broadsheet De Telegraaf was interviewed. Of the four free dailies that were published during our research only DAG offered blogging opportunities; Metro launched mini-blogging in 2007 but ended this within a year while also free daily Spits ended their blogs before the start of our research. One citizen blogger who later became an editor was interviewed. At regional papers AD/ Utrechts Nieuwsblad and TC/Tubantia both one editor and one citizen blogger were interviewed.

The blogs

National daily the Volkskrant was among the first in the Netherlands to offer a blog environment to their readers and journalists, treating them both alike although journalists and invited experts are marked with an orange star. There is a division on the blog website (<http://www.vkblog.nl/>) between ‘clubs’ (topics like ‘work’, ‘news’ and ‘movies’) and ‘regions’ (Amsterdam, The Hague and all twelve provinces) while

all blogs are listed alphabetically as well. Users can chose topics or regions. Blogs usually can be commented on but bloggers can choose to bypass this option. Blogs can be sorted on ‘most commented on’, ‘hot topic’ or ‘recommended’ (*Algemene informatie over het Volkskrant Blogsysteem*, n.d.).

NRC Handelsblad contains journalists’ and experts’ blogs while readers can contribute to the joint ‘ik@NRC’ (I) blog, which is not a personal blog (as at de Volkskrant) but a moderated group blog with short personal contributions. The URL (<http://weblogs2.nrc.nl/ik/>) suggests, however, that Ik@NRC.nl can be seen as a form of blogging. One item from Ik@NRC.nl is printed in newspaper every day. NRC journalists are mostly foreign correspondents who have their ‘World blog’ page. There were contributions in our research period from Brussels, China, Jakarta, the US elections, Moscow, New York and the ‘rest of the world’. The expert blogs cover jobs, the courts, movies, money, media, culture, politics, sports, chess, technology and language.

National daily Trouw offers blogging opportunities for readers, journalists (mainly foreign correspondents) and invited experts. Reader blogs are topical, for instance ‘religion and philosophy’, ‘green’, ‘ideals’ and ‘writing’. There are also local blogging pages.

National popular broadsheet De Telegraaf operates a special citizen website Wat U Zegt (What you say), which shares the name with the section in the paper devoted to letters to the editor. The URL (www.wuz.nl) differs from that of De Telegraaf. Bloggers have their own page but contribute mainly to pages with the same zip code, meaning that news is organized locally.

The website of free daily DAG contained a section ‘Meedoen’ (Contribute) where ten readers had their own blog, each specializing in some topic and jointly being called the DAG-panel. Every month some new contributions were added. DAG closed down in October 2008.

Uniews (www.uniews.nl) is operated by regional daily AD/Utrechts Nieuwsblad and regional broadcaster RTV Utrecht. Some articles from the Uniews website are published in the printed newspaper as well. Registered users can contribute news items for different communities in the province, and submit them as well under topics like ‘sports’, ‘news’, ‘calendar events’ or ‘other’. Journalists of the paper and the broadcaster can contribute stories as well. Bloggers don’t have their own personal blog.

On the website ‘dorpspleinen’ (village squares) local paper TC/Tubantia offers readers the possibility to have their own blog, mostly covering their own community. Also the local city councils, the police and the journalists of the paper can contribute items. On November 1, 2009 the pages were closed down, or as the paper called it ‘integrated’ into the general website.

Only the national papers offer their own journalists regular blogging opportunities, meaning having their own blog branded with their own name. Both regional papers ask journalists to contribute occasionally to the citizen journalism website. NRC Handelsblad, Volkskrant and Trouw have invited experts to blog. Some blogs, like the regional blogs and the ‘ik@nrc.nl’ blogs seem to be a hybrid model as bloggers contribute to a citizen journalism website – looking more like a traditional news website or even a newspaper – these group blogs, however, have the reverse chronological order that is common for blogs (see figure 1).

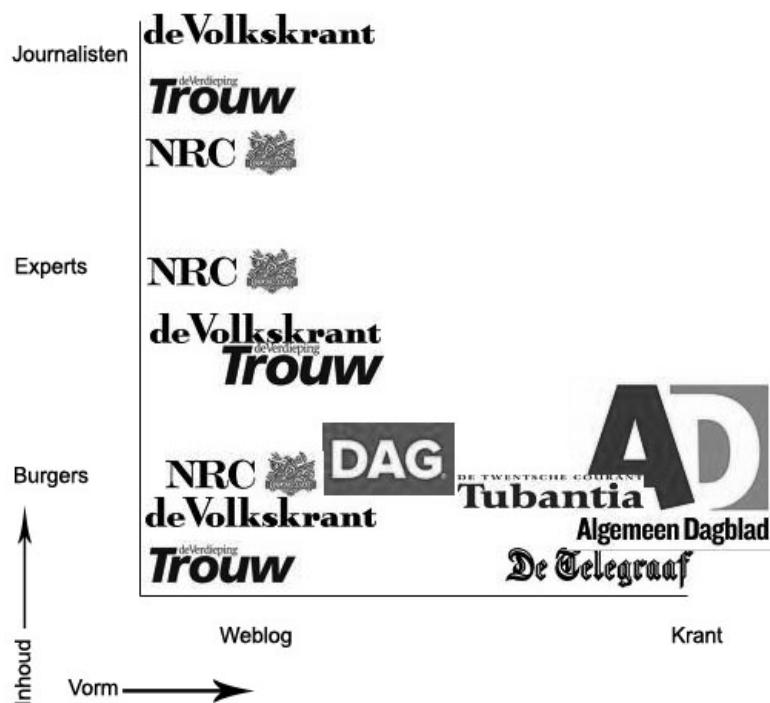


Figure 1 Blogs by citizens, experts and journalists.

Citizen journalists: expectations & experienced

De Volkskrant was one of the first newspapers in the Netherlands to fully employ blogs on the website. The editor responsible for the operation confirmed a rather ambitious approach:

We thought the ideal of citizen journalism was appealing. We wanted to use it so readers of de Volkskrant and users who were (not yet) connected to the paper would have an instrument to generate and publish their own news.

The expectation of the paper was that among the thousand bloggers on Volkskrantblog there would be people you would publish journalistic interesting stories. These expectations never came true. Journalistic input by citizen journalists on Volkskrantblog is almost absent. Expectations have been changed since then. The blog is now mainly seen as a tool to let readers communicate with others.

At Trouw the effort was somewhat more careful, strengthening the relation with the users of the website but also with the readers of the paper, was the main goal. Contrary to what was expected, the majority of the readers of the blogs do not read the paper, which shifted the focus to engaging new audiences. A strong citizen-journalism ideal seems to be lacking. One of the journalists interviewed, said:

Citizen journalism is nonsense. Does it really exist? And if so, how do you do it? How can a citizen journalist practice journalism if he hasn't the resources to check everything? How can he separate the wheat from the chaff in his little attic room?
Citizens can contribute to journalism. If you make a picture or video with your phone, that could have some journalistic value. But anyone blogging from his attic can say anything. Journalism is a real job, we have more resources, we are paid, and we have the time to check sources and to interview people, to ask for different points of view.

De Telegraaf expected WUZ, the ‘what you say’ blogging website, to become the major platform for citizens to make themselves heard. Notwithstanding the high number of visitors, the website did not develop in the way it was expected.

Discussions are focused on personal matters or are dominated by activists who want to make their point without listening too much to others.

For regional paper AD/Utrechts Nieuwsblad and broadcaster RTV Utrecht the Unieuws website was mainly meant to expand the news network of both media. Because of substantial jobs cuts at the newspaper after a merger between national daily AD and regional paper Utrechts Nieuwsblad, there simply was not enough staff to cover all local communities. Apart from that, strengthening the relation with

readers was an objective. The threshold to the traditional paper was considered to be too high for most readers. News items posted by Unieuws users are put on the website and sometimes in the paper as well.

The virtual village squares of TC/Tubantia worked in a similar way, some news items were ‘promoted’ to the print version:

We use a special page for that, instead of using a local news page because we don’t want to use that precious space. This page is used for all editions and contains a mix of all the news that was put online in the previous week. It is always news, no personal blog content. (Wijler, 2007, p. 20)

None of the journalists interviewed could provide data on the number of visitors of the blog website. Strengthening the relation with readers was the common theme in all approaches in the end.

The journalistic value of blogs seemed to be modest at best. In particular national newspapers don’t seem to profit from blogging readers as a source of news: “We never had any scoops, maybe some exemptions, but it’s marginal” according to the editor responsible for online operations at de Volkskrant. In the first years some contributions were included in the newspaper, but this gradually diminished over the years; lately no content from any blog made it to the paper.

The exception to this rule was the Unieuws website which proved its value, mainly because events were covered that normally would have slipped through the widened local news-net.

We had a story from people from Nieuwegein [one of the local communities] who witnessed a police action in their street one night. On the blog they asked what it was about. We informed the local newspaper desk who investigated the story. It was a kidnap within the Roma community, which the police didn’t want to get public at first. Now we had the scoop, otherwise it could have taken days to get it.

In other words: the paper treats the blog as a way to get news leads from citizens. Rather they would have the citizen reporters to write the whole story; but also here lack of time, skills and resources holds the citizen journalist back.

The national newspapers in our research do not feel themselves responsible for the content on the citizen blogs (although this might be seen different in a legal context). This only changes when the blog content is reproduced in the printed version. At de Volkskrant it was stated:

We see as some sort of toy for the audience. Legally and in practice we try to keep as far as possible from the blogs. We only intervene when rules – our rules or laws –

are broken. And in practice it is impossible to check every blog entry before it's published. We only check marginally.

Content from citizen blogs seldom make the pages of the national dailies; regional dailies, however, use this content often on a regular basis. Unieuws checks the blog's content after it's published and if there is a problem, the editors make that clear in a comment.

Overall, great expectations accompanied the introduction of reader's blogs on most newspapers websites we researched. The ideal of the citizen journalist providing websites with interesting stories, however, never came true and made newspapers settle for the next best option: communication with regular readers and new users in the hope of making existing readers more satisfied and attracting new users. Regional papers seem to get a little bit more out of citizens' blogs, although also on this level it never seems to develop into mature journalism.

Blogging journalists

Why do journalists¹ blog? Mostly because they like doing it; it's 'fun' according to the journalists we talked to "just fun to do (...) a sort of dairy". The second important reason that it is an easy way to get into contact with readers. The low threshold of the Internet makes it much easier for readers to get in contact with a journalist, particular a blogging journalist as comments are directly addressed to the journalist. Another reason is that the newspaper has a limited news hole, and the blog offers an opportunity to write about subjects that normally never could make the paper.

Sometimes it is just not fit for the paper. Also when you don't have time enough to do a thorough piece. For the blog I do some street interviews, which is enough. It would never make the paper but it's good enough for the blog.

In particular the foreign correspondents we talked to used the 'lack of space' argument as the space for foreign news is usually heavily contested.

A blog is also much more personal, compared to an article in the newspaper (and does not have to pass a subeditor). This could be the reason for a story being not suitable for the newspaper but very suitable for the blog" "You can illustrate a conflict in a country using personal stories on the blog". Not all journalists, however, go for the personal touch, while giving a personal opinion is considered crossing the line for most.

¹ As we interviewed only one expert blogger, these answers – which were in line with those of the journalists we talked to – are included in this section as well.

Although the blog often contains material not suited for the newspaper, it is not seen as a collection of second-rate articles, but as another medium with more possibilities for background material. The same journalistic standards therefore apply to blogs and newspaper articles.

Journalists often use other blogs as sources for their online writing. A blog entry on the US elections linked to several other blogs to show the different viewpoints. In these cases only ‘professional’ blogs were used, meaning blogs of other journalists or politicians. Citizen blogs were not seen as suitable material for information.

Why do citizens blog?

The citizen bloggers on the websites of the national dailies had very personal motives for their activities. They often focus on one subjects. One of de Volkskrant bloggers for instance writes mainly about his city Utrecht while a blogger at Trouw devoted his blog to fair trade issues. We did not encounter angry or dissatisfied citizens in our small sample of bloggers, blogging is mostly ‘fun’, as it is with professional bloggers. The joy of seeing yourself ‘in print’ (meaning ‘on the web’) seems to be a motive in itself. And when this is done under the ‘brand’ of a well-known national newspaper it even feels better: “People just like to blog at ‘de Volkskrant’. It’s a serious quality broadsheet and they like it to blog there specifically.”

Among citizen bloggers there also seems to be something that resembles a community. There is a stable group of bloggers who often comment on each others blogs. Some bloggers even organize blogging events where bloggers meet.

Discussion

There is no ‘one size fits all’ format for blogs. All newspaper researched employ very different formats and concepts for blogging. All allowed citizens to blog but under very different conditions. At ‘ik@nrc’ they are obliged to write short (120 words) personal stories and go through a heavy moderation process. On the other hand, at de Volkskrant, almost anything goes; the subject is free, there is no space limitation and hardly any moderation. Both regional papers, however, ask their readers to write strictly about local news. Also professional bloggers are treated differently. At NRC

Handelsblad and Trouw they have their own branded professional blog – de Volkskrant treats citizens and journalists as equals.

All newspapers have different ways of dealing with blogs, and all admit that expectations – particular in terms of getting news – have not been met. There still seems to be a genuine confusion when it comes to assessing the value of blogs. That most national media chose for the rather lame objective of ‘strengthening relations with readers’ could suggest that either blogs have only limited value or that their true value has not been discovered yet. Impact on journalism seems to be minimal at a national level – perhaps there never was an army of citizen bloggers waited to be called upon. This is in line with research done in the USA (PEJ, 2008) and Israel (Reich, 2008).

The local experience seems somewhat more promising although one of the local initiatives, the ‘village squares’ has been closed down. But also on this level, real journalism is hard to find, although some news leads seem to come out of the citizen blogs. According to Reich (2008) this is explained the extensive network on a local level that people have, something that is much more difficult on a national level. Even if local contributions are seen as more valuable, this does not mean local citizen blogger can easily cross the threshold of the newspaper. In that case professionals move in, checking facts, finding new sources and editing the content. This indicates that there are indeed other journalistic standards for web work and traditional media. Journalists’ blogs seem to fulfil a different function, providing the journalists with the opportunity to escape from the confined space of the newspaper, write more personal and get into contact with readers.

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