

This chapter summarizes major conclusions from a larger study undertaken at the Center for Mobile Communication Studies at Rutgers University about how news blogs and citizen journalism are affecting not only the reporting of news but also the stability and legitimacy of dominant media outlets and governing elites. The study focuses primarily on Asia but looks at other regions as well. It is based on comments gathered through journalistic-style e-mail interviews of bloggers as well as on data from relevant websites and news services. Due to space considerations only a summary can be presented here.¹

Blogging's Popularity Raises Severe Challenges for Traditional Outlets

In many societies in Asia and elsewhere bloggers have become an important source of news outside as well as alongside of traditional mainstream media. Citizen journalism and volunteer news co-creation activities are increasingly prominent in both Western and non-Western countries. Blogging has clearly become an ordinary part of news reporting that now accompanies the activities of the "old media". Or to put it differently, online ancillaries generally exist for magazines, television news programs and especially newspapers. Given the often Western-centric view of blogging, it may be useful to note that Indonesia and Malaysia are among the leading countries in terms of bloggers. By the same token, a worldwide trend is that information and communication technologies are reconfiguring the traditional balance between the creators and consumers of news and the journalistic reporting profession. Internet blogs and mobile phones, among other technologies, have made new information and perspectives available concerning local events; they have also added impor-

¹ The author is grateful to Chih-Hui Lai for her research assistance and analytical contributions and to Prof. John Pavlik for his insightful comments on an earlier draft.

tant and often oppositional interpretations of the significance and meaning of those events.

The blogs and citizen journalists also constitute an economic threat to traditional journalism publications. This is because those with online access (including mobile phones so equipped) can readily access content, which can be an important convenience and which translates into reduced readership for the traditional outlets. (Of course those without online access will not be able to enjoy such convenience.) Even more consequential, in economic terms, is the fact that blogs and citizen journalist content is usually free, whereas traditional journalistic outlets typically charge for their content. Over the long run, it is difficult to charge people for goods and services that are freely and more conveniently available elsewhere.

A Pew-sponsored study casts the situation in stark light:

. . . it appears the fundamental issue for the future of journalism is not audiences splintering away to citizen media, corporate PR and other non-news venues. In many ways the audience for news – and for what traditional newsrooms produce – appears to be growing. Nor are journalists failing to adapt. There are more signs in 2008 than ever that news people embrace the new technology and want to innovate.

The problem, it is increasingly clear, is a broken economic model – the decoupling of advertising and news. Advertisers are not migrating to news websites with audiences, and online, news sites are already falling financially behind other kinds of web destinations.²

These changes at the organizational, usability and financial levels pose critical problems for the continuing viability and impact of traditional old media, and most especially for the news-gathering and dissemination function that print journalism has traditionally played. Thus on both professional and economic grounds, the New Media are reducing the relative prominence of traditional news outlets as well as the stature of professional journalists.

Among the clearest consequences of these new voices seem to be to add competing narratives to official viewpoints and to bring previously undisclosed information to light. This in turn introduces new rationales for social change, and also encourages the entrance of new personalities onto the public stage to advocate those rationales. As a result, the policy arena may experience over the short-run increased disharmony and social un-

² Project for Excellence in Journalism, *The State of the News Media 2008*, cf. <http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2008>.

rest. However, the longer-term impact of these activities could well be the opposite, namely that they may lead to an overall lower degree of intense unrest and social disharmony. That is, in keeping with the social change theory of Dahrendorf³ and others, the moderate (although sometimes severe) disharmony precipitated by these voices may actually allow for sufficient social mobility and redistribution of resources to prevent widespread social unrest. This in turn would circumvent far more negative consequences that would otherwise result from revolutionary change precipitated in order to relieve the pressure of extreme social cleavages.

At the level of professional journalism, the situation reinforces notions of Schumpeter's view of "creative destruction" and dialectical processes.⁴ New structures are arising to address the functional and affective needs of the public and individual⁵ typified by the movement known as volunteer citizen journalists. By its very nature, this movement represents a challenge to official and semi-official organs of news, no less than their sponsoring governments and media conglomerates. Citizen journalists often interrogate generally accepted and sanctioned interpretations of events through the presentation of alternative facts, speculations and opinions. Yet among these groups of citizen journalists there is seldom a leader per se, but rather their work is carried forward by a decentralized, flexible system of various levels of participation with collaborative decision-making and analysis. Using the example of bloggers in his country, citizen journalist Preetam Rai told us that:

In a place with a very young population like Cambodia, blogs and social tools have helped people mobilize support for their causes. Blog or internet based activism may not help them get the desired result at the moment but it does help in spreading messages and building a community.⁶

Macro-changes: Curvilinear Relationship in the Political Domain

Shifting the level of discussion to the macro-social level, we can assert that there appears to be a relationship between content control and cumu-

³ Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959.

⁴ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1942.

⁵ Cf. Thomas K. McCraw, *Prophet of Innovation: Joseph Schumpeter and Creative Destruction*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

⁶ Personal communication.

lative impact of citizen journalists' blogs. Specifically, we speculate that there is a curvilinear relationship between the level of content control at the society-wide level (i.e., the inverse of freedom of expression and political activity) and the impact of citizen journalism news blogs. That is, that the impact of news blogs is least when there is extensive content control in the ambient environment, but also where there is great freedom of expression. This is because, where there is little or no content control, it is more likely the case that there is a free marketplace of ideas. Thus the special voice of an alternative source loses its special status. Hence, where there is more competition, the relative advantage of a citizen journalist as having special insight or unique sources is likely to be diminished. There are occasional exceptions, of course, but we are referring to the broad and typical situation which prevails.

To pursue this distinction, and in contrast to the case of Cambodia, we can cite the situation in Taiwan. In Taiwan, where freedom of speech is relatively unrestricted, blogs serve as semi-public forums for social matters and have less to do with seeking to precipitate societal change. I-Fan Lin, a blogger from Taiwan, said about the blogosphere in Taiwan:

I do not think most Taiwanese bloggers care about providing about Taiwan to the world or to the Taiwanese public. (Some English bloggers do.) Most blogs are places to share thoughts with friends, not to broadcast, although some of the blogs do attract a lot of visitors. As a result, blogs act more like spreading ideas person by person.⁷

Our argument about the relatively muted impact of citizen journalists in open societies finds support in a systematic study of citizen journalist blogs in the United States. Specifically, a report released in 2008 found that "the most promising parts of citizen input currently are new ideas, sources, comments and to some extent pictures and video – but not citizens posting news. ... most [citizen media] sites are no more open – and often less so – than mainstream press. Rather than rejecting the 'gatekeeper' role of traditional journalism, citizen journalists and bloggers appear for now to be recreating it in other places."⁸

On the other hand, the impact may actually be greatest where there is moderate control or where the society has recently transited from a rigidly controlled environment to one where there are fewer controls. The Philippines, for instance, illustrates this possible relationship. Filipino blog-

⁷ Personal communication.

⁸ *The State of the News Media 2008*, cf. note 2 above.

ger Mong Palatino noted that in 2007 mid-term election, most candidates have set up their own personal websites, blogs and Friendster accounts. Further, the party-list groups, who represented the marginalized and under-represented sectors of Philippine society, effectively used various social media, such as YouTube, to make large in-roads in recent elections.

Also in terms of Malaysia, Sabah Umno Wanita Chief, Senator Datuk Armani Hj Mahiruddin, claimed that Malaysia has almost 500,000 blogs that are actively operated by various groups and individuals for different purposes:

Sheer numbers have made the use of blogs most powerful in influencing the thinking of Malaysians, especially concerning politics. Usage of blog sites has the most effective coverage of information dissemination, given the large number of Internet users who surf the web and blog sites every day.⁹

Armani said he was basing his claim on a Universiti Malaya's Media Department study which asserted that 70% of the results of the 12th General Election had been influenced by information posted on blog sites.¹⁰

Malaysian blogger Ahmad Hj Abang claims that blogs in Malaysia were important in preserving what turned out to be a narrow victory for the National Front Coalition. Blogs allowed voters to express their concerns, but were insufficiently attended to by the plot leadership. The importance of blogs, he finds, is now much more recognized by political leadership. He relates the following:

For the past years our voters have communicated via blogs and websites. At the same time our government was misled by officers who are actually sycophants, in believing that all was well in the country. It was not well. The drive to fight corruption was dragged down and the judiciary in disarray. By this time attempts to coax our leaders to read the blogs and chatsites were to no avail. Thus, on polling day [8th March 2008] the voters deserted many of our leaders. The National Front Coalition still won the day but are deprived of their usual two-third majority. This is the power of Citizen Journalism... These examples are successful. So successful were they that now, even our Government Ministers resorted to blogging in order to explain some policies and actions.¹¹

⁹ "Need to Enhance Blog Use: Armani", *Daily Express News* (Malaysia), April 28, 2008, <http://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news.cfm?NewsID=57231>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Personal communication.

Counter-reaction from Elites

Yet, the success of bloggers has provoked a creative reaction on the part of at least one government in terms of how it wishes to respond. Of course there is the approach of arrests and detentions. As an example, also drawn from Malaysia, a recent case may be instructive, that of Raja Petra Kamaruddin, an internet journalist whose website had been highly critical of official corruption and misconduct, most notably regarding the complicity of Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister in the murder of a Mongolian translator. The enormously popular website, "Malaysia Today", which had attracted tens of thousands of daily readers, was banned by government order from all 21 of Malaysia's internet service providers in 2008.¹²

As has been often learned, sometimes attempting to suppress information only attracts greater attention and publicity to that information. This principle is illustrated in this case since it attracted the attention of Jeff Ooi. Mr. Ooi, a newly elected opposition member of parliament, said that those who had ordered the ban "should be hanged for stifling Internet... [they] are not our final judge to decide what is good and what is bad for Malaysians in the access to information. Malaysians who are online are mature enough to discern what's good and what's bad. It's only idiots – yes, IDIOTS at MCMC [the body that banned the journalist] and those who are not online who are fearful of the Internet."¹³

The case is all the more interesting since Mr. Ooi gained his fame and influence because of his prominent blogging activities. Thus this case illustrates that blogging can lead to a new vector of influence in which there is a "circulation of elites" as outsiders gain enough power so that they become the new insiders. This stands in contrast to co-optation, a strategy in which outsiders are brought in by current elites to work alongside, rather than replace them. An often effective strategy, which will be further examined later in this chapter.

Arrests of bloggers are by no means unique to Malaysia. To draw on the case of the People's Republic of China, the activist organization Reporters Without Borders says that Chinese authorities have imprisoned fifty cyber-dissidents (and 29 journalists) because of their work.¹⁴

¹² "Malaysia Shuts Down an Internet Gadfly", *Asia Sentinel*, August 28, 2008, http://www.asiasentinel.com/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1405&pop=1&page=0&Itemid=31.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ "As Olympic Games Continue, So Does Mistreatment of Prisoners of Conscience", *Boxun News*, August 20, 2008, http://www.boxun.us/news/publish/chinanews/As_Olympic_Games_continue_so_does_mistreatment_of_prisoners_of_conscience_printer.shtml.

But while arrest and censorship of journalists is certainly nothing new, China has found a more creative answer to the critical nature of blogs. Beyond having its security agents arrest bloggers for posting problematic material, the Chinese have also deployed a second line of defence. Experiments beginning in the 1990s in Hunan province have led to a counter-attack on the large numbers of critical bloggers and their vast outpouring of material. Specifically, the authorities have put into place a “sophisticated army of web commentators [who are] paid to drown negative comments in a tidal wave of support for the party line, and to steer online chat away from sensitive subjects”.¹⁵

These propagandists have become known as the “Fifty Cent Party” (Wu Mao Dang) since it is supposed that they receive that amount for each positive post. According to *Boxun News*, propaganda workers focus on specific websites such as the China Spiritual Civilization Network (Zhongguo Jingshen Wenming Wang), in order to

actively seek to influence, alter, and control public opinion by removing critical articles and comments and replacing them with pro-government articles and opinions. In this way an extensive network of pro-government propaganda workers began to be active online... A national Public Opinion and Information Bureau was set up, with subsidiary departments in every province and municipality. It is truly a testament to the Chinese Communist Party’s faith in and ability to act on the power of propaganda to create such an extensive and formal nationwide network to influence, alter, and control public opinion.¹⁶

One estimate is that more than a quarter million people in China are employed in this capacity, often outside the official party circle.¹⁷ This activity lends a new degree of inauthenticity to online postings and confusion to attempts to understand the public’s sentiment. In one sense, then, such an action is innovative in that it taps the taken-for-granted sense of spontaneity and candour which supposedly characterizes the internet to produce a cynically manipulated picture and set of arguments. In an-

¹⁵ “China Marshalls Army of Bloggers”, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, updated Aug. 21, 2008, <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/programguide/stories/200808/s2342236.htm>.

¹⁶ “Web ‘Enlightenment’: The ‘Fifty Cent Party’ – The Background of China’s Ubiquitous Official Web Commenters”, *Boxun News*, July 16, 2008, http://www.boxun.us/news/publish/chinanews/Web_Enlightenment_The_Fifty_Cent_Party_--The_Background_of_China_s_Ubiquitous_Official_Web_Commenters_printer.shtml.

¹⁷ “China Marshalls Army of Bloggers”, cf. note 15 above.

other sense, these practices draw on a long history of manipulation and strategic deception through the propagation of false reports, stories and statements. Such practices of course not only predate the internet but the Communist Party itself by several millennia.

On the other hand, those who wish to articulate critical views have themselves also been innovative. According to Boxu Yang of Peking University (personal communication), some Chinese bloggers who wish to express themselves freely have come up with a “Trojan horse” system. That is, they will write initially about four pages of innocuous or pro-government gibberish. Knowing that the government-sponsored readers are under a “pay for performance” regime, they make the assumption that the government’s fifty-cent readers will simply scan a few initial pages and, finding nothing offensive, will move on to another target. This then leaves the critical bloggers free to devote the balance of their writings to expressing their candid and critical views. This tactic of “hiding in plain sight” is a clever response to centralized systems of manipulation and control.

Yet, as indicated above, there remain clear lines: according to one human rights advocate, immediately prior to the opening of the 2008 Olympic Games “a blogger named Huang Qi was formally charged with inciting state subversion for posting a few pieces on his own blog that speculated about the possibility of corruption as a contributing factor in children’s death in the Sichuan earthquake. ... for that he stands a good chance of spending three and a half years in prison”.¹⁸

Conclusion

Shifting the level of discussion to the notion of competing voices, another finding to emerge from our analysis was that the mere existence of alternative citizen-oriented media outlets poses a challenge to traditional power structures even when availability of these resources to the general public is limited. The reality of these challenges to power structures has implications that play out on at least five interrelated levels.

First, they call into question the profession of journalism, since the issues of vetting, responsibility, and procedural training are pertinent to maintaining the relative autonomy and authority claimed by the profession. Blogs represent a challenge at this level because they problematize the existential nature of professional journalism. To use Peter Berger’s¹⁹ argu-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1969.

ment (which he developed in a different but not unrelated context, namely the role of theologians), the legitimating expertise of a profession must be uniquely conferred through training and certification. Without certain rites of passage, an occupation must seem commonplace and therefore open to ready contestation. Hence the community journalism model blunts the authority and standing of those who would claim to practice the semi-charismatic civil religion of professional journalism.

Second, the public continually seeks authoritative answers to, and explanations for, the problems and events that confront them. Oppositional readings of events that are provided by citizen journalism outlets offer answers and solutions that may pose a direct challenge to traditional sources of agenda-setting in the media and thus the larger society. The citizen journalists' alternative evidence and explanations displace the sanctioned outlets in terms of the public narratives about what the basic social facts are and what their significance portends.

Third, the alternative channel of citizen journalism provides a competing explanatory framework through which outside interest groups can seek to persuade or pressure those in power to alter their decisions. As we have seen from the examples discussed in this chapter, pressure from bloggers can embarrass officials (and media, due to their lack of coverage), forcing them to take action.

The fourth challenge stems from the nature of human cognition. This challenge arises because of the fact that the larger the number of alternative explanations presented to an individual, the lower is the authority and persuasive power of any particular explanation. This finding is robust across multiple domains of intellectual activity and is independent of subject area. Hence the credibility of any given source is reduced by the existence of alternative and provisional interpretations, no matter actual validity. Thus by the mere fact that citizen journalists and blogs are presenting alternative data and interpretations (assuming that they are read), the influence and authority of the mainstream outlets will be reduced.

The fifth challenge is related to who ultimately not only has a voice but also power. As suggested by this brief analysis, voice can lead to power. In the case of Jeff Ooi, his blogging led to him becoming a member of the parliamentary government of Malaysia. So blogs can become important tools in the contest over political representation as well as in eroding the control of traditionally dominant elites over the narrative of society. Of course one way for elites to respond to the challenges of bloggers is to repress them through techniques such as jailing, fines and covert attacks. Another way is to compete with them directly. Perhaps the most attractive course for many elites is simply co-optation. The citizen jour-

nalists can be incorporated in the more traditional media processes. And while co-optation remains a valuable tool, calculus on the part of outsiders of whether to take a half loaf versus a whole, as it were, remains a complex strategic question.

Beyond these five issues, it is perhaps worth pondering a sixth issue, suggested by John Pavlik.²⁰ He has noted that generally speaking, in the West, it is opinion and reaction to news stories that dominates the blogosphere. These Western blogs tend not to offer original reporting per se (though there certainly is some reporting done via blogs) but rather more commonly offer comment and opinion. This is different than what Western mainstream/professional journalists see as their role, which is to provide objective and “hard” news. At the same time, journalists are seemingly increasingly injecting opinion into their reporting. Thus the role of the blogosphere may be more commentary than reporting/citizen journalism. The result is that there is increasingly a blended model in which commentary is harder to separate from news. It is worth considering to what extent these trends may also be occurring in the non-Western world of blogs.

In closing, from the viewpoint of existing social institutions, political and news blogs and citizen journalists are costly competitors. From the viewpoint of social change, blogs and citizen journalists are clearly provoking a transformation in who has control over social resources, including the popular understanding of the government and purposes. This in turn raises severe challenges for countries such as China in terms of social stability and the distribution of resources. The assumption is that, over the long term, additional competition for social narrative will benefit society. The unfolding of this assumption through new media technology, such as internet blogging, bears careful and sustained scrutiny.

²⁰ John V. Pavlik, *Media in the Digital Age*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 78.