

stories based on outsiders' tips and suggestions. As for readers who blog, giving them a stake in the editorial process—by letting them provide meaningful feedback or suggesting story leads—increases loyalty and understanding and spurs them to share their positive experience with others.

The authors of a research study, "Interactive Features of Online Newspapers," sum it up this way: "Journalists today must choose. As gatekeepers they can transfer lots of information, or they can make users a smarter, more active and questioning audience for news events and issues."

Journalism is undergoing a quiet revolution, whether it knows it or not. Readers will always turn to traditional news sites as trusted, reliable sources of news and information—that won't change. But the walls are cracking. The readers want to be a part of the news process.

We will always need a corps of trained journalists to ferret out impor-

tant stories, to report from remote locations, to provide balance and context to the news. But beside big media journalism we are starting to see a mixture of commentary and analysis from the grass roots as ordinary people find their voices and contribute to the media mix. Blogs won't replace traditional news media, but they will supplement them in important ways.

What's ahead? Certainly a much larger role for amateurs in the news process. Weblogs are only one part of the puzzle. For instance, in late June 2003, NHK (the Japan Broadcasting Corp.) carried news of a serious highway accident. The scene was carried live via video from a bystander who was playing the role of journalist by shooting the action with his portable camera phone. Mobloggers—tech-savvy users who post photos, video and text to Weblogs from their mobile devices—just held their first convention in Tokyo. In Daytona Beach, Florida, a janitor created his own one-man TV station

and occasionally Webcasts live news events.

All of this portends important changes as journalism expands its tent to include citizen participation. Ultimately, bloggers and the phenomenon of grassroots journalism have just as meaningful a role in the future of news on the Net as do the professionals. ■

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## Weblogs Bring Journalists Into a Larger Community

'... we need to drop grandiose claims of being aloof, objective observers and be more transparent about how we do our jobs.'

By Paul Grabowicz

One of the most alarming aspects of the Jayson Blair affair was how few people mentioned in his stories complained to The New York Times about his deceptions. This problem is not unique to the Times. In the wake of the scandal an Associated Press Managing Editors' survey found many readers viewed newspapers as so arrogant, uncaring or disingenuous that it was a waste of time to try to correct errors. A July 2003 Pew Research Center survey similarly reported that 62 percent of the public believed news organizations try to cover up mistakes rather than admit to them.

Clearly major changes are in order if news organizations are going to re-

establish credibility with readers and viewers. One step would be to embrace the growing sphere of Weblogs, which break down many of the existing barriers between journalists and the public.

### What Weblogs Offer Readers

Weblogs are easy-to-create Web pages reporters can use to post short, regularly updated news items or commentary on issues they are covering, with links to longer stories and background information elsewhere on the Web. Anyone who has authored a Weblog knows the blogging community doesn't share the hesitation of newspaper read-

ers in pointing out errors. Even the slightest misstep on a journalist's Weblog is likely to elicit a batch of quick responses.

More importantly, a Weblog thrusts a journalist into a larger community where a posting is picked up and passed from one blogger to the next, each adding comments and expanding the discussion. As such, Weblogs are far more animated than the often-stilted forums at news Web sites. They elicit a much broader conversation in which what people have to say about what's been written is regarded as being of equal importance.

Reporters can use Weblogs to post items that expand on their regular news

stories. This can be similar to the traditional “Reporter’s Notebook,” written by journalists covering government or political campaigns. Instead of a highly structured narrative, designed as a finished product for passive consumption, the Weblog writing style is more informal and approachable, inviting the reader to participate.

Weblogs can engage readers in a dialogue about a story even as it’s being formulated. San Jose Mercury News technology columnist Dan Gillmor, a pioneer in journalism blogging, uses his eJournal<sup>1</sup> to float story ideas and get reader input on whether and how he might pursue them. Recently he’s invited his Weblog readers to review his outline for a book on technology and journalism. [See story by Gillmor on page 79.]

Weblogs also can give readers insight into the reporting process itself. This helps strip away the mystique—and misunderstanding—that surrounds so much of what we do as reporters. An example is the string of e-mail dispatches that producers of the “In Search of Al Queda” documentary posted to Frontline’s Web site as they did their filming<sup>2</sup>. While not formally a Weblog, the producers’ very personal descriptions of how they reported the story show how a Weblog-like format can involve the public in a story from the beginning.

## Journalists and Weblogs

For Weblogs to become a tool journalists use in their reporting, journalists will have to re-examine the concept of objectivity—the idea that we are detached, dispassionate chroniclers of fact. When we did a class at the University of California at Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism a year ago on creating a Weblog to report on digital copyright<sup>3</sup>, one of the main issues we confronted was the clash between journalistic objectivity and the informal,

free-flowing format of the Weblog.

That Weblogs and the Internet challenge objectivity is only appropriate, since it was a different technology and media form that fostered it. The advent of the telegraph and wire service in the 19th century allowed distribution of stories to many different newspapers and favored neutral presentations that would offend the fewest and appeal to the most. The evolution of mass media in print and broadcast similarly demanded each news product be tailored to the widest possible audience, with objectivity seen by many news managers as a means to that end.

In the era of digital technology and Web publishing, the mass-market model of news delivery is being displaced by one that emphasizes diversity and dialogue. Rather than presenting a single, homogenized view, the Web, and the blogosphere in particular, is a wide spectrum of perspectives and opinions. It’s a medium where people respond better to a more personal writing style, as usability studies have shown. And this medium is all about communication (e-mail tops every survey as the most favored use of the Internet), something the concept of the detached and impersonal journalist shuts off.

I once heard an award-winning national journalist say she responded to criticisms of her work by telling people their argument was not with her but with the people she quoted in her stories. It was as if no human was involved in the process of reporting and writing the story—just some disinterested bystander stringing together what others had to say. So there was no point talking with her. Not surprisingly, this don’t-bother-calling-me attitude—all too common in journalism—is a message that has been taken to

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## When the concept of objectivity came up ... none of the students voiced much support for it.

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heart by the public.

To be sure, there are many values in journalism that need to be preserved—honesty, integrity, accuracy, fairness, inquisitiveness and thoroughness. But if we’re going to reconnect with readers, we need to drop grandiose claims of being aloof, objective observers and be more transparent about how we do our jobs. When the concept of objectivity came up in our Weblog class last fall, interestingly none of the students voiced much support for it. Instead we settled on more basic principles for our Weblog—to provide “factual” information that was “thought provoking” and would invite a “conversation that will increase understanding.”

Weblogs also pose some dangers for journalism. They encourage quick posting of information, while journalism has distinguished itself with an editorial process that vets stories before they are published. In the case of Dan Gillmor’s Weblog, the Mercury News addresses this issue by having an editor check Gillmor’s entries right after he posts them. For our journalism school Weblog, we decided postings had to be reviewed by another student or professor before they went public.

Weblog postings also often rely on secondhand information, with commentary and links to what has been published elsewhere. But original, in-depth reporting is essential to journalism, and reporters’ Weblogs should be designed to supplement and not substitute for that.

Like other digital media, Weblogs make it easy to correct errors after the fact, which can create the impression that mistakes are just being covered up. In our class we adopted a policy that any significant corrections would be accompanied by a note explaining what had been changed and why.

Weblogs are no panacea for all of what ails journalism. In the case of

<sup>1</sup> Gillmor eJournal <http://weblog.siliconvalley.com/column/dangillmor/>

<sup>2</sup> Frontline <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/search/behind/>

<sup>3</sup> Digital Copyright <http://journalism.berkeley.edu/projects/biplog/>

Blair, numerous blogs dedicated to picking apart the reporting of The New York Times failed to catch his deceit before the Times did. But this also highlights the all too common relationship the press has with Weblogs—the imperious media giant under siege by hostile outsiders. Journalists need to break out of this us vs. them cycle

and be part of the community if we're going to regain the public trust that is essential to journalism. ■

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## Blogging Journalists Invite Outsiders' Reporting In

'To be interesting, the blog must have a discernible human voice: A blog with just links is a portal.'

By Sheila Lennon

**O**n February 20, 2003, 100 young men and women who went to The Station nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island never came home. The band began to play, sparklers flashed, and the soundproofing foam on the walls caught fire. Flames spread, the music stopped, and the dying began.

There was no way to know the names of everyone who was at the Great White concert that night. Identifying some of the dead and badly burned took days. Rhode Islanders banged on local news Web sites looking for the latest bit of information. The Providence Journal Web site<sup>1</sup> published news nearly around the clock, not waiting for the newspaper's next day's press run.

Initially, we created The Station Fire Weblog<sup>2</sup> to collect links to news coverage of the fire elsewhere on the Web. I searched with Google's help and found fresh information in victims' hometown papers, on roadie.net<sup>3</sup>, on Internet "heavy metal" sites, and net radio station KNAC.com in Los Angeles

(hometown of Great White), and on the Web site of guitarist Ty Longley, who died in the fire. I also scanned newsgroups for messages by survivors and friends of the fans and bands.

By constantly updating this blog and publishing information live, we conveyed to readers that any news they sent would be acted on and published immediately. A link at the top of our Weblog asked, "Seen something this blog should point to? E-mail Sheila," and it gave my address.

Readers responded. Amid the confusion, people were trying to sort out what had happened and looking for more information. Journalists, government officials, firefighters, medical professionals, witnesses, survivors and friends pooled their knowledge, and I blogged it all. Friends and relatives of victims e-mailed the URL's of pages friends had made to track the condition of victims<sup>4</sup> and solicit donations for their medical and living expenses. Survivors had started discussions at the Yahoo Groups site, and they wanted

to get the word out. Readers with expertise in pyrotechnics, insulation or firefighting contributed information and speculation. I passed these and the other pieces of this story gathered through the blog onto the newspaper's editors leading the fire coverage.

Still today one can revisit the chronology of this "reporting" process as it unfolded by reading from the bottom of Week One of The Station Fire blog. There's no equivalent for this experience in print.

### A Blogging Journalist

The Station Fire Weblog was an ad hoc blog created to handle the huge flow of information created by a breaking news story. I maintained this in addition to my daily blog, Subterranean Homepage News<sup>5</sup> on [www.projo.com](http://www.projo.com).

Day-to-day I am a newsroom blogger on the mainstream news site of The Providence Journal, which is the major metropolitan daily in the capital of Rhode Island. I've been online since January 1990, when I assigned a story about local computer bulletin boards and then wrote a column about my adventures in connecting to them. After 14 years as a features editor at the newspaper, I moved to [projo.com](http://www.projo.com) four years ago. As our Web site's features producer, I sit among reporters and editors in the paper's newsroom. As its

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<sup>1</sup> The Providence Journal <http://www.projo.com>  
<sup>2</sup> The Station Fire Weblog <http://www.projo.com/cgi-bin/include.pl/blogs/stationfire/week1.htm>  
<sup>3</sup> roadie.net <http://www.teslatheband.com/news/jeffrader.htm>  
<sup>4</sup> Fire victims update <http://www.ornatesky.org/updates.htm>  
<sup>5</sup> Subterranean Homepage News <http://www.projo.com/blogs/shenews/>