

The Weblog: An Extremely Democratic Form in Journalism by Jay Rosen

In this chapter for Extreme Democracy, I revisit my list, "ten things radical about the weblog form in journalism." (PressThink's most popular post.)

"Journalism," James W. Carey tells us, "takes its name from the French word for day. It is our day book, our collective diary, which records our common life."

To record the events of the day is equally the aim of the newsroom and the diary writer. Carey, a press scholar who teaches at Columbia University, finds a connection at the soul between journalism and the practice of journal keeping. Both are trying to prevent events from disappearing without reflection, narration, and the means to look back. "That which goes unrecorded goes unpreserved except in the vanishing moment of our individual lives," he writes.

When Carey speaks of journalism, he means the practice of it. "Not the media. Not the news business. Not the newspaper or the magazine or the television station but the practice of journalism," which exists independent of any media platform. He goes on:

There are media everywhere. Every despot creates his own system of media. There is a news business everywhere; there just isn't all that much journalism, for there can be no journalism without the aspiration for or institutions of democratic life....

Just as medicine, for example, can be practiced in enormous clinics organized like corporations or in one-person offices, journalism can be practiced in multinational conglomerates or by isolated freelancers. Just as medicine can be practiced with technologies as advanced as magnetic image resonating machines or as primitive as an ear that hears complaints and an eye that observes symptoms, so journalism can be practiced with satellites or script. The practice does not depend on the technology or bureaucracy. It depends on the practitioner mastering a body of skill and exercising it to some worthwhile purpose.

And what is worthwhile about it? Carey puts it this way: "For journalism and for us, that purpose is the development and enhancement of public life, a common life which we can all share as citizens." The title of his talk where he says all this is, "The struggle against forgetting."

Journalism is a part of that struggle, the simplest act of which is recording the events of the day. So a journal writer has origins in common with a journal-ist. They are members of the same communication family. And this is one reason that weblogs, which the press calls "online journals," are an *event* within journalism—the practice of it, as well as our ideas about it.

Believing so, in October, 2003 I posted an item listing "ten things radical about the weblog form in journalism." In the rapid way these things happen online, the list became PressThink's most popular and linked-to feature, which means it embedded itself further into the Web than any other entry before or since. It was half the length of a newspaper op-ed. In it I was trying to find points where the weblog "reversed" things about journalism, or shifted a big pattern that had held for a long time. Thus:

- 1.) The weblog comes out of the gift economy, whereas most (not all) of today's journalism comes out of the market economy.
- 2.) Journalism had become the domain of professionals, and amateurs were sometimes welcomed into it-- as with the op-ed page. Whereas the weblog is the domain of amateurs and professionals are the ones being welcomed to it.
- 3.) In journalism since the mid-nineteenth century, barriers to entry have been high. With the weblog, barriers to entry are low: a computer, a Net connection, and a software program like Blogger or Movable Type gets you there. Most of the capital costs required for the weblog to "work" have been sunk into the Internet itself, the largest machine in the world (with the possible exception of the international phone system.)
- 4.) In the weblog world every reader is actually a writer, and you write not so much for "the reader" but for other writers. So every reader is a writer, yes, but every writer is also a reader of other weblog writers—or better be.
- 5.) Whereas an item of news in a newspaper or broadcast seeks to add itself to the public record, an entry posted in a weblog engages the public record, because it pulls bits and pieces from it through the device of linking. In journalism the regular way, we imagine the public record accumulating with each day's news-- becoming longer. In journalism the weblog way, we imagine the public record "tightening," its web becoming stronger, as links promotes linking, which produces more links.
- 6.) A weblog can "work" journalistically—it can be sustainable, enjoyable, meaningful, valuable, worth doing, and worth it to other people —if it reaches 50 or 100 souls who like it, use it, and communicate through it. Whereas in journalism the traditional way, such a small response would be seen as a failure, in journalism the weblog way the intensity of a small response can spell success.
- 7.) A weblog is like a column in a newspaper or magazine, sort of, but whereas a column written by twelve people makes little sense and wouldn't work, a weblog written by twelve people makes perfect sense and does work.
- 8.) In journalism prior to the weblog, the journalist had an editor and the editor represented the reader. In journalism after the weblog, the journalists has (writerly) readers, and the readers represent an editor.
- 9.) In journalism classically understood, information flows from the press to the public. In the weblog world as it is coming to be understood, information flows from the public to the press.
- 10.) Journalism traditionally assumes that democracy is what we have, information is what we seek. Whereas in the weblog world, information is what we have—it's all around us—and democracy is what we seek.

What is a weblog? A personal web page, or online journal, updated easily by an author, that links outward to other material on the Web, and presents original content—typically, links and commentary--in a rolling, day-by-day fashion, with the latest entries on top.

But also:

Some weblogs have comment sections after every item, so in a sense every item is an item submitted for public comment.

Some weblogs have a long list of other blogs they name, highlight and link to, (a blogroll, in the vernacular). This an author uses to define a conversational field, as if to say: "listen to me as I talk to them."

Weblogs don't have to be, but they often are designed with a given look and feel, which is to say they define a particular kind of place. To Joi Ito, a weblog is primarily that, a place its users enjoy. He says that reading his weblog is something like visiting his house. If so, it's a talking house.

Jeff Jarvis, author of Buzzmachine, a popular and newsy weblog, says: "know my blog, know me." According to Dave Winer, one of the pioneers of the form, a weblog is the "voice of a person."

All weblogs offer text, increasingly they have photographs, some include audio, some now present video (and some have ads.) The weblog incorporates these earlier media forms, turning them into tools of expression almost anyone can learn to use. The software behind the form allows for production values high enough that individual authors on the Web suffer no immediate disadvantage in comparison to very large commercial providers. There's something extremely democratic about that.

Remember the rationale for public access television? It was supposed to give individual television makers a place on the cable dial. Weblogs are a more effective public access point. Because they are “live” on the Web, and the Web is World Wide, the millions of weblogs already out there have some ability to compete in the same public space as hugely capitalized media companies.

Although it is still a tiny universe, and not a real threat to the established media or the professionals who operate it, the sphere of weblogs is capable of something bigger inventions have not achieved. As Jarvis says, the weblog gives people in the audience a printing press, and thus access to their own audience. There’s something extremely democratic about that development, too.

And even though we know that only a small, unrepresentative fraction of a percent will start that press up, the fact that it can be done has a radiating effect. Andrew Sullivan got more readers for himself, through his weblog, than he ever had as editor and columnist of the New Republic magazine. Granted that he began with every advantage as a journalist and writer with a track record in public controversy; still, with andrewsullivan.com he showed that an individual provider could compete with long-established journals of opinion. "If the goal of opinion journalism is not ultimately money but influence and readers," Sullivan wrote, "the blogs are already breathing down the old media's neck."

Chris Allbritton, a former reporter for the Associated Press, took this empowerment further. From contributions solicited at his weblog, (back-to-iraq.com) he raised over \$14,000 to report on the war in Iraq as an independent correspondent, answerable only to his readers and his conscience. Armed with a satellite phone, a global positioning unit, a laptop, and his reporting skills, Allbritton flew to Turkey, snuck over the border into Northern Iraq, made his way to Baghdad, and started posting live reports to his weblog, which had 23,000 users and supporters during the peak of his reporting (March 27, 2003.) That was an act of journalism--the social practice Jim Carey talked about--that cut out “the media” entirely, proving that one does not depend on the other. (See this about Allbritton's breakthrough.)

That is why I call the weblog the last mile in self-publishing. In cable television, the last mile, stretching from the system to the private home, is the most expensive and politically charged portion of the network. It’s where greater media capacity comes down from the skies to plug into people's lives; and it is also the point where public regulation, the economics of television, the politics of municipalities, viewer choice, and a dozen other factors converge. The last mile brought us “public access,” but it was under-funded and meant to lose out to the commercial channels people would pay for.

If cable television is the heavy industry of the media age, the weblog is of much lighter invention. In fact, it was hardly noticed at first, beyond a few visionaries who invented the form, and started fooling around with it. Anil Dash is a vice president for Six Apart, a company that makes the popular Movable Type program for webloggers. In a talk he gave at New York University’s Law School, (February 20, 2004) Dash said that the weblog was a “boring” development to techies, who took one look and saw nothing original in the code or functioning.

Yet the genius of the weblog was not in any technological leap, but in completing the last mile in the two-way highway the Web has become. The form favors individual voices and self-publishers, most of whom will have no media institution behind them, and no hope of profit. What they are after is free speech and the enhancement of public life. Or as Tim Dunlop puts it, "an environment where ordinary people can use argument to increase their knowledge."

Institutions, too, will speak through weblogs (CEO’s for example) as will professional journalists. For now, at least, amateurs, “isolated free-lancers” and random citizens speak in the same public space as these other voices. The equalizing effect can be extreme. Atrios, pen name for the one of the most successful political webloggers, had no background in either journalism or politics when he began. Now his blog claims more than 65,000 visits a day. (For more on Atrios, see this case study about blogs and the fate of Trent Lott from the Kennedy School at Harvard.)

On top of the Net was built the Web. On top of the Web sits the weblog and its mini public-sphere, (which Atrios and others call Blogistan) connected by links, public comment sections, search engines, online syndication (RSS), free and paid hosting services, and indexes of popularity-- all the tools of the last mile. Now that it's up and running, the people formerly known as the audience, those we have long considered the consumers of media—the readers, viewers, listeners—can get up from their chairs, “flip” things around, grab the equipment, and become speakers and broadcasters in the public square.

It's pirate radio, legalized; it's public access coming closer to life. Inside the borders of Blogistan (a real place with all the problems of a real place) we're closer to a vision of "producer democracy" than we are to any of the consumerist views that long ago took hold in the mass media, including much of the journalism presented on that platform. We won't know what a producer public looks like from looking at the patterns of the media age, in which broadcasting and its one-to-many economy prevailed.

Weblogs potentially explode the world of authorship far enough that we can at least imagine a sphere of debate with millions of productive speakers, where there was once an audience of millions listening to a few speakers dominate the debate. The existence of such a tool is an extreme change in prospect and pattern for citizens of the media age. When I wrote my list, "Ten Things Radical About the Weblog Form in Journalism" I was discussing only that, the shift in what's possible, or at least thinkable within the social practice of journalism, worldwide. What's *probable* in the world we inhabit today is a far different story.

From what we know so far, it is probable that most weblogs will be short lived, and wind up abandoned, just as most conversations are abandoned. It is probable that a few popular blogs will have huge user base and the vast majority will be invisible most of the time, a pattern that reminds some of the "old" mass media. Since the software and interface are highly flexible, and the uses of an easily updated, good-looking page are endless, weblogs will be commonly used in closed systems—private and company networks—as much as the open waters of the Web.

Most, in fact, will not attempt to reach a public, even if they are in theory reachable by all Net users. The great majority of weblogs will probably be for personal use; and the user base will be peer to peer, not author to public. Teenagers will be the biggest market for weblog software and hosting services. For the public display of private life no easier tool has ever been invented, and it should surprise no one that people use it to record their lives, even when the details are, to most others, insignificant.

Now if the insignificant events in the daily life of celebrity blonde Anna Nicole Smith are worth recording and distributing to the world by cable--and the E! Cable Network thinks they are—then the sight of blogger Jane Smith recording the ordinary facts of her life, and distributing them via the Web, should strike us, not as a strange development in the life of media forms, or one to laugh at, but a far more sensible notion all around. Anna's show is the bizarre form. Jane's journal is a more natural—and a more democratic--thing to do.